

# FROM ISOLATION TO INCLUSION: ELEVATING RESIDENT ENGAGEMENT IN SENIOR LIVING



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Social isolation is a growing concern in senior living communities, with significant impacts on resident health and well-being. This white paper explores strategies to shift from isolation to inclusion through effective engagement and wellness programming. It emphasizes the role of combating ageism, designing meaningful activities, and enhancing emotional and mental health to improve outcomes across the continuum of care.



## Introduction

As the healthcare industry continues to evolve, senior living communities are under pressure to deliver not only excellent clinical care, but also meaningful, person-centered experiences. Social isolation has become a pressing issue among residents, especially following the COVID-19 pandemic. Engagement and inclusion are no longer optional; they are essential pillars of quality care.

## The Challenge of Isolation

Isolation in senior living communities can stem from physical limitations, cognitive decline, or structural inefficiencies in care models. The effects are many: increased depression, reduced mobility, worsening health conditions, and more. Social isolation affects nearly one in three older adults to some degree. Senior living communities must proactively address these outcomes with comprehensive, evidence-based programming.

Ageism also plays a pivotal role in the awareness of developing strategies to combat isolation. Ageism is a prejudice or discrimination on the grounds of a person's age, and it can lead to assumptions like thinking residents physically can't do certain activities, believing some traditional activities such as bingo are "must haves" on the activities menu, assuming residents can't or don't want to interact with technology, and many others. Drawing ageist assumptions for all residents disqualifies some from engaging in activities that are life-giving to them.



**82%**

**of older adults report experiencing ageism regularly**

**45%**

**of older adults reported experiencing ageism in interpersonal relationships and interactions**

**65%**

**reported exposure to ageist messages**

**36%**

**experienced internalized ageism**



## Strategies That Work



### 1. Redesign Wellness Programming

It's important to tailor programs to meet both cognitive and physical abilities. Wellness is much more than physical health. It includes spiritual, emotional, environmental, intellectual, social, and vocational health. Move beyond bingo; Offer intergenerational events, cultural experiences, and purpose-driven activities that align with resident identities.

### 2. Combat Ageism in Care Settings

Staff training must include education on ageism and its subtle presence in how we design care plans. Residents should not be underestimated or placed into restrictive roles based on age-related assumptions. Often, if younger staff reflect on their own likes and dislikes about the way they are treated in daily life, they become more sensitive to the conclusions that are often drawn about residents.

### 3. Engagement Equals Outcomes

According to the World Health Organization, mental health is a "state of well-being in which the individual realizes [their] own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to their community." Increased engagement leads to improved emotional and mental health and greater satisfaction with life. Activities should be frequent, accessible, and integrated into care plans.

### 4. Measure What Matters

Incorporate metrics such as participation rates, mood tracking, and resident feedback. This data supports program justification and continuous improvement. One way of doing this is for staff to have intentional methods (e.g., surveys or checklists) of monitoring resident engagement based on individual personalities. For example, if a resident has a lot of books in their room but doesn't engage with others, perhaps that resident is more likely to engage with a weekly book club than crafts.

### 5. Think Outside the Box

What areas can you begin to think of in fresh ways? Assumptions regarding the use of technology for older adults are often drawn. One senior living community wanting to encourage multigenerational engagement worked with a local group of high school students needing community service hours to visit and train residents on the mobile devices. What creative ways can you think of to engage low physical activity residents with high activity residents?



## Conclusion

Resident engagement is not ancillary to clinical care; it is central. Senior living communities that champion inclusion, resist ageism, and innovate their wellness models will not only see better outcomes, but also higher satisfaction rates from families, staff, and residents.

## Recommendations

- Implement a structured engagement program across all departments
- Provide ongoing training on ageism and motivational strategies
- Align engagement efforts with clinical goals and resident preferences
- Use data to drive improvements and justify resource allocation



For more guidance on program implementation or to learn about Functional Pathways' clinical outcomes model, contact us at [bettertherapy@fprehab.com](mailto:bettertherapy@fprehab.com)

Under the leadership of Brittany Austin, National Director of Health and Wellness, Functional Pathways has emphasized a multidisciplinary approach to wellness. The initiative highlights strategies to motivate residents and foster inclusion, with a strong focus on emotional and psychological outcomes.





*Celebrating 30 years of service, Functional Pathways is a therapist-founded, -owned, and -led company continually reinventing the therapy market. Spanning the full continuum of care, the company provides its hospital rehab and contract therapy clients with enhanced operational efficiencies, improved patient outcomes, and optimized revenue streams that position them as a leader in their market. Through its 2,500+ therapists caring for close to 7,000 patients a day, Functional Pathways continues to make a difference in every life they touch.*



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