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Lessons on loneliness: Theo van Tilburg on 35 years of research on loneliness

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In 1988, sociologist Theo van Tilburg received his PhD from VU Amsterdam; this month he will deliver his valedictory speech as professor of Sociology and Social Gerontology. After 35 years of research into loneliness, especially among the elderly, he looks back on lessons learned about the causes of loneliness and possible solutions. He will discuss these lessons during his valedictory speech on Friday 30 June. In this article, a sneak preview.

When Van Tilburg explains he is researching loneliness among the elderly, he often gets the same response: those poor old people are bound to become increasingly lonely in our current society. He can reassure them. "People often think that elderly people in Western and Northern Europe are more lonely than in Spain and Italy, for example. They then picture those Bertolli adverts, with long tables filled with family members, or old men on a village square. But the truth is that in Italy people are actually more lonely because of high social expectations and obligations, and smaller personal networks."

There are many misconceptions about loneliness, says the sociologist. "The elderly in the Netherlands and, for example, Germany and Scandinavia are generally doing quite well. Compared to the past, people are living longer, are together with a partner for a longer period, and are also doing better financially."

Van Tilburg knows this partly because of the Longitudinal Aging Study Amsterdam, a long-term study on ageing in the Netherlands. Since 1992, thousands of Dutch elderly people have regularly answered questions and taken tests about how they are doing, physically, socially, emotionally and cognitively. In it, he sees a slight improvement when it comes to individual risk of loneliness.

**What is loneliness?**

Loneliness is a broad concept. Van Tilburg argues that we need to distinguish between loneliness and things like alienation and meaninglessness. "Loneliness is about relationships: people see their relationship network as too small or without sufficient quality." Using terms interchangeably also makes it more difficult to come up with solutions.

Loneliness is individual, but closely linked to the social context, Van Tilburg argues. The level of education is rising, as is the increased freedom of choice in life. "Your network used to be dominated along fixed lines: work, clubs, church and especially family. Now you have more and more freedom of choice. This allows people to live more the life that suits them, but you need more skills to do so. You can make more of life, but so you also have to make more of life."

In addition, older people are more active than they used to be. "If you reached 65 in the 1960s, you were 'allowed' to go to the nursing home and didn't have to do anything. That was seen as a privilege. Now our whole life is about being and staying active, with all kinds of interests and hobbies." That freedom of choice can combat loneliness, but it also increases disappointment if that active lifestyle is no longer possible because of old age.

**What can we do against loneliness?**

What works against loneliness, and what doesn't? Van Tilburg is not enthusiastic about some interventions. "Meeting places, setting up group meals and benches: these kinds of things are too fleeting. There is nothing wrong with it, but after such an activity people still come home to an empty house."

So what does work? Van Tilburg: "You have to focus on sustainable solutions, involving fundamental change. This can be done in the field of housing, for instance; there are several initiatives underway to promote 'living together'. But it is also about gaining social skills and cognitive development. People who are lonely are often damaged, they are less likely to trust others and quickly perceive reactions from others negatively. You, therefore, need to create realistic expectations of meeting people and learn to reflect on your own actions."

Van Tilburg stresses the importance of tackling loneliness. "The complexity of the problem is underestimated, interventions are poorly designed and too much is expected of the individual. More knowledge and better use of knowledge is needed." Although we talk about loneliness more often and it is on the agenda of organisations, there remains a taboo on loneliness. "With this kind of problem, too often it is assumed that it is because of the individual, so the stigma remains."

*The valedictory speech 'Lessons learned about loneliness' by Professor of Sociology and Social Gerontology Theo van Tilburg will take place on Friday 30 June, at 15:45 in the Aula of VU Amsterdam.*[*The speech can also be followed online.*](https://vu.nl/en/events/2023/valedictory-speech-by-prof-dr-t-g-van-tilburg)

*Theo van Tilburg received his PhD from the Faculty of Social Sciences of VU Amsterdam in 1988. He is the academic director of the Graduate School of Social Sciences, director of the research program ‘Participation in Society (PARIS): Social Context of Aging’, and board member and senior researcher of the ‘Longitudinal Aging Study Amsterdam'. Van Tilburg published more than 250 scientific articles, book chapters, professional publications and publications aimed at the general public. He was a member of the faculty board multiple times and served as vice-dean and as Portfolio holder for teaching and for research.*