

Strained relationships, past trauma and family responsibilities contribute to loneliness among midlife women

20 May 2019, by Glenn O'neal



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Urban minority midlife women commonly experience significant loneliness due to strained family and romantic relationships, responsibilities as a caregiver, past trauma and social isolation, according to new research being presented today at the American Psychiatric Association's Annual Meeting here. Supportive relationships were identified as protective against feelings of loneliness.

Loneliness has long been linked with detrimental health effects. Social isolation has been associated with functional decline and increased mortality in the elderly. Loneliness in midlife women has been linked to a higher incidence of coronary artery disease. Among low-income populations, loneliness has been associated with anxiety and depression.

In a 2016 [community health](#) needs assessment of North Philadelphia, loneliness was identified as a mental health priority. Among [older adults](#), 7

percent reported speaking with family or friends less than once a week. This study sought to determine factors contributing to loneliness in midlife, predominantly among minority, low-income urban women. Fifty midlife women (ages 35-60) living in North Philadelphia participated in semi-structured individual interviews. A subgroup of 21 participants also attended one of two [focus groups](#) conducted after the interviews.

Study author Jennifer Trinh, M.D., with Temple University Hospital, found loneliness and isolation were common. More than one in five women (22 percent) reported "always" feeling there is no one they can turn to. Another 20 percent reported "sometimes" feeling there is no one they can turn to. Nearly one in four women said they "rarely" or "never" feel close to other people.

Several common themes emerged regarding factors contributing to the loneliness:

- Burden of responsibility
- Past experience of trauma
- Unhealthy or strained family and [romantic relationships](#)

In addition, supportive relationships were identified as a preventative factor against loneliness.

"Though they may be involved in [interpersonal relationships](#)," Trinh notes, "the poor quality of these relationships leads to feelings of loneliness and isolation." Trinh suggests that understanding these nuances can help in developing targeted interventions and community initiatives to reduce loneliness and facilitate engagement with mental health treatment when needed.

Provided by American Psychiatric Association

APA citation: Strained relationships, past trauma and family responsibilities contribute to loneliness among midlife women (2019, May 20) retrieved 24 May 2021 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2019-05-strained-relationships-trauma-family-responsibilities.html>

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