



Why Conversation Matters For Older Adults And Veterans

Texting is a poor substitute for live interaction and connection – especially for older adults and veterans

By Laurie Orlov

You see it on street sidewalks, public places and even at the dinner table. Folks are looking down at their smartphones, texting, instead of engaging with those around them. People may not notice the older adults or veterans right in front of them who may be isolated and in need of the connections that can contribute to an improved quality of life.

Social isolation has become an insidious problem among older adults and veterans.

Social isolation and loneliness are concerning enough issues that the Surgeon General recently declared them to be serious health risks: "29% increased risk of heart disease, a 32% increased risk of stroke and a 50% increased risk of developing dementia for older adults. Additionally, lacking social connection increases risk of premature death by more than 60%."¹ Certainly, one factor is the growth in the number of older adults living alone, including 44% of women aged 75+.²

Veterans, in particular, often struggle with social connection as well. Half don't feel like they belong in society after separating from military service.³ Tinnitus and hearing loss are two of the top health concerns among veterans according to the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs.⁴ More than 1.3 million receive compensation for hearing loss, and 2.3 million receive compensation for tinnitus. And even veterans with typical hearing test results may have difficulty understanding speech.

Hearing loss is associated with social isolation.

In a systematic review, researchers identified a compelling link between hearing loss and social isolation. Most studies found that hearing loss was associated with a higher risk of loneliness and social isolation.⁵ Several studies found that hearing loss was more strongly associated with loneliness and social isolation among women than among men. Additionally, the likelihood of screening positive for post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, or anxiety was higher among veterans who reported moderate, severe, or very severe tinnitus.⁶

Social isolation costs Medicare nearly \$7 billion annually.

A joint study between AARP Public Policy Institute, Stanford, and Harvard revealed an additional Medicare cost of nearly \$7 billion per year to care for socially isolated older adults. The primary cost of longer hospital stays was attributed by researchers to not having community support at home.⁷

Interpersonal connection is a fundamental necessity.

Research has shown that the psychological and physical health benefits of social contact are so great that they can even outweigh the harmful effects of other risk factors and boost life expectancy.⁸ One of the most effective ways to combat social isolation caused by hearing loss is by building a supportive community.⁹ This community can be comprised of friends, family members, hearing care professionals, fellow veterans, and others who share similar experiences. By connecting with others who understand the challenges of hearing loss, we gain a sense of belonging, empathy and support.

Live conversation is losing ground to texting among older adults. With the proliferation of smartphones, 1 in 3 older adults increasingly are texting with others;¹⁰ and according to an AARP survey, 92% of seniors text regularly.¹¹ Senior texting is viewed as ‘patient empowerment’ for health-related services. But is this good for their mental health, let alone their physical health? Studies suggest the answer is no. In fact, overreliance on texting can negatively impact emotion and cognition.¹² Given the risks associated with social

isolation, texting does not compare to a back-and-forth conversation. Why?

Phone conversations represent must-have dialogue for isolated individuals.

Back-and-forth interaction allows for clarification, follow-up responses and the ability to drill down to what matters most. The ability to communicate is a basic need, indeed a right, we all share regardless of circumstance or disability. For veterans specifically, communicating with long-distance friends from one’s military service can revitalize a bond that otherwise may have become weak over time. Some organizations, like AARP Friendly Voice, call socially isolated seniors,¹³ and the Compassionate Contact Corps offers phone buddies who call socially isolated veterans.¹⁴

Dispersed families can leave older adults disconnected from milestones and events.

According to AARP’s Grandparents Today survey, distance is the biggest barrier for grandparents who want to see or communicate with their grandchildren. Over half have at least one grandchild who lives more than 200 miles away, and about a third live more than 50 miles from their closest grandchild.¹⁵ Building family connections by conversing with and engaging grandchildren both within and outside of their (texting) comfort zone can strengthen familial bonds.¹⁶ The ‘Media Richness Theory’ notes that face-to-face meetings and the use of the telephone have a higher level of media richness than written media.¹⁷ But the most significant (other than in-person) contributor to connection is an actual conversation (see Figure 1).

Media Richness



Figure 1. Media Richness Theory¹⁷



Conversation also matters outside of family and personal interactions.

Live conversation, unlike texting, enables explanation of a problem or a need, bringing clarity to the communication. For example, a responder, such as a hearing professional, financial services provider, or subject matter expert, can offer feedback and critical context in a conversation that is impossible in a text message. They can ask clarifying questions about specific problems or issues that cannot be easily conveyed in a text message or email.

Why Captioning Matters

Captioned telephone conversations enable those with hearing loss to connect.

These services, made available at no cost by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), are designed for individuals with hearing loss. Captioned Telephone enables live interaction between family and professional

contacts and the user with hearing loss who views captions of what's said to them on the phone's display screen. How is this useful? Because it:

- **Transcends the limitations of texting, especially for the socially isolated.** Because of the connection between untreated hearing loss and social isolation, many retreat into non-communication. This social isolation correlates with a 27% increase in the risk of dementia, according to a Johns Hopkins study.¹⁸ Another study identified an increased risk to cognitive health among older military veterans.¹⁹
- **Offers individuals with hearing loss a more enriching communication experience.** For example, tinnitus and hearing loss are two of the top disabilities reported by veterans, according to a report from the Veterans Administration.²⁰ One organization involved in mitigating the effect of hearing loss on veterans is Heroes With Hearing Loss®. The program works to create a "Community of Awareness" as well as suggest potential solutions, such as Captioned Telephone, that veterans can use to effectively manage hearing loss.²¹

Ultimately, the research presented underscores the critical importance of live conversation, particularly for older adults and veterans who face heightened risks of social isolation. As highlighted, the detrimental effects



of social isolation are far-reaching, impacting both physical and mental health outcomes, and even contribute to increased healthcare costs. Texting, emailing and messaging through social media platforms, while convenient, cannot substitute the richness and depth of interpersonal dialogue. Live conversations facilitate not only emotional connection but also practical exchanges such as those with healthcare providers or support organizations, like the Heroes With Hearing Loss program.

Furthermore, Captioned Telephone – a service offered by Hamilton® CapTel® – emerges as a vital tool in bridging communication gaps for people with hearing loss, offering them an enriched communication experience. As we move forward, it is imperative to prioritize and promote meaningful conversations to combat social isolation and foster holistic well-being among older adults and veterans alike.



Hamilton® CapTel® 2400i

Captioned Telephone

Thanks to the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), it is possible to receive Captioned Telephone service at no cost, and in many cases, the phone itself is available at no cost or at a discount. The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) regulates Captioned Telephone Service and oversees its funding.



About the Author

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Laurie M. Orlov, a tech industry veteran, writer and speaker, is the founder of **Aging and Health Technology Watch**, providing thought leadership, analysis and guidance. Laurie spent many years in the technology industry, first as a CIO and then at the analyst firm Forrester Research. Her perspectives have been quoted in the *Wall Street Journal*, *New York Times*, *Senior Housing News*, *CNN Health* and *Consumer Reports*. *This material does not constitute a joint marketing arrangement.*

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