

# Parallel Session: Loneliness and Health



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# Loneliness and health across the lifespan

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## What is loneliness?

”Loneliness is unpleasant, is not synonymous with social isolation or rejection, and is the result of perceived quantitative or qualitative deficiencies in one’s social relations” (Peplau & Perlman, 1982).

# Loneliness is an aversive state across the lifespan

- Children as young as 5 years of age offer valid definitions of loneliness.
- Children offer clear ways of coping with loneliness, reporting a need to connect with others, sometimes physically and sometimes mentally.
- Loneliness motivates people across ontogeny to connect with others.

# BBC Loneliness Experiment<sup>1</sup>



1. Qualter, Barreto, Victor, & Hammond, 2018. Funded by the Wellcome Trust.

# Age-related changes in loneliness

- it is stable, but low, from age 7 to 12 years
- it peaks during early adolescence and then very slowly decreases
- is stable during adulthood, but increases at oldest old age (i.e., 85 years and older)
- No gender effects

## Loneliness and mental health

- Conclusive findings linking loneliness to worsening mental health and well-being.
- Shared emotional experience.

## Loneliness and physical health among the healthy population

Our recent meta-analyses showed the following:

1. A within-time association between higher loneliness and poorer physical health outcomes. That is the same across the population, but is strongest for older people than younger ones.
2. Longitudinal analyses is rare, but there is evidence, too, that higher loneliness is linked to health outcomes.



## So, is loneliness a public health problem?

- Loneliness is affecting well-being. Morally we should do something to help people navigate times when they feel lonely and prevent those from moving from normative, transitory loneliness to prolonged loneliness.
- There appear to be health implications of loneliness, but there are still few longitudinal studies.

# Is loneliness a public health problem?

- 1) Prevalence of the condition/exposure (and changes).
- 2) Impact of the condition on an individual level.
- 3) Impact on wider Society.
- 4) Condition is identifiable/preventable/treatable



# So is loneliness a public health problem: What do you think?

- Prevalence is not increasing
- No accurate 'screening' test for loneliness
- There is evidence for effective interventions, but we need more data
- There are negative health outcomes for healthy individuals

Thus, loneliness unequivocally compromises wellbeing and so we should take it seriously