

LONELINESS AND SOCIAL ISOLATION IN LATER LIFE

Loneliness is not, and should not be, an inevitable part of getting older. However, many older people do experience loneliness and social isolation, which are linked to a range of health problems.



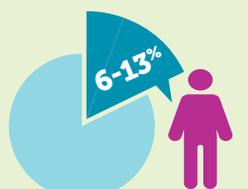
- Loneliness can occur **at any point in life**, and its intensity can vary across the life course.
- Risk of loneliness is **not driven by age**, but by people's circumstances.
- Older people might experience a number of **circumstances** that can increase the risk of loneliness and social isolation.

definitions

- Loneliness and social isolation are linked but **distinct concepts**.
- Loneliness** is a subjective, unwelcome feeling of lack or loss of companionship. It happens when we have a mismatch between the quantity and quality of social relationships that we have, and those that we want.¹
- Social isolation** is a more objective measure of the number of contacts and social interactions a person has.

LONELINESS AND SOCIAL ISOLATION

now and in the future



aged 65+

A fairly constant proportion (6–13%) of people aged 65+ report feeling lonely **often or always**²



aged 65+

Nearly one in three who have experienced **partner bereavement** report being very lonely³



aged 80+

In later life, loneliness is most common amongst the **oldest** in our society⁴



aged 65+

In 2018, 3.9 million people aged 65+ were **living alone** in the UK, an increase of half a million people since 2008⁵



As our population ages, the **absolute number** of lonely older people is likely to increase

LIFE CIRCUMSTANCES

linked to loneliness and social isolation



Retirement



Bereavement



Poor physical and mental health



Poverty



Caring for somebody



Living alone

IMPACTS

of loneliness and social isolation

Loneliness:



key risk factor for **depression** in older age⁶



linked with a 40% increased risk of **dementia**⁷

Social isolation:



strongly linked to **cardiovascular disease**⁸

Loneliness, social isolation, and living alone are all associated with an increased risk of **early death**.⁹



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BARRIERS

- Some older people are **reluctant** to join groups explicitly targeting loneliness, groups that are dominated by one **gender** and groups that target **older people only**.¹⁰
- Older **LGBT people** may be at risk of loneliness as they are more likely to be single, live alone and have lower levels of contact with relatives.¹¹
- Older people from **ethnic minority groups** may experience 'overlooked' loneliness due to language barriers, poverty, and assumptions that they live in 'traditional' family structures that prevent loneliness.¹²

WHAT WORKS

Some promising approaches to reducing loneliness and social isolation include:

- Supporting people to **remain engaged** with activities and interests they enjoy, and that are meaningful to them.
- Designing **mixed-generational groups** that mirror social interactions in everyday life.
- Offering **befriending** services for those who would prefer them to group activities.
- Promoting an **active role** for older people in the development and running of activities, and opportunities to volunteer.
- Addressing underlying **psychological factors** related to socialising such as expectations around social contact, social confidence and resilience.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- The Government must fully resource NHS England to support the commitments to **social prescribing** outlined in the NHS long term plan.
- The Government should take a **whole-system approach** to promote ways for people to maintain social connections and relationships across the life course, e.g. ensuring older people can access public transport, ensuring town centres are age-friendly.
- The Government should work with the Office for National Statistics to develop an appropriate tool to **measure social isolation** at different stages across the life course, similar to the work on a loneliness measure.
- The Government and employers should **pilot interventions** to support people at risk of becoming lonely in older age.

1 Peplau & Periman, 1982.

2 Victor, 2011. Loneliness in old age: the UK Perspective

3 Independent Age, 2018. Good grief: older people's experience of partner bereavement

4 Demos, 2016. Building companionship

5 ONS, 2019. Families and households: 2018.

6 Luo et al, 2012. Loneliness, Health, and Mortality in Old Age: A National Longitudinal Study.

7 Sutin et al, 2018. Loneliness and Risk of Dementia.

8 Courtin & Knapp, 2015. Social isolation, loneliness and health in old age: a scoping review.

9 Holt-Lunstad et al, 2015. Loneliness and social isolation as risk factors for mortality: a meta-analytic review.

10 Independent Age, 2015. Isolation: The Emerging Crisis for Older Men.

11 Guasp, 2011. Lesbian, Gay & Bisexual People in Later Life.

12 Runnymede Trust, 2017. Loneliness and older people from BME groups

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Independent Age is the operating name of the Royal United Kingdom Beneficent Association. Registered charity number 210729 (England and Wales) SC047184 (Scotland)

Campaign to
End Loneliness
CONNECTIONS IN OLDER AGE



advice and support for older age
Independent Age