

Curtin University of Technology

Social Isolation and Loneliness (SIL) amongst Older People

Circumstances, experiences and coping strategies

Linda Grenade
Centre for Research on Ageing
Curtin Health Innovation Research Institute

CRICOS Provider Code 00301J (RMI), 025079 (RSM) Faculty of Health Sciences

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Background

- Part of larger study (UWA-Curtin)
- Aims (interview component):
 - gain a deeper understanding of factors, resources, coping mechanisms that encourage or inhibit SIL
 - explore perceptions of adequacy of current efforts to alleviate loneliness amongst older people

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Method

- In-depth interviews (semi-structured interview guide)
- Sample: people (n=35) representing high/low levels of loneliness and isolation.

Lonely/isolated	14
Lonely/not isolated	7
Isolated /not lonely	7
Not isolated or lonely	7

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Method cont'd

Issues explored:

- social contacts (*nature, importance*)
- social support (*received, provided*)
- community involvement (*nature, adequacy*)
- health (& *impact on 'social' life*)
- living arrangements / time alone (& *feelings about*)
- Loneliness (*experience, coping/preventive strategies*)
- current efforts to address SIL

Data management and analysis

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Range of circumstances & views

Example: Living Arrangements

Living alone

- Not liked
I still find it hard, especially nights weekends and this sort of thing
(female, widowed, lonely/not isolated)
- Not an issue
- Preferred arrangement

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Living arrangements (cont/d)

Living with others

- Vital
[its'] paramountI need company, I am a lonely person if I am on my own. I don't think the wife will go before me but if she does I will be desperate - to get even a friend to stay with me.
(male, isolated/not lonely)

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However.....

- Not always a positive experience

She [wife] treats me like baggage
(male, lonely/ isolated)

He usually spends more time on the computer or.... watching TVthere's no social side to him.
(female, lonely/isolated)
- Similar for many living in congregate housing

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Loneliness – perceived reasons

- Loss

It gets extremely lonely at times because I don't think that I've really had closure from [wife's] passing...I'm finding it very difficult to handle.... It's been 61 years and I just think....it's been obviously the total influence on my life. I dream, I get up and I have been dreaming all night as though I'm talking to her
(Male, lonely/isolated)

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Loneliness – perceived reasons (cont/d)

- Personality
 - *Loner*
 - *Opinionated, critical, 'difficult'*
 - *Shy*
- Marital discord/breakdown

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Not lonely – perceived reasons

- always having people around
- always having something to do and/or to look forward to
- personality /disposition /outlook on life

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Coping strategies

- Keeping busy / activities to pass the time
- Mental strategies
- Seeking the company of others
- Prayer
- 'Escapism'

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Some prevalent themes

- Background and life experiences
- Independence

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Efforts to address loneliness

- Enough being done (majority)
- Up to individual / an individual responsibility

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Efforts to address loneliness (cont/d)

- More could be done (minority)
- Key barriers:
 - costs
 - activities offered (*'I don't think bingo challenges the mind'*)
 - transport
 - access to information
- Older people not a priority

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Conclusions

- Uniqueness of people's situations/ circumstances
- Variety of coping strategies used
- Loneliness / isolation: complex interplay of factors
- Interventions: no 'one size fits' all approach; range of options needed

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Contact details

Linda Grenade
Research Fellow
Centre for Research on Ageing

l.grenade@curtin.edu.au

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