

# Perils of Old Age in Modern Life

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Old age, which can last for years in western complex societies, unfortunately invites ever increasing isolation. Parents are long gone; extended family is a past memory; children are dispersed all over geographically; really good friends are few, of recent duration and dispersed; and mobility throughout life has led to weak ties to community. The last zone of commitment can be marriage, but that may have been fractured by divorce or replaced by loose “significant other” arrangements. Finally the health of one or the other spouse – even in loving relations, often deteriorates into what may become more a burden than an asset. Some isolated, single, older adults move to live with or near children. But with this move, established medical teams and friends disappear, and stability is always threatened by children wanting to move in support of their own interests. For most older adults, there may be a place to live, but no real Home.

For many elders, this is the typical end of life condition following the pursuit of: high mobility, individual freedom, and weak commitment to family and community. Isolated death in a nursing home or hospital ICU is common.

What is there to compensate? 1) religion – to which the vast majority never subscribed, 2) belonging through spirituality for a very few, 3) involvement in recreational activities for others as physical abilities diminish, and 4) pursuit for some of various forms of art. But for nearly all, the support of multiple, surrounding, intimate, long-term, social relations is absent. Peripheralized years ago by mobility, retirement and the society’s fixation on youth, few options exist for older adults to continue to contribute meaningfully to family or community. In this situation, time is mostly filled for the many by the virtual reality of fiction together with the “background” noise of television and the internet. But, in this commonly dismal, isolated and depressing condition, there nevertheless is a generous health care system devoted to the ideal of sustaining life. One has to ask.....WHY? Is it any wonder that such isolated, “discarded” older adults often invite death by contemplating, attempting, or committing suicide?

Every society has to balance the value of individual freedom and social commitment to family and community. Generous governmental services can never substitute for the benefits of caring relationships and a strong sense of community and place. Modern complex societies have failed to achieve the needed balance, and this failure comes to the fore for older adults, who are a greater and greater percentage of the population! Modern complex society must make the adjustments to revitalize family, community, and the fact of HOME.