



A Research Paper on Loneliness in the Aged People, Its Causes, and Consequences on Mental Health

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Abstract

There is a strong correlation between feelings of isolation and negative outcomes like despair, anxiety, dementia, and even suicide. The elderly are disproportionately affected by loneliness, a subjective state of social isolation. Retirement, the loss of a spouse and friends, and health problems are just a few examples of the many life changes that may occur as people age and lead to an increase in feelings of isolation. Loneliness can also result from a lack of social contacts, or social isolation. The purpose of this study article is to investigate the factors that contribute to and the effects that loneliness has on the mental health of elderly persons, as well as to propose strategies that can lessen their sense of isolation and improve their mental wellbeing. The paper investigates several literature from authentic sites to gather information regarding the causes and consequences of loneliness of mental health. The findings suggest that loneliness and isolation can have a negative impact on the mental health of the older population, it can lead to depression, anxiety and dementia. Different intervention programs and support from their loved ones can improve their mental health. As a part of society it is our duty to help our elderly and spend time with them to help them adjust and accept their ageing process.

Keywords: *Social Isolation; Loneliness; Mental health of Old People*

1. Introduction

The detrimental impacts of loneliness as well as social isolation, that may result in significant negative health effects, are especially likely to affect the elderly. Even if you live alone and find it challenging to leave the house, there are solutions to overcome loneliness. There are hundreds of thousands of elderly people in this country who feel lonely and separated from society, especially those aged over 75. In a poll performed in 2014 with HelpAge India (Cacioppo & Cacioppo 2018), it was discovered that over 65% of elderly people in urban areas while 75% of those in rural areas reported feeling lonely. These numbers may have risen as a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has

led to a significant number of elderly persons isolating themselves from their relatives and friends (Gerst-Emerson, 2015). In addition to being a psychological issue, loneliness in older people can have a negative impact on both their physical and mental well-being, including high blood pressure, depression, and cognitive impairment.

1.1 Background

Loneliness is a negative, subjective sensation that results from one's own perception of having insufficient social relationships. Two causal hypotheses are most typically employed to describe the elements that affect loneliness. The very first model looks at physical attributes that are lacking from networking as the causes of loneliness, whereas the second model focuses on internal issues, such as attitude or psychological components (Shankar et al., 2017). As people get older, the likelihood of experiencing age-related losses increases. The chance of loneliness would rise if these losses made it more challenging to maintain or develop desirable connections. Many people experience loneliness as a result of living alone, possessing distant family members, having fewer ties to their cultural background, or being unable to actively participate in neighbourhood activities (Holt-Lunstad, 2015). When this occurs together with physical deterioration, demoralisation and unhappiness are significant side effects.

2. Literature Reviews

According to the findings of a study that was conducted by Cacioppo & colleagues (2010), increased levels of sadness and anxiety, as well as cognitive deterioration, are connected with loneliness in older persons. According to the findings of the study, loneliness is also a predictor of negative health effects such as an increased risk of cardiovascular disease, a weakened immune system, and sleep difficulties.

According to the findings of another study conducted by Victor and colleagues (2012), the primary variables that contribute to loneliness in older persons include social isolation, the loss of close relationships, or changes in either their health or mobility. The research also indicated that older persons who lived alone or had a limited amount of social support were more likely to experience feelings of loneliness.

Shankar and McMunn (2017) conducted a review in which they highlighted the significance of addressing the issue of loneliness in older persons. Loneliness is connected with greater healthcare consumption as well as higher expenses associated with healthcare. The research also highlighted the need for programs that focus on improving psychological conditions and promoting social relationships among older individuals.

A recent study conducted by Gerst-Emerson as well as Jayawardhana (2015) discovered that the incidence of loneliness in elderly individuals is growing in the United States, but also that loneliness is affiliated with poorer mental health conditions such as anxiety and depressive disorders. The findings of this study were published in the journal *Aging and Mental Health*. According to the findings of the study, older persons who receive social assistance and engage in community events are better able to avoid feelings of isolation than those who do not.

In older persons, the risk of dementia and cognitive impairment was found to be higher in those who reported higher levels of loneliness, according to research conducted by Steptoe et colleagues (2013). It was also discovered in the study that the harmful effects of isolation on brain performance are mediated through depressive symptoms. This finding highlights the necessity of addressing both depression as well as loneliness in older persons.

Cacioppo & Cacioppo (2018) conducted a review in which they highlighted the significance that social neuroscience plays in comprehending the processes that are at the root of loneliness in older persons. In this review, we explored how social loneliness and isolation can contribute to changes in the structure and function of the brain, as well as abnormalities in the immune response and the operation of the cardiovascular system. The necessity for interventions that target the physiological, psychological, and social variables that lead to loneliness in older persons was also stressed by the review.

A research by Holt-Lunstad and colleagues (2015) indicated that social isolation and isolation are linked to an increased risk of mortality in older persons. The study also discovered that social loneliness and social isolation have a mortality risk that is equivalent to other known risk factors like smoking and obesity. This emphasizes how critical it is to address loneliness in older persons as a public health issue.

2.1 Research Gap

Mental health is a growing concern for elderly people, as the older population has increased significantly, the old people are finding it difficult to beat their isolation and loneliness. There are several studies on old age people and mental health and however the researcher finds gaps in the studies of loneliness and mental health, the researcher finds out the causes and consequences of loneliness on the mental health of old age people. Loneliness in older age causes a variety of health problems, both mental and physical (Stephoe, 2013). Promoting social ties, mental health initiatives, and addressing social isolation and lack of social support are needed to combat loneliness in older persons.

2.2 Research Question

1. What are the causes and consequences of loneliness on the mental health of older people ?
2. What steps may be taken to reduce feelings of isolation experienced by the elderly and so improve their mental health?

2.3 Importance of the Study

The study on the origins and effects of isolation on the mental wellbeing of older people is crucial because it sheds light on a severe and growing public health concern. More senior citizens are being affected by the loneliness issue. People are more likely to suffer loneliness as they get older, which is linked to a higher risk of mental health problems, a lower standard of living, and a higher use of healthcare services (Courtin, 2017). If researchers as well as healthcare professionals first comprehend the variables contributing to feeling isolated and the effect that hopelessness has on the results of evaluations of mental health, they can create efficient interventions to lessen isolation and enhance the mental health of those in this population.

2.4 Research Objectives

The researcher takes up the following research objectives for this study -

- To understand the causes and consequences of loneliness on the mental health of older people.
- To find out the negative impact of isolation on mental health of older people.
- To look at the process or steps that could reduce the feeling of isolation and improve the mental health of the older people.

2.5 Scope and Limitation

In recent times, there is significant growth in the population of old age. According to the Census there would be 12.4% increase in the old age population by the year 2026. The study would focus on understanding the causes of loneliness and consequences of that on the mental health of the old age

people. Understanding the reasons and consequences would help to suggest ways that could be used in reducing the isolation of old age people. The paper provides an extensive analysis of different literature related to the research topic. However the research is limited to understanding the cause and consequences of loneliness on the mental health of old age people only. The findings are based on the studies of different related studies and articles.

3. Research Methodology

The research methodology is the essential part of the research process. It provides the details of tools and techniques used by the researcher to meet the research objectives. There are two types of research methodology: quantitative and qualitative methods. The researcher used interpretivism research philosophy and extensive literature review analysis for answering the research questions. Here the researcher extracts information from secondary sources like semantic scholar, google scholar, shodhganga etc.

3.1 Research Method & Design

The research methods employ the techniques through which the data is collected by the researcher. According to the research questions and objectives, the research employs qualitative research methods and conducts extensive review of literature for identifying the causes and consequences of loneliness on the mental health of old age people. The research design shows the nature of the analysis process here, the researcher uses explorative research to provide an in-depth analysis of the reasons (Mishra, 2022). The explorative design would conduct analysis in its original form and provide real findings.

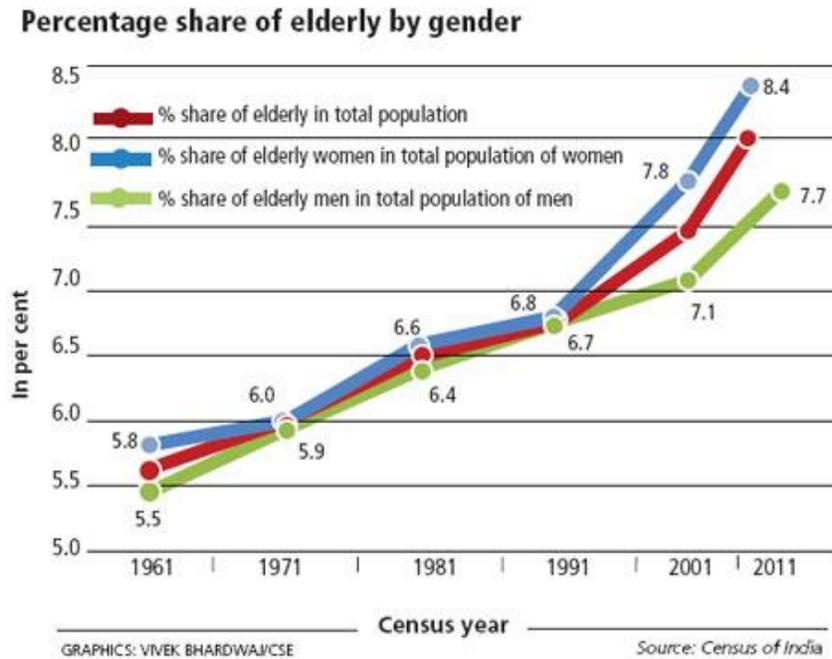
3.2 Research Approach

For Research Approach, the meaning can be varied from research to research. However, in general terms, Research Approach includes the plan and procedures which consist of a set of assumptions for the methods required for the data collection and interpretation for the data analysis. The assumptions of methodology are based on the central theme and research problem. As the qualitative approach does not emphasise statistical or analytical methods for analysis, the inductive approach would be appropriate. (Kothari, 2004). The Inductive approach collects data from the secondary sources and then studies those sources thoroughly to derive further contents for the findings.

4. Analysis of Study

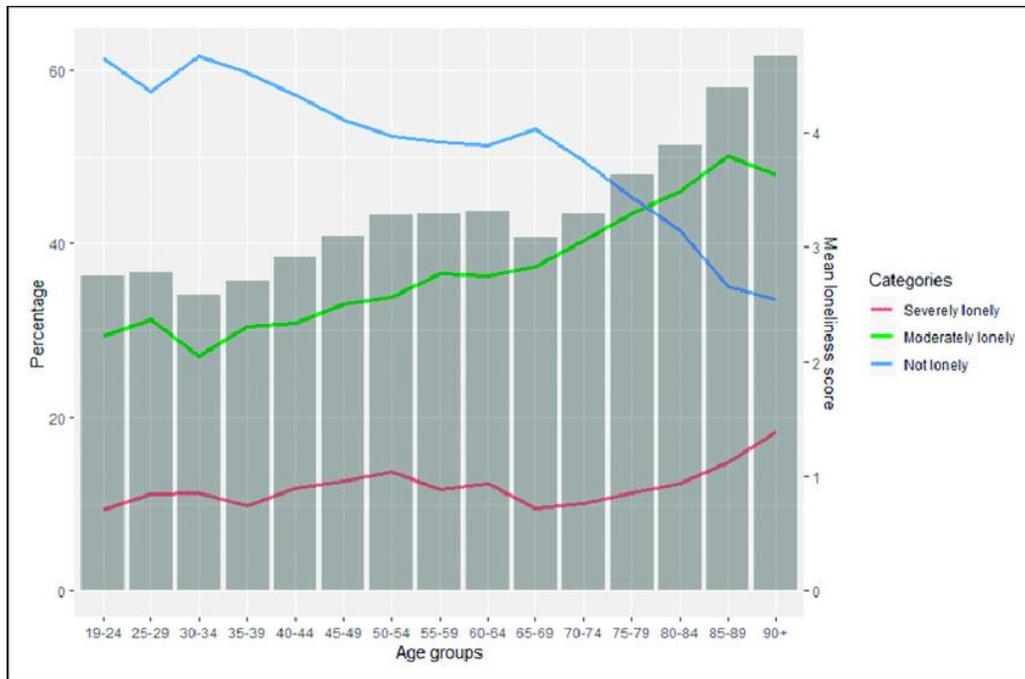
4.1 Cause and Consequences of Loneliness on Mental Health of Older Population

More than hundred out of thousands elderly people stay in isolation and lack social life at the age of 75. There has been a significant rise in the older population, similarly there is a rise of isolation among the Elderly. As people grow old, they become more impatient and need more care and support from their loved ones (Jaremka et al., 2013). Ageing brings them different experiences such as reducing their functionality, increasing health risk and feeling of isolation. The isolation brings negative impact on the mental health of the older population.



(Percentage older people in India)

Figure 1 shows the percentage of Population of elderly generation. The graph shows a significant increase in the population of elderly people from 1961 to 2011. The graphical representation shows the percentage of growth of male and female Older population in India.



(Level of Loneliness faced by different age group)

Figure 2 shows the loneliness graph of people from different age groups. The loneliness is divided into three parts - severe lonely, moderately lonely and not lonely. The data shows that people above the age group of have reported feeling of isolation and loneliness severely and moderately

Causes of Loneliness

In the elderly, loneliness is a widespread and serious problem that can have multiple causes. The death of a partner or spouse is a key contributor to isolation among the elderly. Illness is an important contributor to the isolation of the elderly. Isolation and loneliness are common among the elderly because chronic health problems prevent them from participating in social activities (Luo and Wiate, 2014). Isolation among the elderly might be compounded by the fact that they may have trouble leaving the house due to mobility concerns.

One of the major causes of isolation in the elderly is retirement. Quitting the workforce might cause one to lose contact with others and a sense of fulfilment in life. Moreover, retired folks may find it difficult to meet new people and discover interesting activities to participate in. Alterations in social networks, restricted access to means of transportation, financial restraints, and stigmatisation based on one's age are all factors that can lead to isolation in the elderly. Disruptions to an older person's social support system can be caused by changes in their social networks, such as the death of a friend or family member. Older people may find it challenging to participate in social activities and maintain relationships due to a lack of transportation choices (Masi et al., 2011). An elderly person's freedom and social life may suffer if they are unable to maintain their financial stability. Older people's sentiments of isolation and marginalisation in society are exacerbated by ageism and stigma.

| | Living Alone | Living 2 people by themselves | In home with no one below 60 years old |
|----------------|--------------|-------------------------------|--|
| Tamil Nadu | 9.2 | 15.1 | 24.3 |
| Andhra Pradesh | 8.7 | 15.7 | 24.4 |
| Chattisgarh | 8.5 | 15.2 | 23.7 |
| MP | 6.3 | 14.3 | 20.6 |
| Odisha | 5.2 | 12.0 | 17.3 |
| J&K | 1.6 | 4.0 | 5.6 |
| Haryana | 2.1 | 6.4 | 8.5 |
| Punjab | 2.2 | 6.3 | 8.5 |
| Delhi | 2.5 | 6.7 | 9.2 |
| Assam | 3.0 | 3.4 | 6.4 |

(Source: <https://www.downtoearth.org.in/coverage/elderly-lonely-44173>)

In the Table 1 shows the older people staying in isolation or alone in their home. The data displays the percentage of single-person families, double-person households, and households without anyone less than 60 years old across India's several states. The percentage of single-person households and two-person households in Tamil Nadu are, respectively, the greatest and lowest in the country. It also has the largest proportion of elderly-only families. Jammu and Kashmir, Haryana, Punjab, and Delhi have the lowest rates of single-person households. The proportion of married couples in Jammu and Kashmir is among the lowest in the country. The data indicates that in several Indian states, particularly Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, and Chattisgarh, there may be a sizable population of elderly people or single people living alone.

Consequences of Loneliness

The harmful effects of isolation on the mental health of the elderly are significant. According to research published in the Journal of Gerontology, older persons who reported experiencing loneliness were more likely to have depression in the future. Loneliness has been linked to an increased risk of dementia in an additional study published in the American Journal of Geriatric Psychiatry (Hawkey, 2010).

There are a number of mental health issues among the elderly that have been connected to loneliness, not just depression and dementia. Loneliness, for instance, has been linked to elevated heart rate, blood pressure, and cortisol levels, as well as an increased likelihood of getting anxiety disorders. Loneliness has been linked to increased vulnerability to anxiety disorders in the elderly, according to a study published in the Global Psychogeriatrics journal.

The risk of cognitive impairment and lower cognitive performance in the elderly have both been linked to feelings of isolation. The Review of Aging and Health released a study showing that older persons' cognitive performance suffers when they are lonely. This was especially true for their working memory or executive functioning (Victor and Yang, 2012).

The detrimental effects of isolation on the emotional well-being of the elderly underscore the urgency of finding solutions to this problem. Reducing loneliness and enhancing psychological conditions in the elderly population may be possible through the promotion of social interaction and the provision of services to aid in the maintenance of social relationships among this demographic.

4.2 Reducing the Feelings of Isolation Experienced by the Elderly

The mental health of older persons can benefit from interventions that try to lessen their sense of being alone or isolated. A community-based program that offered older persons social activities and assistance was shown to be successful in reducing loneliness and social isolation, according to studies appearing in the Journal of Gerontology.

Journal of Aging and Health reported another study that revealed that older individuals' symptoms of loneliness and depression might be mitigated with a combination of social interaction and cognitive behavioural therapies. The intervention included weekly phone conversations from a therapist as well as group therapy sessions dedicated to teaching techniques for overcoming isolation (Burholt et al., 2017). Also promising in lowering older people's emotions of loneliness and seclusion are technologically-based therapies. One study indicated that older persons who participated in a computer-based treatment that offered social support and encouraged social interactions saw a significant decrease in feelings of isolation and sadness. Community gardening initiatives, volunteer programs, including intergenerational programs that bring together older persons and younger people are some other strategies that have been demonstrated to be helpful in decreasing feelings of loneliness and social isolation amongst older adults.

4.3 Improving Mental Health of Older People

The following are some methods that have been shown to improve the mental health of senior citizens:

- Being in shape has been linked to better mental health and less depression among the elderly.
- It's important for the mentally ill elderly to keep in touch with their friends and family. Keeping in touch with loved ones, being active in your neighbourhood, and giving back to the community are all great ways to keep your social life active and your mind healthy.
- Meditation or deep breathing are only two examples of mindfulness practices that might help relieve stress and anxiety in the elderly(Chang et al., 2017).
- Help from a mental health expert, such as a therapist or counsellor, is highly recommended for older persons who are experiencing mental health difficulties.
- Nutritional support for better mental and physical wellness in older persons has been linked to a diet rich in fruits, vegetables, whole carbohydrates, and lean protein.
- Obtaining a good night's rest: Sleep is crucial to your physical and mental well-being. The recommended amount of sleep for persons over the age of 65 is seven to eight hours.
- Activities that provide older persons a feeling of meaning and purpose can have a positive effect on their mental health.

5. Results

Loneliness and social isolation are serious concerns that affect a big portion of the older population and have severe repercussions for their mental health. The loss of a life partner or spouse, chronic disease, ageing, alterations in social networks, limited financial resources, ageism, and other circumstances can all contribute to feelings of isolation and loneliness. In India, the elderly population is particularly susceptible to the negative effects of social isolation and loneliness. The states of Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, and Chattisgarh have a disproportionately high number of families consisting of a single individual or exclusively senior people.

Depression, anxiety, dementia, cognitive decline, and decreased cognitive function are only some of the detrimental effects that loneliness can have on the mental health of the senior population. These negative impacts highlight the need for immediate approaches to address the issue of isolation from society and loneliness among some of the elderly. According to the findings of certain studies, community-based programs that target elderly people and provide them with help and opportunities to participate in social activities may be an effective way to combat the negative effects of social isolation and loneliness.

According to the findings as a whole healthcare professionals, and community organisations ought to make it a top priority to combat feelings of isolation from society and loneliness among the elderly population. It is possible that interventions that target fostering social interaction and preserving social interactions among the older population would be helpful in lowering the detrimental effects of isolation on the mental health of this demographics.

Conclusion

It is critical that we, as a culture, acknowledge the significance of tackling the problem of loneliness among the elderly population. There are a variety of factors that can lead to feelings of isolation in older adults, including the passing of loved ones, physical restrictions, and social isolation. Loneliness can have catastrophic effects, including the development of mental health conditions such as depression, anxiety, as well as other disorders. Research have indicated that certain interventions,

including such social support networks, outreach to the community, and cognitive-behavioural therapy, can be successful in lessening the feelings of loneliness experienced by elderly people. We can help build a sense of belonging or connectedness in the senior population by focusing on the root reasons of loneliness and delivering effective interventions. This will ultimately result in an improvement in the quality of life for this demographic. Doing so will help us enhance the mental health and very well of our senior citizens therefore ensure that they may continue to lead lives that are both full and meaningful in their later years.

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