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All the lonely people: Why more of us will feel disconnected than ever before

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(CNN) - Despite popular belief, baby boomers between 55 and 75 aren't more lonely than prior generations, according to two new studies published Tuesday by the American Psychological Association.

But that doesn't mean we won't have a loneliness epidemic in the future, as the baby-boomer population continues to age and younger generations struggle with feelings of isolation.

"While the data show we don't need to worry, at this point at least, that our older adults are suffering loneliness at rates higher than they have been suffering in the past, the concern about loneliness is real," said lead author Louise Hawkley, a senior scientist at the nonpartisan research organization NORC at the University of Chicago.

"It has real consequences for health, for wellbeing, for cognition," she added. "So we can't ignore it. We just need to get smarter about how we deal with loneliness."

No loneliness 'epidemic'

Google "loneliness" and you'll see the word "epidemic" widely used. That got Hawkley and her team at NORC (formerly called the National Opinion Research Center) interested in looking at two national databases on aging to see just how true that was.

"Headlines have said there's been an uptick in loneliness, likely because research shows more people are not married, aren't civically or socially involved and are living alone," Hawkley said. "But our data found loneliness decreased from age 50 to about the mid-70s."

At that point, however, prior studies show that resilience to loneliness begins to decline. Loneliness peaks as people age into their 80s and 90s, or what's called the "oldest-old."

"It isn't until the losses begin to mount in much older age -- the loss of health and mobility, the deaths of spouses, family and friends -- that people begin to be unable to bounce back and loneliness spikes," Hawkley said.

The baby boomer population in the United States was born between 1946 and 1964 and totals about 75 million people. The oldest boomers are currently 73, the age in which research shows levels of loneliness begin to rise.

"That means the total number of older adults who are lonely may increase once the baby boomers reach their late 70s and 80s," Hawkley said.

A sense of control is key

A second study, based in the Netherlands, also found no current loneliness epidemic in a Dutch population aged 55 and older.

Despite the fact that social communities such as churches, neighborhoods and extended families have declined in strength in recent decades, the study found Dutch adults in their 50s and 60s were actually less lonely than prior generations, although the decrease was small.

Dutch adults from later-born groups had better cognitive functioning and more diverse social networks than those born earlier. While that wasn't surprising, the study also found that a sense

of control -- or mastery -- over one's life had a significant impact on how lonely a person felt.

"Older adults today need to develop problem-solving and goal-setting skills to sustain satisfying relationships and to reduce loneliness," said lead author Bianca Suanet, an associate professor of sociology at Vrije Universiteit in Amsterdam, in a statement.

In addition, Suanet suggested that public health interventions focused on loneliness prevention should provide tools and training to help older adults keep a sense of control over their lives, rather than just offering social activities.

"I'm not surprised by the findings," Hawkley said. "There's definitely a connection between a sense of autonomy that plays into feelings of loneliness."

She points to adult children who push their elderly parents into a community or nursing home facility against their wishes, and wonders if that might not be a disservice at times.

"They end up in a place where they haven't had a choice who they're living with and sometimes they don't get along with who they're living with. They're stuck," she said. "A sense of mastery over your life is critical at all ages of adulthood."

Other ways to assist an aging relative are to provide "opportunities to engage in the community, whether it's volunteering or being part of an activity group of some kind, even if it's the recreation center," Hawkley said.

And don't forget the role of social media. While research shows that social media is isolating for youth today, it's the opposite for the aging population.

"Older adults use social media differently than younger adults," Hawkley said. "They're using it to fortify existing relationships, not a place to discover new stuff. It's a place to connect with the grandkids that live on the other side of the country. "

Rising loneliness in youth

One concerning aspect not covered by these studies is the growing prevalence of loneliness among young people under age 25.

"There's really credible evidence that we need to be worried about younger adults being lonely, and not just in this country, or maybe even lonelier than they have been in the past," Hawkley said.

A study of 1,200 people done by George Mason University in the US found one in three youth below the age of 25 felt lonely, while only 11% of adults older than 65 felt the same. Another study in the UK found 40% of youth 16 to 24 felt lonely "often or very often," compared to 27% of adults over 75.

"Our research shows that loneliness is a subjective mental state rather than an age-related symptom," said Stephanie Cacioppo, director of the Brain Dynamics Laboratory at the University of Chicago Pritzker School of Medicine, in an email. "Loneliness does not discriminate. Everyone is at risk."

One of the benefits of age, Hawkley points out, is that you learn how to develop relationships that provide protection from loneliness and depression.

"You build up a repertoire of resources, you become resilient," she said. "You figure out a way of navigating this world and obtaining the kinds of social connections you need. And so loneliness levels peak in young adulthood and then they decline after that."

Will that happen for today's youth? Will those feelings of loneliness subside?

"That's worth worrying about because that's what they're taking with them into the rest of their life," Hawkley said.

"Are they establishing habits that will leave them deprived of the kind of social network they need to carry them through the rest of their life?" she wondered.

"And are they going to be amping up the rate of loneliness in future generations of older adults?"

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