

Building and Sustaining Social Support Networks for Seniors

A Research Brief for the Project – Senior to Senior:
Personal Support Networks for Senior Parents of
Children with a Disability
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Introduction

Informal social support plays an important role in the lives of seniors. Seniors who have active social relationships have a better quality of life, are less isolated, and have both the emotional and practical support that enable them to remain active.

Some seniors have on-going responsibilities to support an adult child with a disability. This has often been a long-term commitment in which seniors have raised their child from birth and have provided a home, as well as care and support for their child over several decades. These seniors face challenges as they age – they may need more help with carrying out their support roles, they worry about what will happen with their adult child in the future, and they are often more socially isolated than others.

The *Senior to Senior Project* was established to develop, implement and test mechanisms for developing personal support to create a culture of supports and reduce isolation for senior parents of adult sons and daughters with a disability. The project set out to:

- Identify and connect with senior parents supporting an adult child in the greater Fredericton area;
- Identify the key models and strategies for developing social networks and connections for senior parents (including roles and responsibilities of senior aged and other community network members);
- Facilitate and support up to 20 social networks for senior parents living in the greater Fredericton area;
- Involve seniors and other community members in social networks;
- Develop and undertake training and information sessions on social networks and connections;
- Develop and distribute materials for senior parents and community members;
- Conduct focus groups to explore issues of isolation facing senior parents in the greater Fredericton area; and
- Research ways to sustain social networks and connections for senior parents into the future.

This research brief focuses on strategies to both build and sustain social networks for people who experience social isolation and loneliness. It will first provide an overview of the nature and causes of isolation and loneliness amongst seniors and describe the benefits of having social support networks. Strategies for both building and sustaining social support networks are explored and identified. Lastly, implications for policy making are noted.

The Nature and Causes of Senior Isolation and Loneliness

Social isolation and loneliness amongst seniors are recognized as two of the most significant issues facing today's aging society. While the two issues are inter-related, they represent different concepts and have distinct features. Social isolation is often described as an objective state that is "defined in terms of the quantity of social relationships and contacts".¹ It is represented by the usual low number of contacts with others and can be measured objectively by observing a person's social network and interaction with others.²

Loneliness is described as a subjective state or experience. It is described as "a negative emotion associated with a perceived gap between the quality and quantity of relationships that we have and those we want."³ In this sense, the experience of loneliness is personal and linked to one's values, preferences and feelings. Some people may be described as being socially isolated but may not experience loneliness.

Social isolation and loneliness also overlap with other concepts such as social exclusion and social disconnectedness. The latter concept is defined as a "lack of participation in social activities, having a small social network or irregular social interactions."⁴ Social disconnectedness is often a key predictor of isolation and the experience of loneliness.

Prevalence rates of social isolation and loneliness are difficult to measure and under-researched. Despite this, researchers have provided estimates of the prevalence of loneliness. In the U.K., researchers found that 7 per cent of older people were often lonely while 31 per cent were "sometimes lonely".⁵ The research has revealed a "significant pattern" in that both isolation and loneliness appear to increase with age, and despite the distinction between the two concepts, there is a "particularly strong correlation between isolation and loneliness."⁶

¹Kate Jopling, Promising Approaches to Reducing Loneliness and Isolation in Later Life, Age U.K., 2015, p. 6.

² National Seniors Council, Scoping Review of the Literature – Social Isolation of Seniors, 2014, p. 3.

³ Kate Jopling, note 1, p. 6.

⁴ National Seniors Council, note 2, p. 3.

⁵Age U.K., Loneliness and Isolation Evidence Review, no date, p. 8.

⁶Ibid.

There is also some indication that people in urban areas may experience more isolation and loneliness than do people who live in rural areas; suggesting that people in rural areas “may have better networks of support”.⁷

Similar prevalence rates have been established for older people in other countries. The Centre for Addiction and Mental Health in Ontario estimates that loneliness affects about 10 per cents of older adults and is linked to depression. They note that loneliness is more often experienced by women and increases with age.⁸ In the U.S., it is estimated that between 5 and 15 per cent of older people frequently feel lonely, while half of people over age 80 often feel lonely.⁹

The evidence is clear that some seniors are at a greater risk of experiencing isolation and loneliness than are other seniors. The “risk factors” are multi-faceted and involve the one or more of the following causes:

- *Life transitions.* These involve significant transitions as retirement, death of a spouse or other significant family member/friend, losing the ability to drive, or moving into a residential facility. Transitions may also involve changing dynamics of family life such as people moving away.
- *Economic factors.* These include living on a low income or lacking access to affordable transportation or housing.
- *Health status.* People tend to have a greater risk of experiencing social isolation if their health is poor or deteriorating. Conditions such as incontinence, frailty, or the loss of independence are also risk factors.
- *Care giving responsibilities.* Seniors who have care giving responsibilities are at a higher risk is isolation. This is particularly true when care-giving involves long hours or intensive care-giving or when the person receiving the care is unable to be left alone.
- *Social barriers.* Some groups of seniors are at a greater risk of experiencing social isolation. These include Aboriginal seniors, newcomers, LGBTQ seniors, and care-givers.¹⁰

Seniors who develop or acquire disabilities as they age (or earlier in life) face significantly higher rates of isolation. A report from the Australian Bureau of Statistics

⁷Ibid.

⁸ National Seniors Council, note 2, p.3.

⁹Age U.K., note 5, p.8.

¹⁰National Seniors Council, note 2, pp. 4-5.

noted that people over the age of 65 with moderate or severe disabilities spend 85 per cent of their waking time alone.¹¹

The *Senior to Senior* project has focused on isolation and loneliness experienced by seniors who maintain care-giving and/or support obligations for an adult son or daughter with a disability. Through the project, these seniors have identified the key factors that lead to social isolation. They spoke about not receiving enough support to help with their care-giving responsibilities or often having difficulties finding people (both paid and unpaid) who may be willing to provide some support. Senior parents have also noted that other people do not understand their situations; their care giving responsibilities are on-going and that it is often difficult to leave their son or daughter for long periods of time or at all.¹²

The comments of senior parents reflect other research on the impact of raising a family member with a disability. While many families express how rewarding the experience is (and what they have gained personally from having a child with a disability), research has confirmed that many families can experience “financial, technical and emotional difficulties.”¹³ This can also involve “strained family relationships and social isolation, high levels of stress for parents, and “feelings of anxiety, depression, loss, loneliness and hopelessness.”¹⁴

Consequences of Senior Isolation and Loneliness

There is a strong body of evidence on the effects that social isolation and loneliness has on people. The Public Health Agency of Canada has identified social support as one of the twelve key determinants of health. Social isolation and loneliness can have serious impacts on personal physical and mental health. A U.K. report has recently noted:

- The effect of loneliness and isolation can be as harmful to health as smoking 15 cigarettes a day, and is more damaging than obesity;
- Lonely individuals are at a higher risk of the onset of disability; and

¹¹Michael Hillier, *Rebuilding Connections: Creating Opportunities for Socially Isolated Older Australians*, 2007, p. vi.

¹²NBACL, Focus Group of the Seniors United Network Fredericton, October 29, 2014.

¹³Social Policy Research Centre, *Evaluation of the Demonstration Support Networks Program: Final Report*, 2011, p.5.

¹⁴*Ibid.*

- Loneliness puts individuals at greater risk of cognitive decline, and one study concluded that lonely people have a 64 per cent increased chance of developing clinical dementia.¹⁵

An Australian report has echoed the serious consequences stemming from social isolation and loneliness:

Evidence shows that social isolation is associated with depression and low morale. ... Inadequate social support is associated not only with lower overall general health and well being, but also with higher levels of emotional distress, more illness and higher mortality rates (WHO, 2002). There are a higher number of deaths among those without networks of relationships and emotional support ... while being part of a social network is a significant determinant of longevity.¹⁶

The Nature and Benefits of Social Support Networks

With the link between social isolation and loneliness clearly established, much attention has been paid to the importance of social support networks in the lives of seniors and other populations who face social isolation or exclusion. The concept of social support has been linked to “social capital” theory that defines social capital as the “developing and maintaining of relationships that allow people to work together and the sharing of resources to address opportunities and issues.”¹⁷ Social capital is relational and can increase if used and decrease if not used. It can take time and effort to build but can also be diminished quickly.¹⁸ Social capital involves people in networks as well as trust and reciprocity between people. It requires having close as well as peripheral ties to others and the opportunity to connect with or join important social structures (for example, volunteer organizations, faith communities, other associations, peer groups, etc.).¹⁹

Drawing on social capital theory, social support systems have been identified as a key aspect of personal well-being. Social support has different connotations and is usually broken down into two main types of support – structural and functional. Structural support is seen as a “measure of integration through social networks” including networks that exist through ties with family or friends but also through group or

¹⁵Jopling, note 1, p. 6.

¹⁶Social Policy Research Centre, Promoting Social Networks for Older People In Community Aged Care, 2009, p. 2.

¹⁷Uniting Care Community, Final Report: Leveraging Networks and Building Social Capital, 2013, p.4.

¹⁸Ibid., p. 5.

¹⁹Ibid.

organizational membership.²⁰ Functional support is the “type of supportive resources gained through social networks.”²¹ It can include emotional support, informational support, and tangible support such as the direct provision of assistance (e.g., financial, transport, etc.).

Social support is often seen as reciprocal. In this sense, the support that someone can give can also have positive impacts on their health and well-being.²² This reciprocity is seen to add to the stability of a person’s social networks.

Having strong social ties and social networks can have many positive benefits on personal health and well-being. Research studies since the 1970s have provided a significant body of evidence on the value of social support networks. A recent report commissioned by Vancouver Coastal Health has noted:

With the association between social support and positive health outcomes established, studies are now looking to determine the mechanistic processes at play, seeking an understanding of the behavioural, psychological, and biological processes along the pathway between social support and health outcomes.... Great progress has been made in this area, with evidence linking social support to cardiovascular, neuro-endocrine, and immune function, with research continuing into the integrative aspects of these processes.²³

The research has noted that seniors with stronger social networks and social activity report “better self-rated health” and demonstrate reductions in cognitive decline and better cognitive function, decreased risk of dementia, positive impacts on functioning and disability status, and positive impacts on physical and emotional health.²⁴

With this evidence, efforts are increasing to assist seniors (and other populations) to strengthen their social support networks and thereby reduce social isolation and loneliness.

²⁰Jolene Lansdowne, *The SMART Fund: The Links Between Social Support and Improved Health Outcomes*, Vancouver Coastal Health, 2011, p. 4.

²¹*Ibid.*

²²*Ibid.*

²³*Ibid.*, pp. 3-4.

²⁴*Ibid.*, p. 8.

Strategies to Address Isolation and Loneliness Experienced by Seniors

A variety of strategies have been developed and identified that are aimed at enhancing social support networks for seniors experiencing social isolation and loneliness.

Research literature has looked at the effectiveness of social connection strategies as well as the broader framework for addressing isolation and loneliness. This section of the report will highlight the key strategies that have demonstrated impact.

Age U.K. has recently published *Promising Approaches to Reducing Loneliness and Isolation in Later Life* (2015). As part of a new framework for providing “loneliness interventions”, *Promising Approaches* highlights practices that are designed to address three main challenges:

1. Reaching lonely people;
2. Understanding the nature of a person’s loneliness and developing a personalized response; and
3. Supporting lonely people to access appropriate services to address loneliness.²⁵

The report highlights the need to develop personalized responses to loneliness given its multiple dimensions and the nature of people’s subjective experiences with isolation. The need to have “guided conversations” with people is also identified. These conversations are “relatively unstructured engagement with an older person in which their circumstances, needs and wishes are explored”, leading to a discussion about what might be available to improve a person’s well-being.²⁶

Strategies to address isolation and loneliness experienced by seniors are varied. *Promising Approaches* identifies two key “gateway services” that impact on the ability of seniors to maintain existing social relationships or to expand their social connections. The first of these “gateway services” is transportation. The lack of appropriate transport is a major barrier to successfully reducing isolation and loneliness. A number of initiatives designed to address isolation include access to transportation as a key part of the program or service. These can be costly and sometimes difficult to maintain, especially in rural areas.²⁷

²⁵Jopling, note 1, p.9.

²⁶Ibid., p.20.

²⁷Ibid., p. 41.

The other “gateway service” is the use of technology. *Promising Approaches* notes that a review of technology based initiatives found that these strategies “were among the most effective of all studied interventions in tackling loneliness”.²⁸ It was noted, however, that in most cases technology either enabled or was the catalyst for new social connections (in one case technology was the reason for the development of connections as IT training was provided to seniors).

It can be argued that an additional “gateway” service is the provision of needed respite support for seniors who face isolation stemming from their roles of caregivers of another family member. This is addressed in more detail below.

The review of the literature on other strategies or interventions aimed at reducing senior isolation has revealed a number of key and effective approaches. Below is a brief overview and summary of some of the approaches identified in research literature.

Group-based Approaches

Group-based interventions are often seen as being most effective and “the evidence of effectiveness of such initiatives, as a general type, is relatively strong”.²⁹ Those most effective group approaches are those that are:

- Targeted at a specific group of seniors;
- Focused on a shared interest, or that have an educational focus; and
- Set up to involve seniors in running the group.³⁰

There are a variety of types of groups that create a space for seniors to come together and share time and interests. These include simple efforts such as “coffee mornings”, and other activities such as faith groups, community choirs, peer support, physical activities, recreation pursuits, etc. The key is to tailor any response so that it addresses a person’s specific needs and interests.³¹

Successful interventions have also focused on providing seniors with opportunities to learn new skills or to use skills that they already possess. Approaches with a skill

²⁸Ibid., p. 38.

²⁹Ibid., p.26.

³⁰Ibid.

³¹Age U.K., note 5, p. 14.

development focus can involve training programs (such as assisting seniors to use IT), or on seniors learning new skills as part of a group project.

One-on-One Approaches

These approaches involve connecting isolated seniors with a person with whom they can share time and interests. These can be particularly effective if barriers prevent seniors from leaving their home or if seniors prefer more low key opportunities to connect with others. In the U.K. and other places, one-on-one approaches are referred to as “befriending” schemes or services. These typically involve matching seniors with a volunteer who visits or calls them regularly.³² These approaches tend to be relatively inexpensive to operate as they are primarily volunteer based. There is usually some cost involved with coordination and training of volunteers.

Seniors as Volunteers

Senior isolation often involves being disconnected from the broader community and lack of opportunities to make one’s own contributions. Some strategies involve supporting seniors to contribute to their communities through volunteer activities. In the “befriending” schemes mentioned above, some are designed to ensure that seniors are encouraged to become volunteers who are matched with other seniors. In some circumstances, seniors who originally became involved as recipients of volunteer support have later become volunteers to support others.³³

Addressing Isolation Faced by Caregivers

Seniors who regularly provide care and support to another family member may benefit from specific strategies. One important approach is the establishment of peer support groups. Some of these groups have a specific focus on addressing issues that seniors face as carers and supporters to a family member. The Seniors United Network in Fredericton, N.B. is a group of senior parents who are still supporting an adult son or daughter with a disability. The SUN group meets monthly to share ideas and learn about topics that are relevant to their role as care-givers or supporters. The group strategizes on ways to address their needs and group members provide emotional support to each other through their common bond. This group is facilitated by a staff member with the New Brunswick Association for Community Living.

³²Jopling, note 1, pp. 32-34.

³³Ibid., p.35.

Other caregiver support groups provide more social opportunities to group members. In Brighton, U.K., senior men who are carers come together twice a month in community settings to engage in social activities. These activities include bowling, mini-golf, attending movies, etc. The group is coordinated by a part time facilitator (working for 10 hours per month) who is employed by a local Carers Centre. An evaluation of the group showed that the men who participated noted real benefits in managing stress, depression, feelings of isolation, and enhancing their ability to cope with their on-going caring role.³⁴

The other significant aspect of addressing isolation of seniors who are carers and supporters is the provision of respite services or other services that provide support to the family member in need of care. Seniors in the *Senior to Senior* project spoke about their difficulties in accessing respite or other support workers to the extent that they questioned whether they could take a break from their care-giving responsibilities.³⁵ Dedicated approaches to assist seniors to find respite support providers offer significant opportunities to seniors to engage in their communities and expand their social networks. Some seniors will still require assistance to making these links to other people in their community – particularly if they have spent years experiencing isolation from their communities.

Addressing Isolation Through Care Provision

Many seniors receive support or services to address personal needs. These supports and services may be paid or unpaid. Support providers can help to address senior isolation by providing services that focus on “care as relationship building” as opposed to care as simply “service provision”.³⁶ In this respect, the provision of care and support to seniors can help to generate social capital for seniors.

The provision of care and support can address senior isolation in a number of ways. The provision of the appropriate care and support can assist seniors to access the help they need to get out into the community. Sometimes, paid care workers can also form strong bonds with the people they are supporting, especially those support roles that continue

³⁴Ibid., p. 28.

³⁵NBACL, note 12.

³⁶Debbie Horsfall and Susan Evans, Care Networks Project: Growing and Maintaining Social Networks for Older People, University of Western Sydney, October 2010, p. 3.

for many months or years.³⁷ These relationships may involve strong connections that involve “regular mutual exchange” between seniors and their paid carers.³⁸

Care providers can also connect seniors to community activities or other services that help link seniors to others. This connection role means that people providing care see their role in broader terms than the provision of direct support. As connectors, care providers will look for opportunities for seniors to participate in community organizations, peer groups, faith communities, etc. Care providers can also become significant facilitators of access to community by providing transportation for seniors to do errands or to attend activities.

Care that is provided in locations that bring seniors together can also help to off-set isolation experienced by seniors. Seniors day supports can offer opportunities for seniors to come together to undertake activities of mutual interest or activities designed to share fun times (e.g., music, card games, etc.).³⁹ These group activities that are provided on a regular schedule provide opportunities for maintaining social connections. The provision of transportation also helps to ensure that people can get out to events and group activities.

Strategies to Sustain Social Support Networks for Isolated Seniors

There are many viable strategies that can be employed to successfully address senior isolation and loneliness. Knowing what strategies work is an important first step in building sustainable social support networks for seniors.

While research of senior isolation is on-going, there are a number of key strategies that have emerged that provide ways to think about sustainability of social support networks and the approaches that have been used to address isolation. Below is a summary of the sustainability strategies that can have a positive impact.

Invest in Intentional Efforts to Facilitate Activities Designed to Address Senior Isolation

Many of the strategies employed to address senior isolation involve having a skilled person responsible for the facilitation of actions that bring seniors into contact with

³⁷Ibid., p. 19.

³⁸Ibid., p. 20.

³⁹Ibid., p. 15.

others. One research study noted that “high quality approaches to the section, training and support of the facilitators or coordinators of the interventions appear to be one of the most important factors in under-pinning successful interventions.”⁴⁰

A facilitator is often responsible for bringing people together to participate in peer support groups, assist seniors to engage in community recreation and leisure activities, finding and matching volunteers to spend time with seniors, and for keeping track of how actions are effectively working to address senior isolation. While a facilitator can be a volunteer, many isolation reduction schemes provide for paid facilitators who have the skills and training to undertake activities and to monitor progress in reducing isolation.

Use Volunteer Based Strategies to Connect Seniors with Other Community Members

There are many people within community who are willing and able to volunteer their time to be a part of a social support network for seniors who are isolated. Many volunteers can be other seniors who are looking for ways to become involved. Volunteers can play a variety of roles including assisting with transportation, spending time with seniors who are lonely (home visits, telephone chats, or doing activities on the community), and helping to organize group or social activities that involve seniors. Volunteer schemes are critical to sustainability as they can be highly cost effective (and may only have some modest cost for volunteer facilitation or coordination).

Build Support Network Development into Existing Programs or Services

There are many existing programs that are designed to serve seniors and to address senior issues. Where supporting seniors is part of an organization’s “core business”, efforts to help expand social networks can be a good fit and enhance the likelihood that these efforts will be sustainable.⁴¹ These organizations can benefit from seed funding to start a support network initiative that will become another element of the organization’s mandate going forward. Attention will need to be paid to ensuring that activities reflect current innovative thinking about person centred approaches and community building.⁴²

⁴⁰Robyn Findlay, “Interventions to Reduce Social Isolation Amongst Older People: Where is the Evidence?”, *Aging and Society*, 23, 2003, p. 655.

⁴¹Social Policy Research Centre, University of New South Wales, Evaluation of the Demonstration Support Networks Program: Final Report, April 2011, p. 34.

⁴²Ibid.

Provide Training for Care Providers and Support Workers on Ways to Enhance Social Support Networks

Agencies that offer care or support services to seniors can review their practices to encourage support providers to explore opportunities for expanding social support networks. This can involve providing training and professional development opportunities for support workers so that they can learn about ways to model “social network formation” as part of their work.⁴³ This expanded role will need careful implementation and consideration of privacy issues and duty of care obligations, but it does hold promise for moving support services beyond addressing basic care needs to facilitating responses to senior isolation.

Promote an Understanding of the Cost and Benefits of Isolation Reduction Interventions

The effects of isolation and loneliness on individual well-being are now well established. The cost of loneliness and isolation (in terms of individual physical and mental health) versus the benefits of having social support networks (in terms of positive health outcomes) creates a strong rationale for social investments in community strategies aimed at enhancing social support networks. Studies in the U.K. suggest that there is a significant social return on investment in community building strategies. One program aimed at developing support groups showed a return (of money saved because of the promotion of social well being) of six times the cost of the program.⁴⁴

Building and sustaining social support networks makes both economic and social sense as more and more evidence on the impact to social networking interventions is gathered. This will mean that formal evaluations of interventions will need to take place as well as more informal ways to gather data about impact of efforts designed to address senior isolation.⁴⁵

Support Seniors Who are Providing Care and Support to a Family Member

Seniors who have on-going care giving roles and responsibilities face unique challenges to over-coming isolation. These seniors require both formal and informal support to provide them with breaks from their care-giving roles so that they can engage in social activities with others. Experience from the *Senior to Senior* project shows that seniors

⁴³Horsfall and Evans, note 36, p. 38.

⁴⁴Catherine Wilton, Strategic Briefing: Building Community Capacity, 2012.

⁴⁵Jopling, note 1, p. 59.

are more apt to be concerned about the needs of their family member rather than their own needs for social connections. It is also clear that seniors need significant help in finding and retaining trusted support workers who can offer them a break from their care-giving responsibilities. Having well developed community respite options for senior care-givers will give these seniors both the opportunity and confidence they need to engage in social networks and activities. Peer support groups of senior care-givers have also shown to be an effective social network strategy. This strategy requires some minor facilitation support but it can be embedded in the roles of existing community organizations and sustained at very modest cost.

Involve Seniors in the Planning and Implementation of Social Support Activities

Sustainability can be addressed when initiatives aimed at reducing senior isolation involve seniors in both the planning and implementation of activities. Senior involvement is particularly critical for the successful implementation of group based strategies.⁴⁶ Many seniors have the time and understanding required to respond to the needs of other seniors. While they can play paid roles in isolation reduction schemes, seniors are also a rich source of volunteers. Some enabling structure for securing senior involvement is required.

Implications for Policy

Addressing senior isolation and loneliness has significant implications for policy makers and social policy. In recognizing the effects and consequences of senior isolation, social policy must shift its focus from intervening at the point of crisis (or when health and well-being is so negatively affected) to early intervention and prevention. In this respect, the prevention and alleviation of isolation and loneliness must be a priority. It will require the re-design of systems to ensure that seniors have access to the interventions needed to address isolation and loneliness.⁴⁷

In looking at this as a policy priority, a number of strategies for building and sustaining social support networks outlined in this research brief are worth exploring. From a policy perspective, designing and funding interventions should also:

- Target the prevention and alleviation of isolation and loneliness as a “core outcome” of senior care policy and programming;

⁴⁶Jopling, note 1, p. 26.

⁴⁷Ibid., p. 5.

- Develop an isolation prevention and reduction strategy that explores a full range of interventions and the cost effectiveness of those interventions;
- Collaborate with post secondary institutions to ensure that the awareness of “relational and social network issues” of socially isolated people are built into curriculum of educational and training programs focused on social work and community care;⁴⁸
- Address senior isolation as a part of existing senior services and programs and build in expectations and strategies on ways that senior services can play a role in building social support networks for seniors;
- Recognize that local community efforts to build social networks are often most effective and provide investments in building community capacity to prevent and address senior isolation; and
- Recognize the unique situations of seniors who are care-givers and develop responses to ensure that these seniors have access to the needed respite and other supports to build and maintain their social support networks.

The building and sustaining of social support networks for seniors (including seniors who are care givers to another family member) is necessary and important for many reasons. This issue should be a social priority and recognized as a cost effective strategy for improving people’s lives and our communities.

⁴⁸Hillier, note 11, p. 28.

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