



Loneliness twice as unhealthy as obesity for older people, study finds

Scientists found that the loneliest were nearly twice as likely to die during their six-year study than the least lonely

Ian Sample in Chicago

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Loneliness can be twice as unhealthy as obesity, according to researchers who found that feelings of isolation can have a devastating impact on older people.

The scientists tracked more than 2,000 people aged 50 and over and found that the loneliest were nearly twice as likely to die during the six-year study than the least lonely.

Compared with the average person in the study, those who reported being lonely had a 14% greater risk of dying. The figure means that loneliness has around twice the impact on an early death as obesity. Poverty increased the risk of an early death by 19%.

The findings point to a coming crisis as the population ages and people increasingly live alone

or far from their families. A study of loneliness in older Britons in 2012 found that more than a fifth felt lonely all the time, and a quarter became more lonely over five years. Half of those who took part in the survey said their loneliness was worse at weekends, and three-quarters suffered more at night.

Previous studies have linked loneliness to a range of health problems, from high blood pressure and a weakened immune system to a greater risk of depression, heart attack and strokes. In his recent book, *Loneliness*, John Cacioppo, a psychologist at the University of Chicago, says that the pain of loneliness is akin to physical pain.

Cacioppo said the world was experiencing a "silver tsunami" as baby boomers reached retirement age. "People have to think about how to protect themselves from depression, low subjective well-being and early mortality," he said.

In light of the damaging health effects of loneliness, Cacioppo said people approaching retirement age might want to think twice about pulling up their roots and heading to fresh pastures to live out their retirement. He described results from the study at the American Association for the Advancement of Science meeting in Chicago.

"We have mythic notions of retirement. We think that retirement means leaving friends and family and buying a place down in Florida where it is warm and living happily ever after. But that's probably not the best idea," he said.

"We find people who continue to interact with co-workers after retirement and have friends close by are less lonely. Take time to enjoy yourself and share good times with family and friends. Non-lonely people enjoy themselves with other people."

The researchers found that some people were happy living a life of solitude. Others still felt lonely, and suffered the health impacts of loneliness, even with family and friends close by. The findings suggest that people needed to feel involved and valued by those near to them, and that company alone was not enough.

Caroline Abrahams at Age UK said the study added to a growing body of research showing that being lonely not only made life miserable for older people, but also made them more vulnerable to illness and disease.

"It's time we took loneliness seriously as a threat to a happy and healthy later life. We need to do more to support older people to stay socially connected. This is a big part of our job at Age UK and everyone can help by being a good friend or neighbour to the older people they know," she said.

Local branches of Age UK help older people through befriending schemes and other services that include home visits and phone calls for people who are feeling lonely or isolated, she added.

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