

Loneliness of older people. Reviews and results of a population-based survey

This abstract is based on the following research reports and articles.

Research reports of The Central Union for the Welfare of the Aged:

Pitkälä K et al. Background and planning of the rehabilitation project. Research and development project on geriatric rehabilitation, report no 1 (In Finnish). The Central Union for the Welfare of the Aged. Gummerus, Saarijärvi 2003.

Routasalo P, Pitkälä K, Savikko N, Tilvis R. Loneliness of older people. Results of a survey. Research and development project on geriatric rehabilitation, report no 3 (In Finnish). The Central Union for the Welfare of the Aged. Gummerus, Saarijärvi 2003.

International articles:

Routasalo P, Pitkälä K. Loneliness of older people – how has it been studied in gerontology? *Gerontologia* 2003; (1): 23-9. (In Finnish.)

Routasalo P, Pitkälä K. Loneliness among older individuals. *Clin Rev Gerontol* 2004; 13: 303-11.

Routasalo P, Savikko N, Tilvis RS, Pitkälä Kaisu H. Older Finnish people in rural areas and in cities. *Hoitotiede* 2005; 3: 155-65. (In Finnish.)

Routasalo P, Savikko N, Tilvis RS, Strandberg TE, Pitkälä Kaisu H. Social contacts and their relationship to loneliness among aged people – a population-based study. *Gerontology* 2006; 52: 181-7.

Savikko N, Routasalo P, Tilvis R, Pitkälä K. Predictors and subjective causes of loneliness in an aged population. *Arch Gerontol Geriatr* 2005; 41: 223-33.

Savikko N, Routasalo P, Tilvis R, Strandberg TE, Pitkälä K. Loss of parents in childhood – associations with depression, loneliness and attitudes towards life in older Finnish people. *Int J Older People Nurs* 2006; 1: 17-24.

Savikko N, Routasalo P, Tilvis RS, Pitkälä K. Feeling of insecurity of the elderly and its association with the feeling of loneliness. *Sosiaalilääketieteellinen aikakauslehti* 2006; 43: 198-206. (In Finnish.)

Background

When people get older and experience different kinds of losses they are exposed to the threat of loneliness. Earlier research findings suggest that about a third of older Finnish people suffer from loneliness. Experiencing loneliness is related to culture in the sense of cultural expectations. The way in which loneliness is inquired about in surveys also affects the responses received.

In Finnish there is only one word for loneliness and solitude. Solitude can be experienced as a positive and relaxing aspect of one's life, as well as a resource for creativity, whereas loneliness is a negative feeling causing suffering. In research, loneliness has been understood in terms of concrete social isolation and subjective experience of loneliness. Social isolation can be measured by the frequency of meeting others and by the number of social contacts. However, this does not tell us anything about the inner experience of an individual. Even people surrounded by friends or relatives can experience loneliness. The feeling of loneliness has been conceptualised in a two-fold way as emotional loneliness and social loneliness. Emotional loneliness is related to the absence of a close satisfying relationship (e.g. spouse), while social loneliness is related to feeling like a bystander in one's social community, or to lack of friends. Loneliness is also closely related to depression.

Loneliness has been widely studied by population-based cross-sectional studies which have shown its associations with to e.g. widowhood, decreased functional ability, morbidity and living in an institution. In addition, low economical status, female gender and living alone have appeared as risk factors for feeling lonely. In follow-up studies, loneliness has been shown to predict deterioration in quality of life and functional status as well as impairment in cognitive functioning, increased use of health services and mortality.

Objective

The objective of this study was to gain population-based information about the feelings of loneliness, social contacts and factors associated with loneliness of older (≥ 75 years) Finnish people. In addition, the research aimed at clarifying factors that older people themselves view as causes for their loneliness. Yet another objective of the survey was to find lonely older people willing to participate in psychosocial group rehabilitation.

Data

The data was gathered by a postal questionnaire in 2002. The questionnaire was sent to a random sample ($n=6\ 786$) of older people (≥ 75 years) from The Finnish National Population Register in six municipalities. The municipalities represented various parts of Finland: north (Oulainen; $N=786$), east (Joensuu; $N=1000$), middle (Hämeenlinna; $N=1000$), west (Pori; $N=1000$) and south (Lohja; $N=1000$ and Helsinki; $N=2000$). Rural areas as well as small and large cities were represented. Only data involving people living in their own homes or residential homes were analysed. The response rate for them was 71,8 %.

Methods

The data were analysed using NCSS and SPSS statistical programs with respect to frequencies and percentages. Logistic regression analysis was used to determine which variables independently predicted suffering from loneliness.

Respondents

The mean age of the respondents was 81 years (SD 4.49), and 69 % of them were women. Most of the respondents (49 %) were widowed, 36 % were married and 15 % were separated, divorced or had never married. Most of the widow(er)s (78 %) had been alone for six years or more. Of the respondents, 55 % lived in small towns, 31 % lived in large cities and 14 % in rural areas. 93 % lived in their own homes and 7 %

in residential homes. 59 % of the respondents lived alone, 35 % lived with their spouse and 6 % lived with someone else. 73 % viewed their financial situation as moderately good, and 66 % considered themselves to be in good or rather good physical health.

Results and discussion

- Of older Finnish people, 34 % suffered from loneliness sometimes and 5 % often or always. The problems related to feelings of loneliness thus affect a large proportion of older Finnish people.
- Feelings of loneliness increased with age, which has been shown also in previous studies. According to logistic regression analyses in this study, the increase in feelings of loneliness is explained by other factors than age itself.
- Women suffer from loneliness more often than men. This may be because women can generally express their feelings more openly than men. Women may value, and expect more from their social relationships than men. Women also live longer than men and are thus more often exposed to widowhood and other age-related losses.
- In the study, loneliness was related to depression, living alone, widowhood, and poor subjective health. In addition, decreased psychological well-being was strongly related to loneliness.
- Loneliness was not related to the number of social contacts but to expectations of, and satisfaction gained from, social contacts. This supports the understanding that emotional loneliness and social isolation are distinct concepts. From this point of view interventions aimed at alleviating loneliness should enable individuals' to reflect on their own expectations and inner feelings of loneliness, and not only to increase the number of social contacts.
- Loss of one or both parents in childhood was not related to feelings of loneliness in old age. Parental loss may actually evolve the sense of control over life and coping methods rather than being a risk factor for depression, loneliness and psychological ill-being. Another explanation may be that of the very old people, those who live longest are the most vital, healthiest and psychologically strongest. In comparing the oldest of old individuals, the earlier risk factors might thus lose their relevance as explanations of loneliness.
- The respondents in the study felt that the most important causes for their loneliness included their own illness (81 %) and death of their spouse (78 %) as well as lack of friends and relatives (67 %). This result supports the findings of previous epidemiological studies. Meaningless life was also mentioned as a cause of loneliness (48 %). This supports the view that loneliness of older people is related to the absence of meaningful roles and that feeling like an outsider in one's life decreases psychological well-being.
- Older people living in rural areas are more likely to feel lonely than older people living in small or large cities. This indicates that the feeling of loneliness does not solely derive from problems of ageing but may be an effect of changes in society. Loneliness of people living in rural areas may be increased by many younger people moving to cities. This may lead to fewer social contacts particularly if the older person's functional ability is decreased.
- Depression, pessimistic attitude towards life, unfulfilled expectations of contacts with friends, living alone, being widowed, not feeling needed, unfulfilled expectations of contacts with children, and decreased subjective health status appeared as the most significant independent predictors of loneliness in logistic

regression analysis. Age, gender, level of education or satisfaction with social relationships did not independently predict loneliness in the model.

Other articles relating to the research:

Routasalo P. 2004. "Alone you are..." –loneliness of older people. *Vanhustyö* 3, 5-8. (In Finnish.)

Routasalo P, Pitkälä K. Loneliness of older people – a challenge for nursing. Noppari & Koistinen (ed.) *Quality to elderly care*. Kustannusosakeyhtiö Tammi. Helsinki 2005. s. 19-35. (In Finnish.)