

IN THE JOURNALS

Studies provide insight into 'loneliness epidemic' among older adults

Hawkley LC, et al. *Psychol Aging*. 2019;doi:10.1037/pag0000365.

Suanet B, et al. *Psychol Aging*. 2019;doi:10.1037/pag0000357.

December 10, 2019



ADD TOPIC TO EMAIL ALERTS



Louise C. Hawkley

A pair of studies published in *Psychology and Aging* found that among older Americans, claims of a “loneliness epidemic” reflect the overall increase in the aging population. However, researchers noted that today’s older generations are likely not any lonelier than their counterparts from previous generations.

“Reports of a loneliness 'epidemic' have been greatly exaggerated, at least for adults aged 50 years and older,” **Louise C. Hawkley, PhD**, of the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago, told *Healio Psychiatry*. “Because the population is aging, we can expect to see an increase in the absolute number of lonely older adults. Loneliness places people at risk for poor physical and cognitive health, depression and early mortality, and the health implications of loneliness call for attention to ways of preventing and reducing loneliness as people age.”

To compare three groups of American adults born in various periods throughout the 20th century, Hawkley and colleagues analyzed data from two national surveys — the National Social Life, Health and Aging Project and the Health and Retirement Study. The researchers analyzed data in 2005 to 2006 from 3,005 adults born between 1920 and 1947; in 2010 to 2011 from 3,377 people, including those still living from the previous survey and their spouses or partners; and in 2015 to 2016 from 4,777 adults, including surviving respondents from the previous two surveys and an additional sample of adults born between 1948 and 1965. Specifically, the authors determined participants’ level of loneliness, overall health on a scale from poor to excellent, educational attainment, marital status and number of family members, relatives and friends with whom they shared close relations.

Hawkley and colleagues found a decrease in loneliness from age 50 through the early 70s and an increase beyond age 75. Among baby boomers, there was no evidence that loneliness was substantially higher or that it increased over the past decade. The researchers noted associations between loneliness and poor health,

living alone or without a spouse/partner and having few close family and friends — factors that accounted for the overall increase in loneliness after age 75, they wrote.

“Loneliness levels may have decreased for adults aged between 50 and 74 because they had better educational opportunities, health care and social relationships than previous generations,” Hawkley said in a press release. “Our research suggests that older adults who remain in good health and maintain social relationships with a spouse, family or friends tend to be less lonely.”



Bianca Suanet

Bianca Suanet , PhD, and Theo G. van Tilburg, PhD, of Vrije University in Amsterdam, also assessed loneliness among older adults and found that they were less lonely than their counterparts from previous generations.

“Most interventions that combat loneliness are not very effective, most likely because they do not facilitate lonely people to actively alter their situation,” Suanet told Healio Psychiatry. “Our findings suggest that interventions that aim to increase mastery and self-efficacy might be fruitful to give people a start in obtaining necessary skills to counter loneliness successfully.”

Suanet and van Tilburg analyzed data from 4,880 people born between 1908 and 1957 who participated in the Longitudinal Aging Study Amsterdam — a long-term study of the emotional, physical, cognitive and social functioning of older adults. Participant self-reported factors including loneliness, control over situations and life in general and goal achievement on a scale from 0 (ie, no loneliness) to 11 (ie, severe loneliness).

The researchers reported that older adults born later in the 20th century were less lonely because they felt more in control and thus were more likely to better manage their lives, although the effect size was small. Further, they noted a sharp age-related increase in loneliness when comparing those aged 75 vs. 95 years and those aged 55 vs. 78 years. Thus, age effects outweigh cohort effects in size, they noted.

“Next to the higher mastery and self-efficacy experienced by older adults in later-born cohorts, people in these cohorts also more often have a partner, have a larger and more diverse network and more often have daily social contact, which also contributed to lower loneliness,” Suanet said. – *by Joe Gramigna*

Disclosures: Hawkley and van Tilburg report no relevant financial disclosures. Suanet reports a Veni grant from the Dutch Research Council.

