

Research gives new perspectives on social isolation in older age

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Social relations are important for people. But this does not mean that solitude is always harmful. On the contrary, research shows that a small minority of older people are alone and that a considerable proportion of

them are happy with being so. This sheds light on what exclusion from social relationships in older age means.

Loneliness and [social isolation](#) among older people have been studied and discussed extensively. The starting point is often that many older people are lonely, that [loneliness](#) is harmful, and that a social lifestyle is necessary for [good health](#) and well-being.

But it is not that simple, research shows.

"Social relationships are significant, and one of the strongest factors in terms of how long we live and how satisfied we are with our lives. But as our research clearly shows, this does not mean that solitude is always bad. Not everyone who lives a solitary life is unhappy," says George Pavlidis, postdoctoral student in aging and social change.

George Pavlidis is part of a research group that has studied [exclusion](#) from social relationships in older age and its connection with mental health and well-being. The data comes from the 2011 and 2015 waves of the Survey of Health, Ageing and Retirement in Europe, where over 70,000 older people answered questions about their lives.

Some results of the study are in line with previous research: that being unhappily alone or unhappy with established social relationships are associated with poor quality of life and [depressive symptoms](#).

But what is interesting is that while a very small minority, four percent, of older people are alone, four percent, more than half are satisfied with their solitude. The quality of life among the "happy loners" is high—on a par with the people who have a social network and are satisfied with their relationships. In addition, both the "happy loners" and those who are happy with their social network have the least depressive symptoms, although "happy loners" report increased levels of loneliness.

"The message in research, in the media and from politicians has been that loneliness always has negative consequences. But this may be misleading," says Andreas Motel-Klingebiel, professor of aging and [social change](#).

The researchers say that we need to re-think what older people's exclusion from social relationships means. There are different types of exclusion, and they can have different consequences.

"Having no social network at all is a type of exclusion, and it's not necessarily bad if you're happy that way, except for the fact that you feel lonely sometimes. Having social relationships but not being happy with them is another type of exclusion, and that is associated with a poorer quality of life," says George Pavlidis.

The types of exclusion, and their effect on health, differ between men and women. It seems that a functional social network or being satisfied with a solitary life is particularly important for women's mental health.

"One explanation for this is that there have been different expectations for social relationships among men and women, as [older generations](#) have had different gender roles in society, and consequently different types of social networks," says Andreas Motel-Klingebiel.

Gender and life patterns are at the core of the major project that the research group from Linköping University is part of. In the project, titled Genpath—A life course perspective on the gendered pathways of exclusion from social relations in later life, researchers from several European universities are studying different aspects of exclusion.

George Pavlidis says that this knowledge is important in several ways. In particular, it gives insight on how to support older people in the right way.

"We often believe that society must create social contacts for everyone who is alone—but is this really the right way to go now when we know that solitude and loneliness are not always harmful? The question is how social services can support older people who are challenged by different types of exclusion."

He sees a need for more knowledge about what it is that makes some people unhappy with their [social relationships](#) or with their solitary states. There is also a need for a less stigmatizing perspective on these issues.

"If we are to understand how health, well-being and quality of life are affected by social isolation and loneliness in older age, we should avoid homogenizing these conditions. Yes, social isolation and loneliness can be bad for [older people](#), as it can be for any age group. John Donne famously said 'no man is an island', but we argue here that some people are fine with living alone on their island."

Provided by Linköping University

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