

Vitamins Health: Loneliness – the quiet killer?

A growing base of evidence shows that loneliness and social isolation increase the risk of death. Why is this, and what can be done?

It's a truism that human beings are social animals. Consistently through history, cultures and geography we have lived in communities taking many forms – including tribes, communes and the nuclear family. It now seems these social groups are key not just to our happiness but to a healthy body too.

Studies increasingly indicate that loneliness is comparable to long-accepted clinical risk factors. Those with a solid social network were shown to have a 50% greater likelihood of survival (over a period of around 7.5 years) compared to those without, the effect being comparable to quitting smoking and even eclipsing some other factors such as obesity.¹ Research shows that after controlling for other variables, loneliness is connected to a greater all-cause risk of mortality² as well as various specific conditions such as heart disease and stroke³ or physical frailty.⁴ An analysis of multiple studies concluded that risk of death increases by 26% (over a period of around 7 years) for self-reported loneliness.⁵

Almost one in five of us in the UK report feeling lonely “always” or “often”,⁶ so it's worth sitting up and taking notice of these statistics, particularly in an age when online services and shopping are increasingly replacing face-to-face human contact. Could loneliness become a health epidemic?

What makes loneliness dangerous?

Since the studies referenced here control for external factors such as pre-existing conditions, the link between loneliness and premature death is something of a head-scratcher. There are a few schools of thought here. Social connections directly impact a person's motivation for self-care, for example if they have dependants relying on them. The influence of one's peers can also lead to the copying of healthy behaviours and the sharing of related information. At the same time, social connections themselves reduce stress, increasing our capacity to both cope with difficulties and devote energy to healthy living. Conversely, loneliness is linked to poor sleep which is associated with poor health outcomes.⁷

The Office of National Statistics has carried out studies indicating that loneliness is more of a problem for certain demographics: women, younger people and the oldest old, singletons or widow(er)s, those already in poor health or with a disability, the unemployed, those living alone, and those who rent their home.⁸ While it may be intuitive that the group least likely to feel lonely are married homeowners in good health, the fact that young renting populations can be high-risk groups may come as more of a surprise. The reasons for this are uncertain. You may be tempted to draw a link with the prevalence of social media and pressures related to cyberbullying, but at this stage that's only speculation.

¹ <https://journals.plos.org/plosmedicine/article?id=10.1371/journal.pmed.1000316>

² <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3625264/>; <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3303190/>; <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4383762/>

³ <https://heart.bmj.com/content/102/13/1009>

⁴ <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5920346/>

⁵ <https://www.ahsw.org.uk/userfiles/Research/Perspectives%20on%20Psychological%20Science-2015-Holt-Lunstad-227-37.pdf>

⁶ <https://www.redcross.org.uk/-/media/documents/about-us/research-publications/health-social-care-and-support/co-op-trapped-in-a-bubble-report.pdf>

⁷ <https://www.aginglifecarejournal.org/health-effects-of-social-isolation-and-loneliness/>

⁸ <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/wellbeing/articles/lonelinesswhatcharacteristicsandcircumstancesareasociatedwithfeelinglonely/2018-04-10>

What can we do?

Public Health England has found that targeted initiatives are the best way to address loneliness, as well as reducing the stigma associated with the condition. It's thought that earlier interventions can restrict the later negative health impacts of isolation. Simple solutions such as improved public transport or increased public seating can encourage older people to be more mobile and sociable.⁹

Last year the UK Government committed to taking action to tackle loneliness, including appointing a ministerial lead for cross-government work on the topic.¹⁰ This comes on the back of work carried out by the Jo Cox Commission on Loneliness, which made several recommendations for how the spread of social isolation can be curtailed both by individuals and through UK-wide strategy.¹¹ Additionally, the Office of National Statistics has recently released a publication proposing national measures of loneliness to inform future Government policy.¹²

Other UK bodies working on initiatives to address the issue include the non-profit organisation The Campaign to End Loneliness, which works with many other organisations to share research and knowledge as well as campaigning for increased spending on prevention of loneliness.¹³ Additionally, charities and community groups can apply for funding from the UK National Lottery's £11.5m "Building Connections Fund" which was set aside specifically to assist enterprises meant to bring communities together, and has had contributions from the UK government and the Co-op Foundation.¹⁴

What does this mean for pension schemes and insurers?

It will be interesting to see going forward where the recent loneliness initiatives will take us. It could be that the specific geographic areas targeted by some of the organisations mentioned above see an improvement in longevity. Additionally, since lonely individuals typically use more healthcare resources than those who are better connected,⁹ tackling the issue will arguably free up public health services, potentially increasing their efficacy across the board.

What do you think? Please join the discussion in the Friends of Club Vita group on LinkedIn.

About: VitaMins Health

Health behaviours and levels of morbidity are key drivers for future mortality rates and can be thought of as key components of the "longevity pipeline". The levels of health and morbidity in a population today will be stored up and reflected in how long people live in the future.

⁹ <http://www.insidegovernment.co.uk/uploads/2017/05/nuzhatali.pdf>

¹⁰ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/pm-commits-to-government-wide-drive-to-tackle-loneliness>

¹¹ https://www.jocoxloneliness.org/pdf/a_call_to_action.pdf

¹² <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/wellbeing/compendium/nationalmeasurementofloneliness/2018>

¹³ <https://www.campaigntoendloneliness.org/>

¹⁴ <https://www.biglotteryfund.org.uk/funding/programmes/building-connections-fund>

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