

Ageing in Solitude

Unwanted Loneliness as the Silent Epidemy of our Times

1 November 2024



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Loneliness frequently stems from difficulties in forming connections and cultivating meaningful relationships, often tied to challenges with self-confidence or self-esteem. Significant life changes —such as the loss of a loved one, a relationship ending, relocating to a new area, or dealing with physical or mental health issues— can also precipitate episodes of loneliness. Admitting loneliness is complex and deeply personal, with no universal approach for addressing it.

Loneliness may be experienced either as a prolonged or as a temporary state. In both cases, it can be profoundly distressing and can impact overall health and well-being. Studies indicate that individuals experiencing loneliness are more likely to encounter mental health challenges, including heightened risks of anxiety and depression.

Discussing loneliness is often uncomfortable, with many feeling embarrassed or reluctant to admit a lack of social connection. However, it is important to recognize that even those who outwardly appear sociable and content may be grappling with feelings of isolation.

Loneliness is the state of mind where you feel lonely or experience a need for social connections which does not match reality.

It is not necessarily social isolation. In fact, people can feel lonely even when surrounded by people all the time or in long-term relationships. Being lonely is not the same as being alone.

Loneliness can be understood as involuntary feelings of isolation, rejection, separation, or abandonment.

Lonely people can develop mental health issues like depressive symptoms that can have negative effects on their overall well-being.

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Distribution

Unwanted loneliness is often mistakenly associated exclusively with ageing. However, recent studies suggest that young people, despite their heightened social connectivity and access to technology, are more frequently affected by loneliness.

This phenomenon results in what researchers describe as a U-shaped distribution of loneliness, with higher prevalence at both ends of the age spectrum: during adolescence and in old age.

Loneliness in children can result from a mismatch between their actual social relationships and the connections they desire, and it can significantly impact their emotional and psychological development. Adolescence also can be a vulnerable time when prolonged or chronic loneliness has detrimental effects on mental health and overall well-being.

Evolution

The topic of unwanted loneliness is not new, with research dating back to the 1950s. Early studies primarily focused on the isolation of older adults. However, in the early 21st century, attention began to shift toward understanding the impact of loneliness on both physical and mental health. In 2018, the issue gained prominence on the global stage when the UK Prime Minister appointed the world's first Minister for Loneliness, highlighting that loneliness affected an estimated nine million people in the UK. This led to the development of a national strategy aimed at better understanding, preventing, and addressing the issue.

Around the same time, a European Commission report revealed that 30 million people across Europe frequently experienced loneliness. By 2021, Japan had also introduced a Minister for Loneliness.

Despite these alarming statistics, loneliness is often perceived as an issue mainly afflicting older adults. This may be because we tend to equate loneliness with being physically alone, and it is true that many

single-person households are composed of individuals aged 65 and older, especially women.

Nature

But loneliness is not synonymous with solitude. One can be alone and content, while others may feel lonely even when surrounded by people or engaged in regular social activities.

Unwanted loneliness is best understood as the emotional experience resulting from a mismatch between the quantity and quality of social relationships that an individual desires and what they actually have. This subjective feeling can manifest in various ways, such as the absence of close confidants, feelings of neglect or exclusion, or an overwhelming sense of emptiness. Importantly, loneliness can affect people at any stage of life, often emerging during significant transitions such as moving to a new place, starting or losing a job, entering parenthood, or suffering the loss of a partner. Chronic illness, unemployment, retirement, and caregiving responsibilities can also trigger feelings of loneliness.

Recent studies have challenged the assumption that unwanted loneliness is an inevitable part of ageing. By analyzing data from surveys and longitudinal studies, they have demonstrated that loneliness can affect people of any age and is most prevalent among young people and the elderly.

Age groups

Can we assume that loneliness in adolescents, young adults, and older people is the same? While the feeling of emptiness may be common across age groups, the underlying nature of loneliness often differs. Among older adults, loneliness is usually linked to a decline in the number or quality of social relationships and to health issues such as chronic illness, physical dependency, or depression, which can further hinder social interactions.

In contrast, loneliness among younger individuals seems to be more closely related

to the frustration of unmet life expectations. Young adults who have not yet achieved societal milestones, such as financial independence, stable employment, or starting a family, are more susceptible to feeling lonely. For this age group, loneliness can stem from the pressure to attain these societal benchmarks, and the failure to do so can heighten feelings of inadequacy and isolation.

For adolescents, loneliness is often tied to the pressures of navigating life transitions, particularly those related to education and social environments. They may struggle with changing social groups, academic pressures, and decisions regarding their future educational or career paths. Additionally, the need to belong to a peer group is a key factor during adolescence, and the absence of meaningful, supportive relationships with peers or educators can intensify feelings of loneliness.

Causes for older persons

1. Loss of Loved Ones

As people age, they often face the death of spouses, siblings, close friends, or children. The loss of these vital support systems can leave older persons feeling deeply isolated and disconnected from the world.

2. Reduced Mobility and Health Problems

Chronic illnesses, physical disabilities, or declining mobility can make it difficult for older people to leave their homes, participate in activities, or engage in social interactions. This isolation can become more pronounced if they live in inaccessible environments or lack transportation.

3. Retirement

While retirement can offer freedom from work responsibilities, it often removes older individuals from their social networks, which they previously built around their professional lives. For many, work provided a sense of purpose and daily interaction, and its absence can contribute to feelings of loneliness.

4. Fragmentation of Families

In many modern societies, family structures have changed. Children may move away for work, education, or lifestyle reasons,

leaving their elderly parents geographically distant. This can create an emotional gap, even if contact is maintained through technology.

5. Living Alone

Many older adults live alone, whether by choice or due to circumstances such as widowhood. Living alone can lead to long periods without meaningful interaction, exacerbating feelings of loneliness and abandonment.

6. Technological Barriers

While technology, such as video calls and social media, can help bridge the gap for some, many older individuals find it difficult to adapt to new technology. This digital divide can prevent them from maintaining social connections with family, friends, and the community.

7. Ageism and Social Exclusion

Ageism, or the negative stereotyping and marginalization of older people, can lead to social exclusion. Many older individuals feel undervalued and invisible in their communities, workplaces, and even within their families. This exclusion can contribute to a sense of being left out and unwanted.

Effects in older persons

1. Mental Health Decline

Loneliness is strongly linked to depression, anxiety, and other mental health issues. Older people experiencing unwanted loneliness are at higher risk of developing these conditions, which can lead to further withdrawal from social interactions. Loneliness is also a significant risk factor for cognitive decline, with studies showing a correlation between social isolation and dementia or other memory-related disorders.

2. Physical Health Impacts

Unwanted loneliness has been shown to have tangible effects on physical health. Research suggests that chronic loneliness can lead to higher blood pressure, heart disease, and a weakened immune system. Some studies even suggest that loneliness has the same health risks as smoking 15 cigarettes a day. Older persons who feel lonely are more likely

to neglect their health, leading to poor nutrition, decreased physical activity, and missed medical appointments.

3. Shortened Life Expectancy

The cumulative effects of loneliness on mental and physical health often result in a shortened lifespan for those who experience prolonged isolation. A lack of social connection is a strong predictor of mortality in older populations.

4. Increased Risk of Elder Abuse

Older people who are isolated and lonely may be more vulnerable to elder abuse, whether financial, emotional, or physical. Their isolation makes it easier for potential abusers to exploit them without detection.

5. Diminished Quality of Life

Loneliness diminishes the overall quality of life for older persons, reducing feelings of happiness, fulfillment, and life satisfaction. Without social engagement, older individuals may lose a sense of purpose, leading to apathy and emotional numbness.

Interventions for older persons

1. Social Engagement Programs

Community-based programs can play a crucial role in combatting loneliness among older individuals. These may include social clubs, hobby groups, exercise classes, or volunteer opportunities designed specifically for seniors. Such initiatives provide opportunities for older adults to build friendships and feel connected.

2. Intergenerational Connections

Encouraging interaction between older and younger generations can be highly beneficial. Programs that facilitate mentorship, shared activities, or educational projects can create meaningful relationships, reduce ageist stereotypes, and provide older persons with a sense of purpose and value.

3. Technological Training and Support

Offering older adults training in digital technologies can help them stay connected to family and friends. Teaching seniors how to use smartphones, social media, or video conferencing tools allows them to maintain contact even when physical interactions are limited.

4. Transportation and Mobility Solutions

Providing accessible and affordable transportation options is essential for helping older people engage in social activities. Public transport services tailored to the needs of older adults, or volunteer driver programs, can prevent isolation by facilitating their participation in community life.

5. Support for Caregivers

Caregivers play a key role in the lives of many older individuals. Supporting caregivers through respite care, education, and mental health resources ensures they can continue providing social interaction and care without becoming overwhelmed, which could inadvertently contribute to the loneliness of those they care for.

6. Mental Health Services

Providing mental health support to older adults through counseling, therapy, or support groups can help address the emotional aspects of loneliness. Access to professionals trained in geriatric mental health can offer older persons the tools to cope with loneliness and its psychological effects.

7. Policy Initiatives and Awareness

Governments and policymakers can help combat unwanted loneliness through national strategies that promote age-friendly cities, social inclusion, and public awareness campaigns. Initiatives such as community centers, housing schemes, and elderly-friendly public spaces are essential for creating environments where older adults can remain active and engaged.