

Mar 14, 2010

Loneliness creeps up on Delhi's elders

NEW DELHI: On the face of it they're busy and happening at 60: exercise regime, social work, satsang, paying bills, housework and the works. Yet, in a disturbing way, loneliness is increasingly creeping up on the old in Delhi, making them feel isolated. A study on the elderly conducted by NGO Agewell Foundation shows that about 80% of the surveyed Delhi residents in their 60s reported feeling isolated despite an active life. While only 11% of old who live in joint families experience loneliness, in nuclear families, more than 70% feel isolated.

Reduced interaction with family emerges as the greatest factor leading to feeling isolated. Differentiating between emotional and social isolation, the study — conducted in January this year among 10,000 citizens above age 60 in 20 states across all economic strata — found that 44% in cities such as Delhi, Mumbai, Chennai and Kolkata felt both social and emotional isolation. Social isolation stems from a dwindling friends circle, immobility and a feeling of being ignored socially, while emotional isolation results from strained interpersonal relations within family.

Himanshu Rath, founder Agewell explains that at home, younger members are "always bone-tired and too busy" to spend time with the old. "It's not that there's no concern. Even where nuclear families do all that needs to be done for the old, life is too hectic and tough for them to give time," he says.

Additionally, adds Rath, their stagnant incomes and growing costs of living especially in the last two years have led to much self-denial, also resulting in feeling alone, says Rath. "Last two years' slowdown has hit the old hardest. Interest rates have slipped. Monthly yields are reduced. The pressure's tremendous," he says.

Rath gives an example of the stress an average middle-class 65-year-old faces. "With longer life-spans, and given that today, a 65-year-old's wife will be to 6 to 12 years his junior, the retired man believes he has to secure finances for the wife for at least 20 to 30 years." With skyrocketing costs especially for medical, conveyance and food, the feeling of helplessness is strong.

There may be better medical facilities today, but they're expensive. Neighbourhood GPs are a thing of the past, points out Rath, a simple blood test will cost Rs 200 at least. "They cut down on the simple things. A third biscuit can mean Rs 1.50 more. I'm talking upper middle-classes who've had a certain lifestyle," he says. Saving for a rainy day, the old are cutting down on socializing also to avoid expenditure. Understandably, loneliness among elderly in Delhi increases with age.

Further, in cities many oldies, says 81-year-old Carol H. Barbosa, have had to financially pitch in to help children who have suffered setbacks and job losses due to recession. "They encash FDs, send money. The financial pressure has grown. It takes a toll, it's like a physical and mental breakdown," says Barbosa, who lives by herself in a South Delhi apartment complex that houses several retired people.

The report, conducted via interviews in urban and rural randomly selected districts found that at nationally, 87% of those in their 70s reported loneliness. Interestingly, rural old reported lesser levels of loneliness at 78% than urban ones (90%). At 97%, the loneliest were individual elderly who lived by themselves.