

The impact of loneliness and social isolation on the elderly population

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Module name: Living with Care: The Older Person

Module code: BMHP6009

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Date: 05/05/2022

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1. Introduction

According to the World Health Organization (2022), the number of elderly people is increasing significantly each year. If in 2019 the number of people over the age of 60 was around one billion, it is estimated that by 2050 this number will reach 2.1 billion. On the one hand, this is a joyous thing because no one wants to die, on the other hand, the fact that the balance between our newborns and those who reach needs due to age tilts in favor of the latter must question the entire world.

Humans as a species are not made to live alone, they need to socialize and communicate in order to maintain daily balance in their lives. If in our youth there are times when we want to be alone, over the years the feeling of loneliness can become overwhelming. In most cases, loneliness turns into isolation or self-isolation. Paradoxically in a world of technology where we are a click away from each other, people, especially the elderly, feel increasingly lonely. Loneliness is a feeling that we cannot control described by the loss of connections with our loved ones. If we look at the concept of loneliness, it can be divided into emotional loneliness and social loneliness. Emotionally we feel alone when we cannot interact with the loved ones in our life, here we can talk about our spouse, parents, children, and people in our daily entourage. As for social loneliness, we can describe it as a lack of socialization on a large scale. Loneliness can also be occasional or can become chronic, but one thing is for sure, loneliness can be a trigger for mental disorders and that is why we need to adapt to the needs of the present. We must understand that no one is alone and if we ask for and accept the support of those around us, things will go uphill.

In this report, we will assess the impact of loneliness and isolation on the elderly population. We will also compare the UK's old-age care policy and provisions with the Romanian old-age care policy and provisions. We will examine what changes could be made to the programs aimed at addressing the issue of loneliness among the elderly. Furthermore, we will examine how modern technology can be implemented among those suffering from loneliness.

2. Notion of elderly

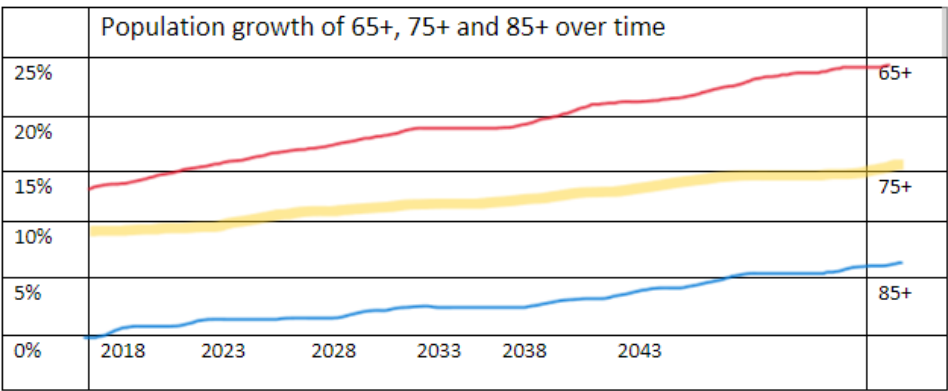
We can say that officially in the UK a person over the age of 65 is an elderly person but that does not mean that he is also old. Modern medicine, healthy lifestyle, food, education and the environment cause many people over the age of 65 to “hide” their age. So, we can say that years

are just a number and as long as people lead a balanced life accompanied by sports and healthy food, they can enjoy life even at a much older age.

If we talk about Romania, things have a different dynamics. Even if officially in Romania 65 years is the age at which a person can be called elder morally the Romanian population is much older. So, we can say that it is the opposite of the United Kingdom. The economic and social situation, the lack of a competitive medical system and the lack of education among a large part of the population, especially in rural areas, contribute to this. As a short observation, being an elder in Romania is not the most pleasant situation.

3.Statistics of ageing population

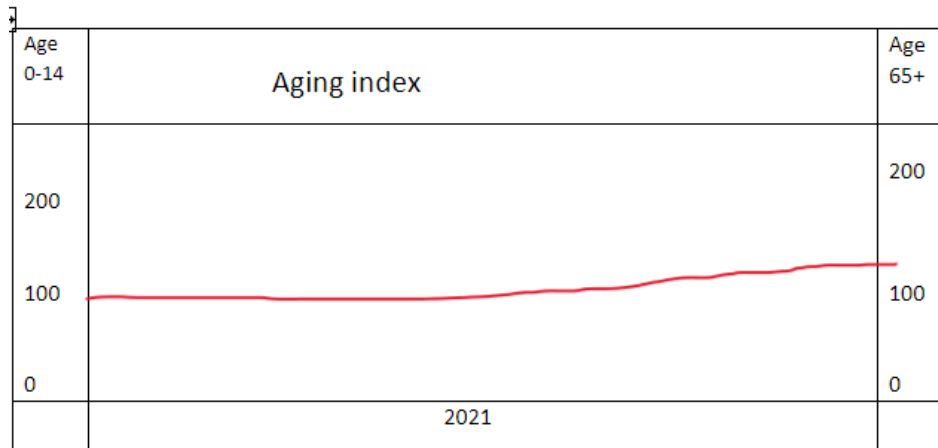
Analyzing the population based on age, we will see that in the last decades there has been a major demographic change in the UK. This is due to both the declining birth rate and the fact that life expectancy has increased significantly. Statistically in 2019 one in five people (12.3 million people) was 65 years of age or older. As a comparison between 2009 and 2019, the percentage of people aged 65 and over increased from 19% to 23%. Over the same period, the total population in the UK increased by only 7%. It is also expected that by 2043 the percentage of people over the age of 65 will reach 24% (17.4 million people) according to the House of Commons (2021).



Source: Autor

Returning to Romania statistically, the ageing process is in accelerated growth. The number of people aged 65 and over is dominant compared to the 0-14 age segment. For every 100 children under the age of 14, it is estimated that there are 123.9 people over the age of 65. According to the demographic ageing index, the ageing population has increased since January 1, 2020, from

120 people to 123.9 on January 1, 2021, compared to 100 people under the age of 14. This is due both to the decrease in the birth rate in relation to deaths and to the phenomenon of emigration. (National Institute of Statistics, 2021)



Source: Autor

Loneliness is one of the major problems facing people, especially in countries with a high economic index. The fact that people no longer have time to interact with each other in real-time can lead to the development of loneliness and isolation. This condition is most often found in the elderly. Even though loneliness is associated with old age, it can be found in other segments of the population. Loneliness is associated with the loss of loved ones in our lives, the change in the environment, or the fact that we voluntarily stop communicating with those around us (Social isolation, loneliness in older people pose health risks, 2019).

Another reason may be the loss of the ability to socialize with other members of society due to unwanted events. Here we can refer to physical or mental incapacity. The paradox is that some people, even if they feel alone, share this condition as a natural one, leading in time to the development of mental disorders (Luanaigh and Lawlor, 2008).

Studies show that single people are more likely to suffer from depression. Systematic research based on 35 literature articles involving 77,220 subjects has shown that loneliness is a risk factor for death (Rico-Uribe et al., 2018).

4. Types /theory of loneliness

interpersonal loneliness	social loneliness/isolation	cultural loneliness
It happens when we lose a relationship with someone close to us (Serani, 2017).	Occurs when a person is excluded / marginalized in society (What is social isolation? 2022).	It is experienced by a person who cannot adapt to a different culture / place (Van Staden and Coetzee, 2010).
intellectual loneliness	psychological loneliness	existential / cosmic loneliness
The person cannot decide which group he belongs to, families or social groups based on their own intelligence (Deaton, 2022).	It is when a person goes through a difficult period psychologically without being understood by those around him (Hawkley and Cacioppo, 2010)	Is experienced by a person who is in the last stage of life (Ettema, Derksen and van Leeuwen, 2010).

Source: Autor

In 1973, in his book *Loneliness: The Experience of Emotional and Social Isolation*, Robert S. Weiss divides the concept of loneliness into two theories based on emotional loneliness and social loneliness. According to research, the theory of emotional loneliness is based on the fact that when a person loses someone important in their personal life (husband/wife) they self-isolate even if they have other people close to support them (Ouellette, 2004).

By their nature, people also need to socialize in society to meet their needs. Social loneliness occurs when we fail to integrate or are rejected by a social group. Robert S. Weiss says that it is not enough to be supported and loved only by those around you, you must also be part of social groups as an antidote to emotional loneliness (Ouellette, 2004).

Another theory of loneliness is the Cognitive discrepancy theory launched by Perlman and Peplau (1998) which has as discrepancy the argument between what we propose and what we manage to do in social relations. The fact that we cannot always maintain the level of interaction can be the effect of sometimes uncontrollable phenomena in our lives. These phenomena can be the loss of a partner, the need to integrate into a new social environment or the onset of disability (Burholt, Windle and Morgan, 2017).

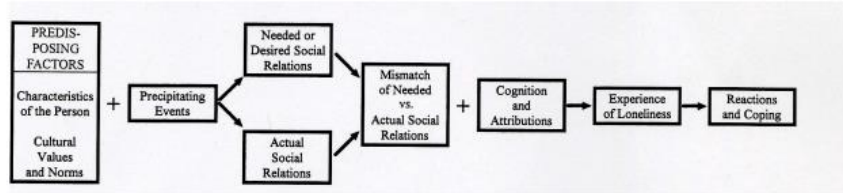


Figure 1 A model of the experience of loneliness.

Psychological loneliness can be diagnosed as the cognitive and emotional discomfort of an isolated individual in society. Along with the phenomenon of isolation come the negative psychological effects, these can be depression, sleeping difficulty, dysfunction of internal organs, and cognitive decline (Novotney, 2019).

In modern society, we are always in a hurry, sometimes forgetting to socialize with those around us. Even if loneliness can bring short-term benefits overall, the result is always the same in the long run. According to the Cacioppo Evolutionary Theory of Loneliness (ETL) no matter how much we evolved as a society; our brains think the same way as they did a few thousand years ago when it comes to social relationships. This theory is based on the fact that no matter how strong we are in order to survive, procreate and develop we need to be part of a group (Cacioppo and Cacioppo, 2018).

5. The impact of loneliness and isolation

Loneliness is part of the human condition and has positive and negative parts. In the UK there are approximately 12,500 residential homes with a total of 490,326 residents. People move into homes for many reasons such as a physical or mental disability, the need for help in daily life or because no one in the family is around them so they cannot socialize. The latter suffer from the loneliness complex and are most prone to mental illness. Some studies show that over 200,000 people in the UK have not spoken to family or friends for at least a month, and 3.9 million of their main interaction is the TV. Also, a worrying fact is that 60% of those who live in a home do not receive any external visitors (Berg, 2021).

The question is: Is the care sitting well for people who face loneliness, and what impact do they have on their lives? Although it seems hard to believe that residential homes are like a breath of fresh air for those suffering from loneliness. The lack of family or friends can be a reason for loneliness but in many cases, they are compensated for by the possibility of making new friends

and joining the various social activities within the institution. Even if some people feel isolated, they do not feel alone. As I said before, loneliness is a feeling that each person experiences in his own way. Some people choose to be alone while others adapt more easily to a new environment.

If the UK society and government are working hand in hand to reduce the impact of loneliness among the elderly in Romania, the situation is quite different. In fact, in Romania, social assistance for the elderly is almost non-existent, and the government is overwhelmed by the situation. There is no functioning home/nursing home network. The private system has speculated on the opportunity to get rich, and they have turned some properties into old people's homes. In many of these private nursing homes, people end up waiting to die in loneliness and isolation.

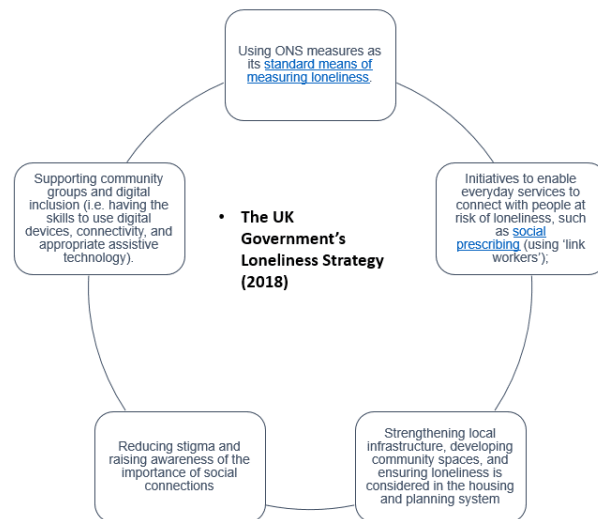
According to a study conducted by GfK for the Princess Margaret of Romania Foundation. More than 1.5 million elderly people in Romania are affected by loneliness. As we have shown above, in addition to the lack of social care, they also face acid indifference from society. Loneliness among the elderly is primarily associated with the loss of loved ones, and here the biggest cause is emigration. Due to the social and economic climate in Romania, increasingly young people are leaving the country (What are the elderly Romanians' main problems? 2015).

6. Legislation and policies aimed at reducing the loneliness and isolation of the elderly population

No one is immune to loneliness; we all experience the effects of loneliness at least once in our lives. In order to prevent and combat loneliness, the government adopted laws and regulations aimed to reduce loneliness. All age groups can be affected by loneliness but the category that is most affected by the effects of loneliness is the elderly. That is why the UK government has adopted a number of laws and public policies aimed at reducing the appearance of loneliness among the elderly. Research shows that loneliness has financial repercussions on the economy. The UK government allocated between 2.2 and £ 3.7 billion annually to combat loneliness. Following the report published by the Jo Cox Commission on Loneliness (2017) which highlights the severity of loneliness among people in the UK, strategies are being adopted to reduce the impact of loneliness among the population. The UK government has also allocated £ 98 million to promote health and well-being among the elderly and £ 20 million to support associations fighting loneliness (Macdonald and Kulakiewicz, 2021).

In 2018, the government produces a new strategy designed to strengthen the fight against loneliness. UK Government Loneliness Strategy (2018) "A Connected Society"

The strategy comes with a clear set of measures:



The Care Act of 2014 defines the legal framework for the provision of care assistance services. This act clearly delimits the new attributions and obligations of the authorities in order to apply the strategies for combating loneliness. According to the act Loneliness is an eligible need under the act and to reduce the effects of loneliness it must be part of the care package (The Care Act 2014 and Loneliness, 2022).

Romania, like the UK, lives in the 20th century, but from the perspective of laws and policies for the prevention and reduction of loneliness, Romania is at the level of the 15th century. The article Aging in Romania: Research and Public Policy " (2013) reveals that older people are not sufficiently supported by the government. Even if there is a social system in Romania, it is not able to implement social assistance programs. The authors of the article as well compared the level of social assistance in Romania with the similar one in the European Union. The result was dramatic, showing that Romania is far behind in terms of the social and health system. The conclusion is simple, even if there is a social system in Romania, it is only on paper. The state institutions that should implement this system are few and poorly funded (Bodogai and Cutler, 2013).

Moreover, in Romania, the proverb still works: "dogs bark the bear passes", no matter how striking the need for legislation in support of the elderly, and they need, the government is deaf and dumb.

7. The proposed future of caring for the elderly

The Loneliness Minister Baroness Barran points out that the UK is still at a critical stage in tackling loneliness (GOV.UK, 2021). The National Service Framework for Older People is the first strategy in the UK to guarantee high quality, integrated health, and social care services for older people. Social services together with the NHS are involved in the development of the strategy:

- Improving the standard of care in nursing homes,
- persons over 60 years of age to have the right to extensive medical services
- supporting people's independence
- Helping the elderly to stay healthy

are just a few of the measures taken (GOV.UK, 2022).

On the other hand, according to the "ROMANIA Country case study on the integrated delivery of long-term care", Romania has a long way to go to reach the European Union standards in terms of social services. In Romania social services are limited and the connection between institutions is fragmented. If we discuss long-term care, there are no well-defined services. Most of the care homes are based on family care. As well in terms of labourers, the carers are also few and poorly paid (WHO Regional Office for Europe, 2020).

8. Use of technology for lonely older persons

Sometimes technology can be difficult for older people to understand, sometimes it can play an important role in fighting loneliness. The use in the daily life of technology such as television, computer, telephone makes us lose the notion of real communication. This leads to loneliness over time. On the other hand, in the last two years in which we have been devastated by the pandemic, technology has contributed substantially to communication between family members, friends, and the medical staff. Even though we have been isolated, technology has helped us not to be alone. In the UK, the implementation of modern technology among the elderly has made it possible for them to socialize with those close to them regardless of distance. Technology has

also diminished social loneliness, through the possibility of integrating into online group activities.. (Stockwell et al., 2020)

In terms of technology implementation among the elderly, Romania is also way behind. If in urban areas older people have contact with modern technology, we cannot say the same about those in rural areas. Lots of isolated places in Romania do not benefit from internet or telephone signals. Also, the social and economic climate prevents the elderly from being able to buy a computer or a phone. Migration has brought a lot of loneliness among the elderly. In conclusion, technology is a beneficial thing for those who have children who have gone to other countries. They can communicate with them through the internet device (Mihociu, 2021).

9. Conclusion

As I pointed out at the beginning of the report, loneliness is not something to joke about. No matter what part of the world you are in, the harmful effects of loneliness are the same. Everyone has the right to live as long as possible in the company of loved ones and the role of society and government is to make this possible. We must give value to the elderly and the fact that in countries like Romania this is not possible is a shame for humanity. State institutions should protect the ageing population through laws and public policy, which is not always the case. As a recommendation, greater involvement of the government in the development of the social and health system is necessary for Romania. It is also necessary to implement education in the elderly to deal with loneliness. Also, bringing the country from the 15th century to the 20th century by implementing technology in all demographic areas can prevent and combat loneliness. In conclusion, it is imperative that the Romanian government learn from its older brother in the UK in order to bring health and well-being to the elderly.

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