Social connection and loneliness in late life

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Loneliness: A consequence of social distancing

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

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 | @ezklein | Mar 12, 2020, 6:20am EDT
Loneliness vs social isolation

- **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

**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

\[4\]

Low Loneliness

Adapted from Holt-Lundstad et al., 2010

Measures of both PERCEIVED and OBJECTIVE isolation

- Quitting smoking
- Physical Activity (controlling for adiposity)

\[4\]
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

- 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

Adapted from Luhmann et al., 2016
Loneliness across the lifespan

- 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.

Adapted from Luhmann et al., 2016.
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

Cacioppo & Hawkley, 2009; Cacioppo et al., 2015; Mund et al., 2019
How did the pandemic influence loneliness across the lifespan?
 Older adults’ loneliness increased during the pandemic

| Changes in loneliness and social contacts, 2018 to 2020 AMONG ADULTS AGE 50-80 |
|---------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| October 2018 | March–June 2020 |
| felt a lack of companionship | felt a lack of companionship |
| 34% | 41% |
| felt isolated from others | felt isolated from others |
| 27% | 56% |
| had infrequent social contact | had infrequent social contact |
| 28% | 46% |

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

![Loneliness graph]

- Initial Stay-At-Home orders
- Prolonged Stay-at-home orders
- Overall change - February to April

Piette et al., 2020; Luchetti et al., 2020
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

- Had a virtual party or social gathering online with friends or family
  - All adults: 32%
  - Ages 18-29: 48%
  - 30-49: 38%
  - 50-64: 22%
  - 65+: 20%

- Watched a concert or a play that was livestreamed through the internet or an app
  - All adults: 20%
  - Ages 18-29: 23%
  - 30-49: 24%
  - 50-64: 16%
  - 65+: 15%

- Participated in an online fitness class or did an online workout video at home
  - All adults: 18%
  - Ages 18-29: 30%
  - 30-49: 22%
  - 50-64: 12%
  - 65+: 8%

Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted April 7-12, 2020.
PEW RESEARCH CENTER
In dementia populations, story may be more complicated
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
Reporter.NIH.gov

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