

**6.5 Minutes With...Colleen Galambos**  
**Center for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Studies – University of Wisconsin – Milwaukee**  
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C21 Deputy Director:

You're listening to 6.5 Minutes with C21 – an audio introduction to the topics, experts, and leaders who take part in the conversations hosted by the Center for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Studies.

In today's episode, Director Anne Basting speaks with Dr. Colleen Galambos, Helen Bader Endowed Chair in Applied Gerontology at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. Ahead of our 2022 Lonely No More! Programming, [00:00:30] Galambos gives us a peek into the longer United States-based Consensus Study Report she helped complete on *Social Isolation and Loneliness in Older Adults*.

Anne Basting,  
C21 Director:

How is it that you are working on the topic of loneliness and social isolation?

Colleen Galambos:

I was identified as an expert in the field by the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, after quite a vetting process I was asked and selected to join a team [00:01:00] of experts across the country who really looked at social isolation and loneliness and a healthcare response. So, trying to figure out how the healthcare system could be part of the solution and more responsive to identifying isolation and loneliness, and then to help with the intervention process of it.

Anne: If you could point to highlights of the findings that you found really important that [00:01:30] you take with you as something you're really proud of that document for, what would be those highlights?

Colleen: Well first, that social isolation and loneliness is a killer. We know that it contributes to a number of healthcare issues and problems, including cardiovascular disease. It also contributes to dementia, to depression and to anxiety. In all of those, the behavioral [00:02:00] health that coincides with the healthcare as well. There are comorbid conditions which exacerbate even more. So, that was a big finding.

The other big finding is that as a society we need to do more to reach out to people who are isolated and lonely. One of the parts that I was particularly instrumental in writing [00:02:30] was the healthcare response to isolation and loneliness, and what we found is that we do not routinely screen for isolation and loneliness. We don't routinely treat for isolation and loneliness, but yet that

healthcare provider may be the one connection that person who is isolated and lonely has in their whole life.

We also need to be careful when we do research. We need to be careful that we are [00:03:00] actually measuring and studying isolation and loneliness. We looked at many, many, many studies, hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of studies. When we looked at how isolation and loneliness was being measured, sometimes it was being measured by, "Are you living alone? Yes or no." If you answer, "Yes", then automatically you were labeled lonely and isolated. Well, I know plenty of people who live by themselves and [00:03:30] wouldn't have it any other way and are very active and socially engaged and they would not consider themselves isolated at all. So, there are two dimensions of isolation, loneliness. One is your connection piece, how many connections you have, but it's also the quality of those connections.

Transportation is a big thing that came out of the report. If you don't have transportation, you're isolated. If you don't have access to transportation, you're isolated.

Anne: Yeah and I was also struck by the urban [00:04:00] and rural data. That was really profound as well, that we need to look at this as an urban and rural stretching across the whole of it. Are there things in the way that we structure our communities and our social attitudes that actually are causing [isolation] so that the part of the prevention is a narrative mindset shift, and what do you think those things might [00:04:30] be? Yeah, it's a big question.

Colleen: I think we have this whole sprawl concept where you have to have a car. We don't have much public transportation. You have to have a car to get to places. I think that structurally, that I think creates barriers for somebody who maybe doesn't have the wherewithal to be able to drive all over the place.

We don't [00:05:00] pay attention to rural communities and what that means in accessing services to rural communities and what might that look like in a different world and in a different way. We do have a tendency to diagnose and prescribe, and I think that then creates some issues when we really need to be more person centered. We need to start where the person is at and have the person tell us what it is that they [00:05:30] need, rather than we judgmentally decide, "This is what the person needs." And then try to force that person in to that model.

Anne: Does anything or any organization come to mind that you would draw into that fantasy dinner party to talk about, "How are we going to get out of this mess? Or improve move us toward the success that we're looking for with loneliness isolation?"

Colleen: Well, I go back to that question that you asked [00:06:00] about systemic causes and I would really like to see urban planning and architectural studies as part of

the table. If we're going to create more responsive communities, they really have to be part of the dialogue in the discussion moving forward.

Anne: Are different cultures, within the United States larger culture, better at addressing loneliness within the family? [00:06:30] You hear like multigenerational households and things like that. Did you guys look at any of that?

Colleen: We did. That was not part of my charge, but there was another group of people on the committee who looked at that. There's very little out there, and what exists is what's in that report. One of the recommendations that came out is that we really need to look at this from a cultural diversity perspective. And I will tell you one of the things that I'm doing, you asked, "What am I doing [00:07:00] moving forward?" Is I'm trying to put isolation and loneliness measures, and good measures, not just "Are you living alone?" in just about every piece of research that I'm doing so that I can start to help collect that body of knowledge that we so desperately need.

Nicole: To further engage with this interview, other conversations, and the participatory research and reading activities for Lonely No More!, please visit our website at [00:07:30] [uwm.edu/c21](http://uwm.edu/c21). If not there, we hope to catch you when you have another 6.5 Minutes to spare.