

Social connection and loneliness in late life

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Montgomery County Public Forum on Countering Social Isolation and the Loneliness of Seniors

May 18, 2021

Loneliness: A consequence of social distancing

The New York Times

Opinion

Coronavirus and the Isolation Paradox

“Social distancing” is required to prevent infection. But loneliness can make us sick.

By **Abdullah Shihipar**
Mr. Shihipar studies public health.

March 13, 2020

Vox

Coronavirus will also cause a loneliness epidemic

We need to take both social distancing and the “social recession” it will cause seriously.

By Ezra Klein | @ezraklein | Mar 12, 2020, 8:20am EDT

Loneliness vs social isolation



Isolated
and lonely



Isolated but not lonely

- **Social isolation:** Objective social isolation

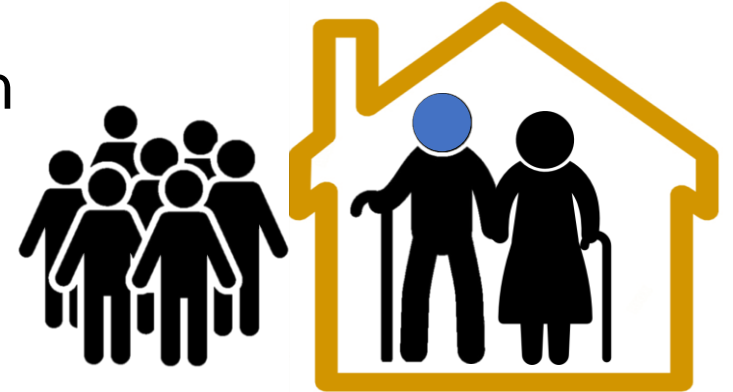
- Size of social network and frequency of contact

- **Loneliness:** Perceived social isolation

- Discrepancy between desired and perceived social relationships

- **Social loneliness** – discrepancy in one's broader community or network

- **Emotional loneliness** – discrepancy in one's intimate connections and the consequences thereof



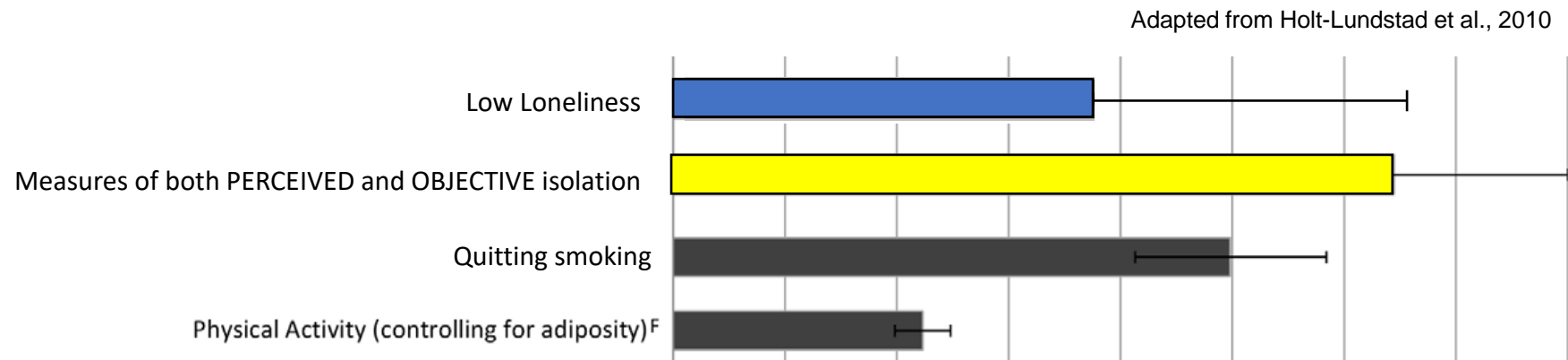
Lonely but not isolated



Loneliness ≠ social isolation, but social isolation increases risk for feelings of loneliness.

Poor social relationships are associated with increased mortality

- Strong social relationships are associated with a 50% increased likelihood of survival
- Both *perceptions* of relationships and isolation and *objective* isolation matter
- Effects comparable to or greater than traditional health risks



Why are poor relationships associated with health?

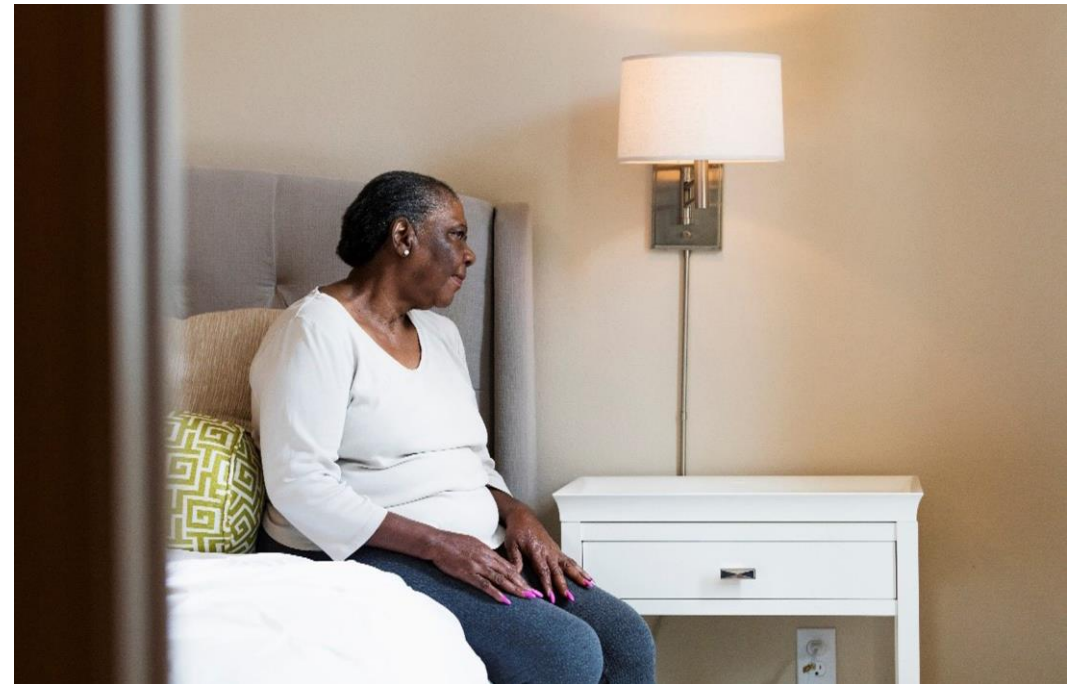
Loneliness in midlife is associated with increased prevalence of diseases aging

Cardiovascular disease • Metabolic syndrome •
Type 2 Diabetes • Chronic pain • Alzheimer's disease

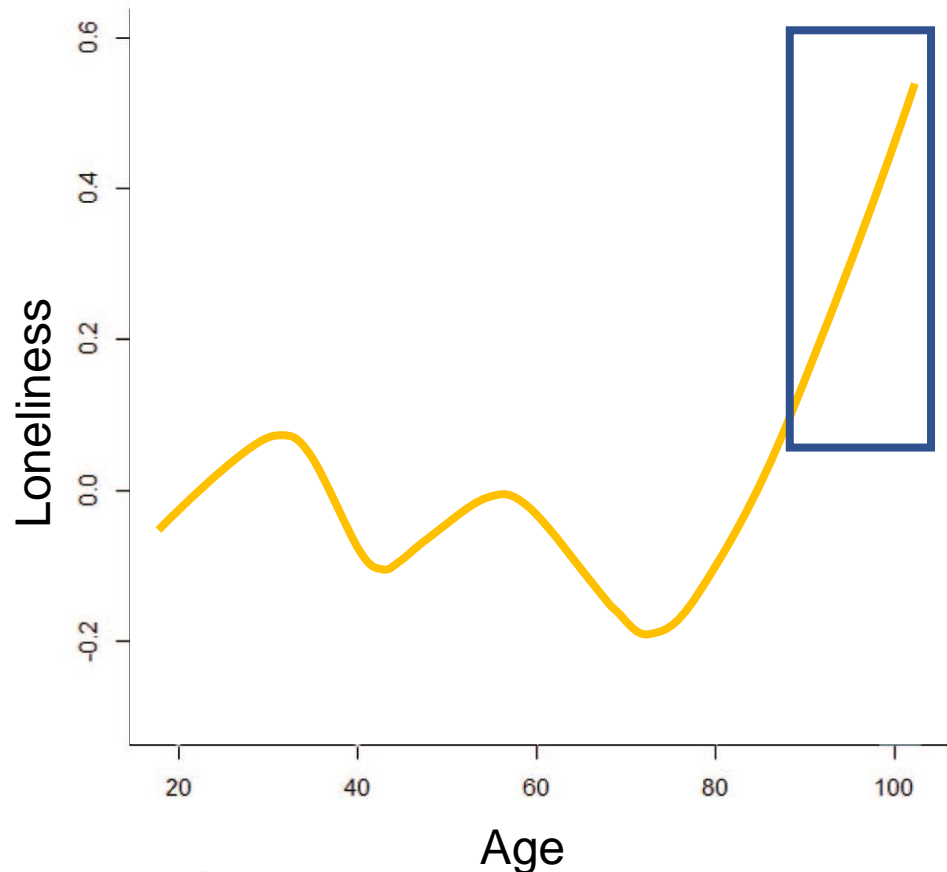
- Poor health behaviors
- Poor quality sleep
- Biological dysregulation:
 - Age-related changes in neuroendocrine, cardiovascular, and inflammatory stress responses
- Research funded by NIA:
 - [Understanding how social connectedness protects older adults' cognitive health: the role of social cognition](#)
 - [Resilience, cultural alignment, and social support in brain aging: Data from the Strong Heart Study](#)

Loneliness across the lifespan

- Over 29% of adults 75+ in the *Health and Retirement Study* report being lonely at least sometimes. 19.3% age 65+ report feeling lonely much of the previous week.
- 9% of older adults in UK report severe loneliness.



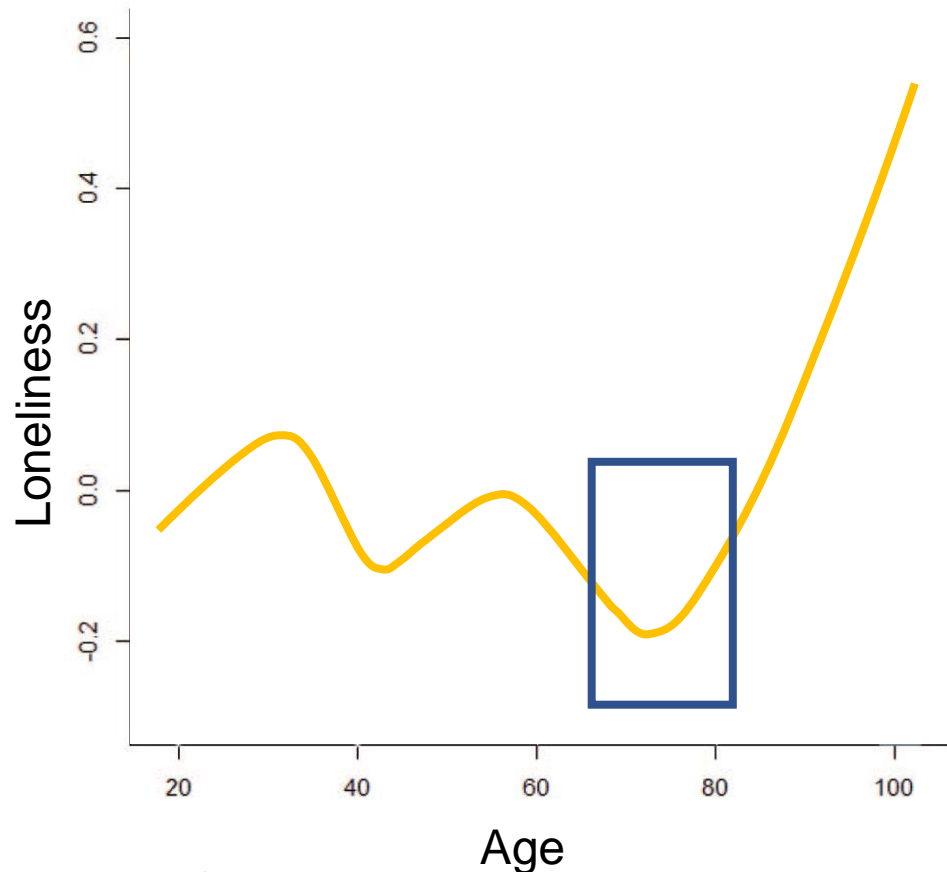
Loneliness across the lifespan



Adapted from Luhmann et al., 2016

- Loneliness in late-life related to:
 - Worsening physical health
 - Bereavement
 - Being female, widowed, divorced, never married
 - Having little contact with significant friends or low-quality friendship ties
 - Lacking socioeconomic resources
- Variability in loneliness related to:
 - Race/ethnicity/culture/immigrant status
 - Cognitive decline
 - Community dwelling vs long-term care facility

Loneliness across the lifespan

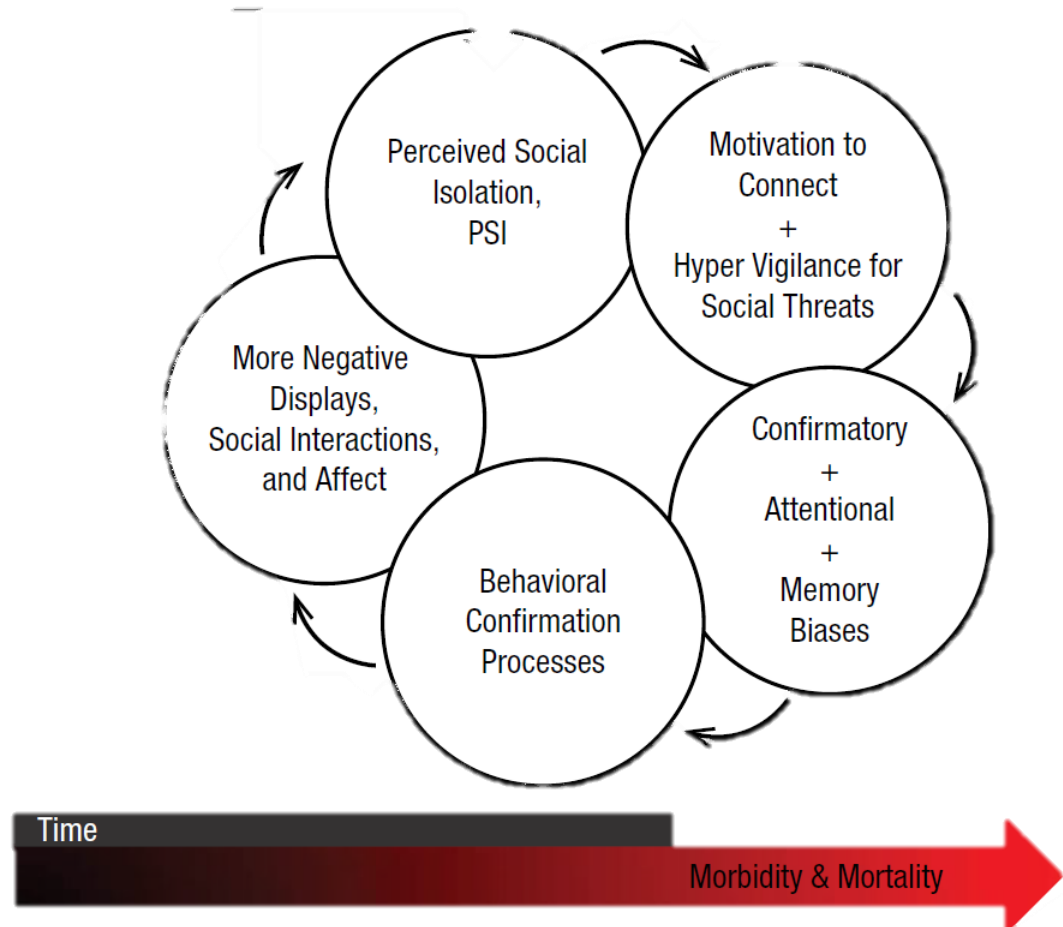


Adapted from Luhmann et al., 2016

- In late life, people focus more on positive emotions and less on negative emotions
- But they also experience changing life circumstances that may make them more isolated, and they are more sensitive to these changes
- Late life is a period of vulnerability to isolation

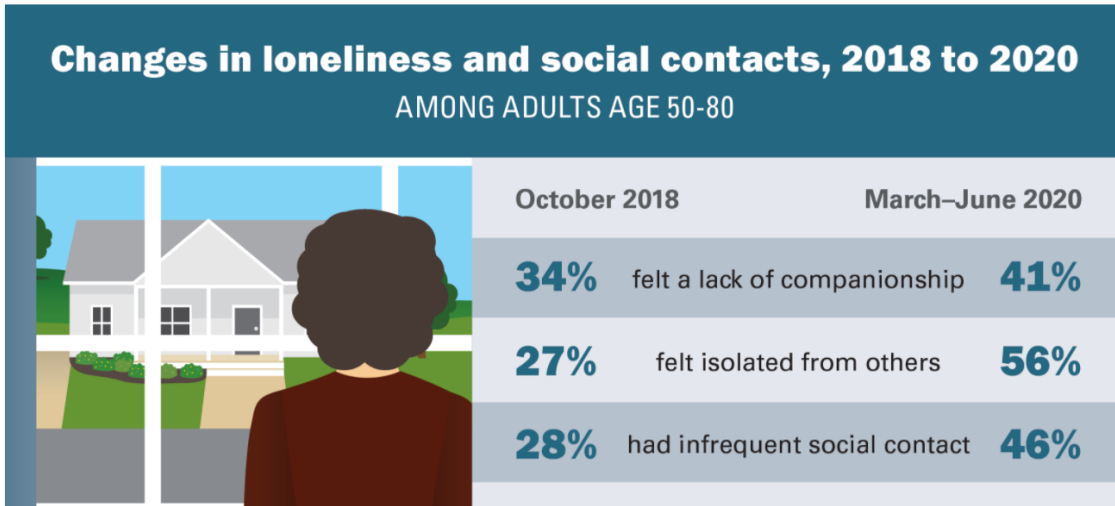
Loneliness is a vicious cycle

- Lonely individuals' social cognition and behaviors diminish social interaction quality
 - Particularly true in old age
- Effect of loneliness-inducing circumstances is more prolonged in mid-life

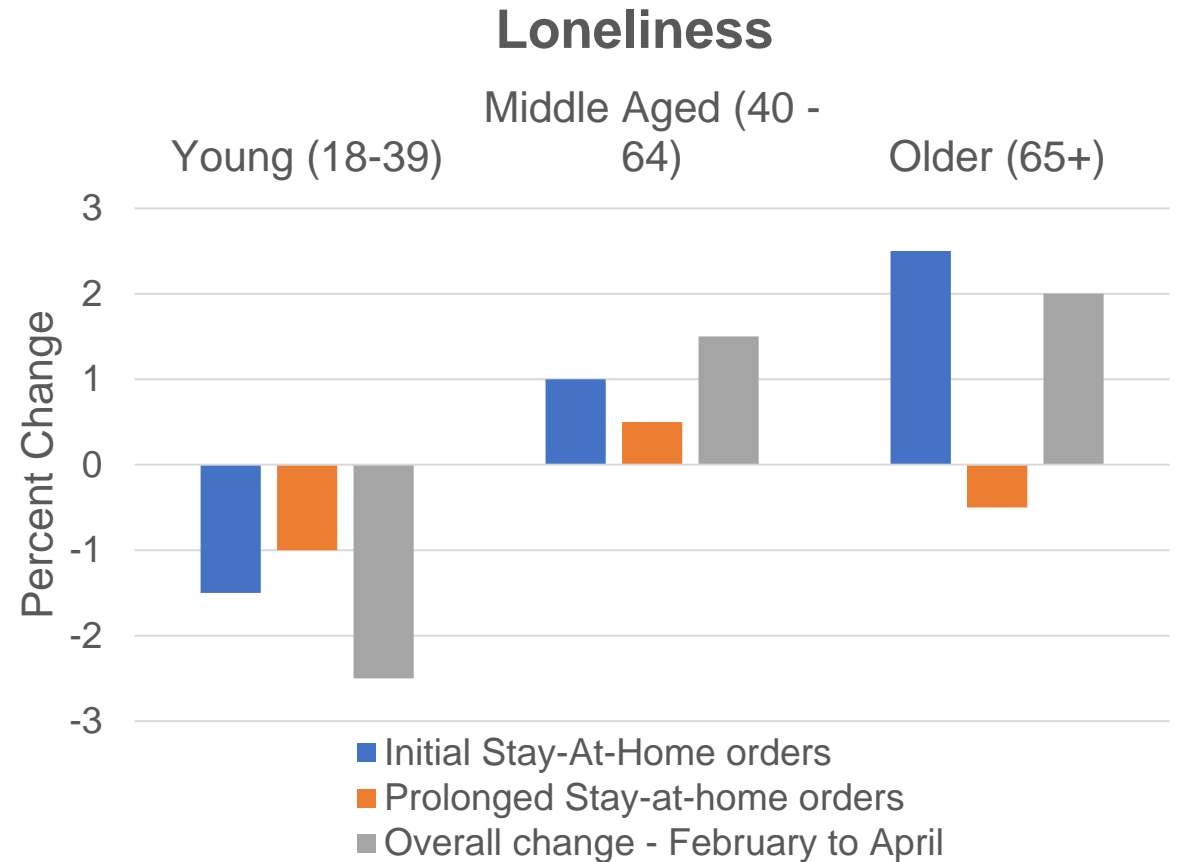


How did the pandemic influence loneliness across the lifespan?

Older adults' loneliness increased during the pandemic

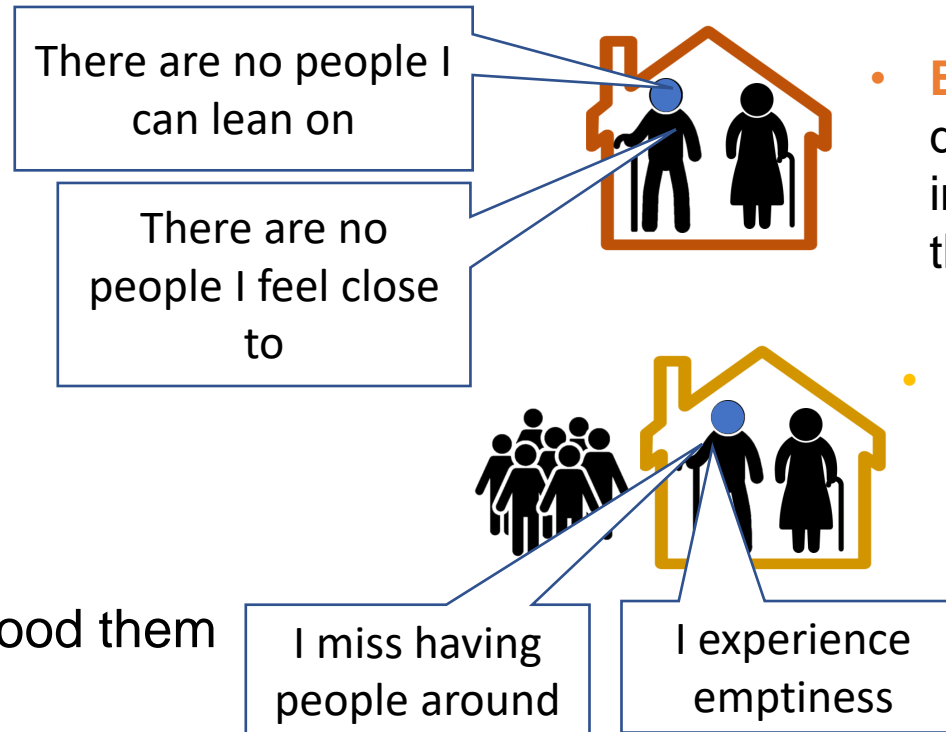


But on average, older adults were still less lonely than younger adults



Increases in loneliness driven by intimate connections

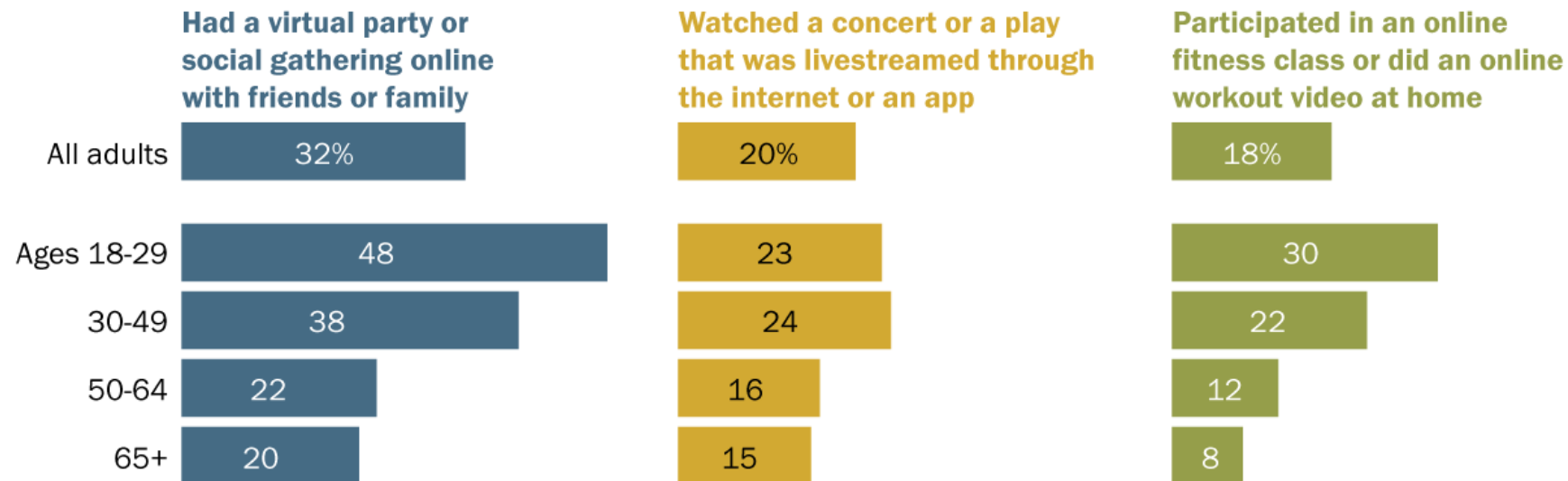
- Increases in **emotional loneliness** are larger than increases in **social loneliness**
- The effects of the pandemic:
 - Younger adults:
 - More 'in tune' with others
 - More people who really understood them
 - Older adults:
 - Less 'in tune' with others
 - Intimate connections were unavailable



- **Emotional loneliness** – discrepancy in one's intimate connections and the consequences thereof
- **Social loneliness** – discrepancy in one's broader community or network

Double problem of exclusion – Digital and Social Exclusion

% of U.S. adults who say they have ____ as a result of the coronavirus outbreak



Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted April 7-12, 2020.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

In dementia populations, story may be more complicated

The New York Times

Opinion

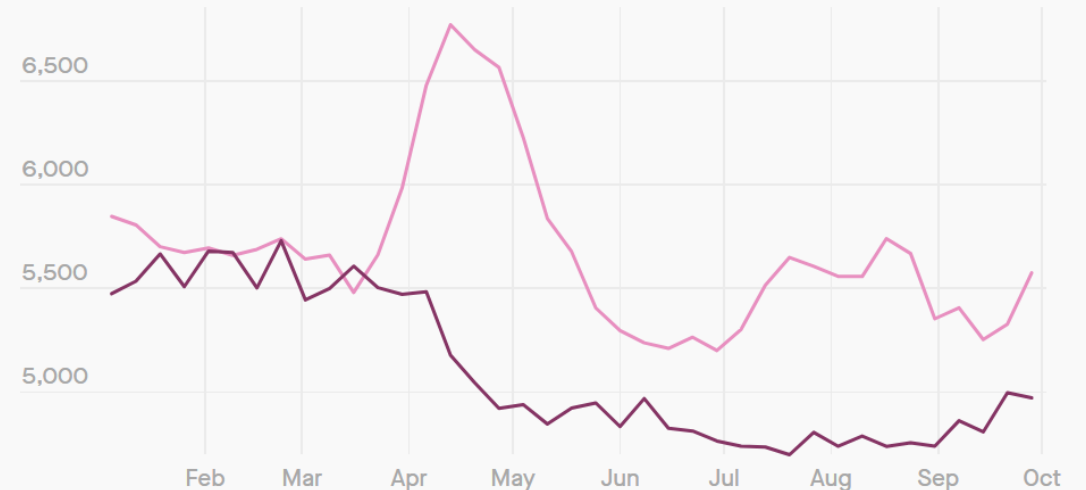
'We Are Going to Keep You Safe, Even if It Kills Your Spirit'

For the millions of Americans living with dementia, every day during this pandemic can bring a fresh horror.



US weekly deaths from Alzheimer's and other dementias

— 2019 — 2020



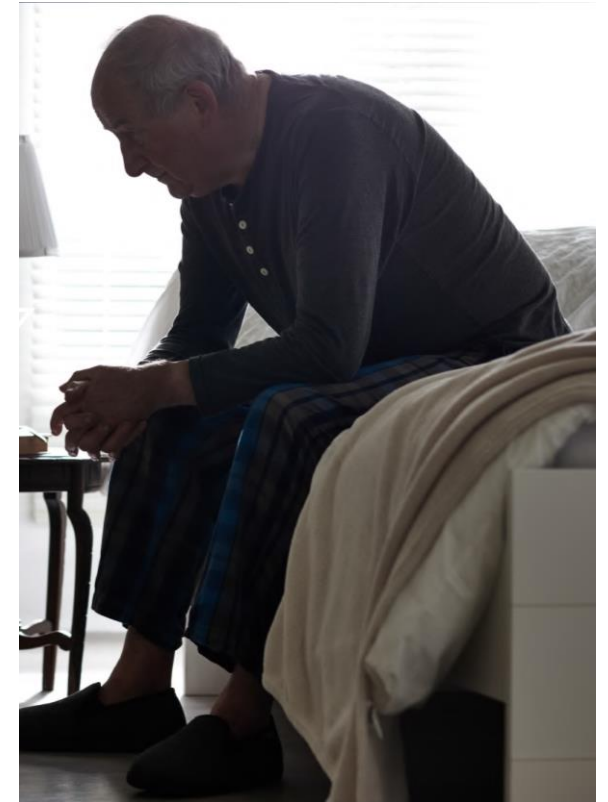
Quartz | qz.com | Data: US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention | Note: Deaths from recent weeks are likely to be incomplete as reports are delayed

Promising Interventions for Loneliness Exist

- Recent interventions leverage components of CBT (behavioral activation) and empathic listening/social support with substantial success
 - [The Getting Active Project \(GAP\): A Randomized Trial of Volunteering to Reduce Loneliness in Later Life](#)
- How do we scale these interventions up?

Research at the NIA

- How does loneliness relate to Alzheimer's disease and related dementias?
 - [Investigating the impact of loneliness on brain aging and pre-symptomatic Alzheimer's disease progression](#)
- What makes us lonely?
 - [Loneliness and Biomarkers of Physical Health Among Married Older Adults: A Longitudinal Dyadic Approach](#)
 - [Loneliness and Social Isolation among Older Adults in the Last Years of Life](#)



Thank you!

To find out more about research funded at NIA,

check out:

[NIA.gov](https://www.nia.nih.gov)

[Reporter.NIH.gov](https://reporter.nih.gov)

<https://www.nia.nih.gov/about/stay-connected>