‘Play Is a Basic Human Need’ How This Entrepreneur Is Combating the Epidemic of Loneliness In the U.S.

In this ongoing series, we are sharing advice, tips and insights from real entrepreneurs who are out there doing business battle on a daily basis. (Answers have been edited and condensed for clarity.)

Ted Fischer is the co-founder and CEO of Ageless Innovation, a company with a mission to combat some of the most pressing challenges facing older adults, including social isolation, loneliness, and cognitive decline. “We do this by delivering joy, fun and happiness to improve quality of life,” says Fischer.

“We believe that play is a basic human need for people of all ages,” he explains. “It can foster essential social connections, improve emotional health and well-being, and bring joy as we live and age together – all of which ultimately helps to combat the larger health epidemic of loneliness and social isolation.” The company has developed an award-winning line of animatronic Joy for All Companion Pets and games and partnered with AARP for the Reach Out And Play initiative, which aims to rally people of all ages to come together through board game events. Their “Pets for Vets” program with Capital Caring Health has given animatronic pets to veterans nationwide.

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Fischer says his inspiration and drive comes from his grandmother, Claire, who he credits as his biggest champion. “When she was diagnosed with progressive dementia, my family and I saw firsthand that laughter and play were crucial components of her care,” he recounts. “It became increasingly clear that play was not a ‘nice to have’ – it was an essential part of helping her to live and age gracefully – and it has become my life’s mission to try and make play accessible for everyone. My grandmother never stopped laughing. Her playful spirit was and continues to be a driving force behind the Joy for All brand.”

Fischer points to recent research that finds that nearly 25% of adults over the age of 65 are socially isolated, and that loneliness can cause serious health problems such as obesity, arthritis, high blood pressure, and depression. In 2023, U.S. Surgeon General Dr. Vivek Murthy issued an advisory detailing the devastating impact of what he termed the “epidemic of loneliness and isolation” in the United States.

Social interactions are scientifically proven ways to combat physical and mental health decline, and here Fischer shares strategies we can all us to reconnect and revitalize the lives of our loved ones.

- **Attend a “Reach Out and Play” Board Game Event:** People of all ages come together and celebrate the older adults in their lives, particularly those searching for social interaction, playful experiences, and fun. Participants have described the events as “fantastic”, “a lot of fun”, and “filled with laughter.” There are dozens of events already on the docket for 2024, and hundreds more on the horizon. Anyone can find a game night event nearby – or consider hosting their own! – at aarp.org/agelessplay.

- **Companionship is Key:** Built on the insight that older adults were seeking interactive companionship, we created a collection of animatronic pets designed to look, sound and, feel like real pets, without the responsibility and struggles of pet ownership. Results from clinical studies have shown that our Joy for All Companion Pets can enhance the well-being, sense of purpose, and quality of life of individuals with dementia; they have also proven to show a significant reduction in social isolation and loneliness among older adults. They are a wonderful option for those searching for companionship and connection. You can find out more and get a companion pet of your own or for a loved one at joyforall.com.
- **Grab a Game:** Alongside Hasbro, we recently reimagined classic gaming properties, including Game of Life Generations, Scrabble Bingo, and Trivial Pursuit Generations, to feature easy-to-grasp game pieces, increased font size, and trivia and references that cater to players of all ages. The new games aim to facilitate intergenerational connection, stimulate conversation, and increase the quality of life for older adults, making it easier than ever for older adults to meaningfully connect with family members, friends, and peers.

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