

The prevalence and nature of the social isolation of older people



Presented by Dr Debbie Faulkner

No One Should Have No One Symposium
Onkaparinga City Council
7 July 2017

Defining social isolation/loneliness

Social isolation is an objective and quantifiable reflection of reduced social network size and paucity of social contact.

Loneliness often is regarded as the psychological embodiment of social isolation, reflecting the individual's experienced dissatisfaction with the frequency and closeness of their social contacts or the discrepancy between the relationships they have and the relationships they would like to have

(Steptoe et al 2013)

Defining social isolation

Isolation is the experience of diminished social connectedness stemming from a process whereby the impact of risk factors outweighs the impact of any protective factors. A person's lack of social connectedness is measured by the quality, type, frequency and emotional satisfaction of social ties.

Social isolation can impact health and quality of life, measured by an individual's physical, social and psychological health; ability and motivation to access adequate support for themselves; and the quality of the environment and community in which they live.

Causes of social isolation

Individual factors:

- Socio-demographic factors (age, gender, income, education, ethnicity, household characteristics, place of residence)
- Significant life events (death of partner, loss of relationships, divorce, disability, retirement/unemployment, being a carer)
- Physical and mental health issues
- Mobility (changes in transport options – loss of licence, poor access to public transport)
- Subjective factors (individual personality characteristics, attitudes & expectations)
- Degrees of support received and participation in social activities & access to information

Causes of social isolation

Societal factors:

Connected Communities: How Australia's Social Capital Has Declined



Connections matter
Helping older people stay socially active

www.beyondblue.org.au 1300 22 4636

The need for good neighbours

By Australian Ageing Agenda on February 21, 2013 in Industry



Older people are more likely to consider moving to a retirement village if they feel disconnected within their current neighbourhood, according to new research released yesterday by a seniors' advocacy group.

The findings, reported in a National Seniors Productive Ageing Centre report, indicate that the baby boomer generation – those aged between 55-64 years – are the group most likely

The ignored elderly: We've become invisible to society say half of over 65s

By KATE LOVEYS
UPDATED: 20:06 +10:00, 20 May 2011



36
View comments

The elderly believe they have become invisible in Britain's youth-obsessed society with more than half feeling ignored, a survey revealed yesterday.

They fear being sidelined despite embracing modern technology such as surfing the web and going on Facebook and Twitter.



Love thy neighbour no more: Disappearance of community spirit as 70% admit they don't know who lives next door

- Only 6% say community spirit is strong in their area
- 51% wouldn't ask neighbour for help
- Main reason given for decline is lack of time to meet those in the community

Impacts of social isolation

Social, psychological and medical research has now demonstrated conclusively that there is a direct correlation between the degree to which a person feels connected to others and their physical and mental health

Examples of identified impacts:

- Increased sleeplessness
- depression
- increased propensity for dementia
- elevated blood pressure
- increased risk of institutional care
- reduced recovery outcomes after serious illness

Impacts of social isolation

A review of 148 international studies into effects of social isolation (more than 300,000 individuals) found absence of supportive social relationships:

- Equivalent to health effects of smoking 15 cigarettes a day; or
- Drinking more than 6 alcoholic drinks daily;
- More harmful than not exercising;
- Twice as harmful as obesity

strong social relationships = **50% greater likelihood of survival**

She died here all alone ... nobody noticed for eight years

Janet Fife-Yeomans

The Advertiser

July 07, 2011

12:00AM

Recommend

Send



Tweet

0

A+ A-



The skeletal remains of a woman who would have been 87 years old were found in this house in Surry Hills. Picture: Stephen Cooper Source: The Daily Telegraph

Impacts of social isolation

Can have significant impacts on community:

- Absence of community cohesion/reduced sense of community
- Increasing demand on health services
- Increased burden on family and relatives
- Greater incidence of ageism – inadequate focus on older people in policy and resource allocation
- Limited engagement with active citizenship and loss of benefit this confers on community
- Greater need for acute intervention by local governments, housing providers and welfare services

Prevalence of social isolation

Establishing an estimate in a society /community affected by:

- Variations in how isolation defined
- Variations in how isolation measured
- Variations in ages of populations studied
- Lack of a focus on isolation in nationally represented samples/surveys with comparable definitions and measures
- Condition of isolation itself - difficult to engage social isolated people in research
- Gatekeepers in system that prevent contact with socially isolated people



Prevalence of social isolation

- Internationally rates vary between 2 and 20 per cent among community living older people
- In Australia:
 - Early 2000s estimated 10% of people aged 65 and over are socially isolated and a further 12% are at risk (Findlay and Cartwright 2002)
 - Hawthorne (2005) early 2000s indicated 15% isolation among older Australian adults aged 60 years and over

Prevalence SI Australia

(Friendship scale Hawthorne 2006; 2008)

Level of Isolation	Per cent	
Very socially isolated	7.2	17.8
Isolated	10.6	
Some social isolation / some social support	14.2	
Socially connected	25.0	
Very or highly socially connected	43.0	68.0
TOTAL PERSONS	1467	

Incidence SI: perceived isolation last five years

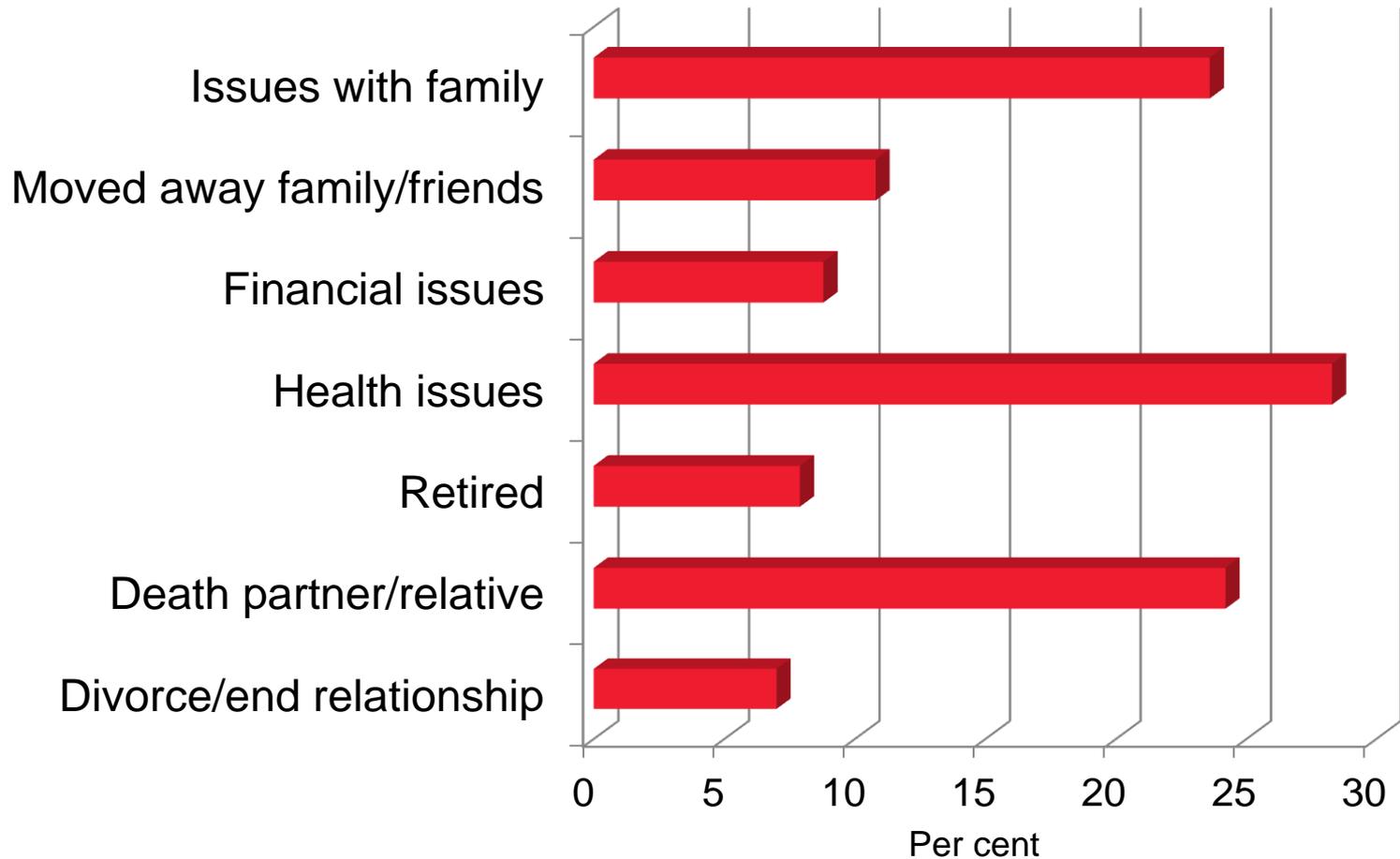
Felt isolated over last five years	Per cent
No	56.8
Yes, currently feel this way	12.7
Yes, not feel this way now	30.5
TOTAL PERSONS	1434

43.2 % of older people identified as being lonely or socially isolated at some point over the last five years

Time felt this way: last five years

Length of time felt this way	Have felt SI / lonely last 5 years (not now)	Currently feel SI / lonely
Short time	48.3	1.5
Few months	13.9	14.1
Over a year	16.1	16.1
Several years/long time	16.5	66.3
Don't know	5.3	2.0
TOTAL PERSONS	454	199

Reasons for feeling socially isolated / lonely

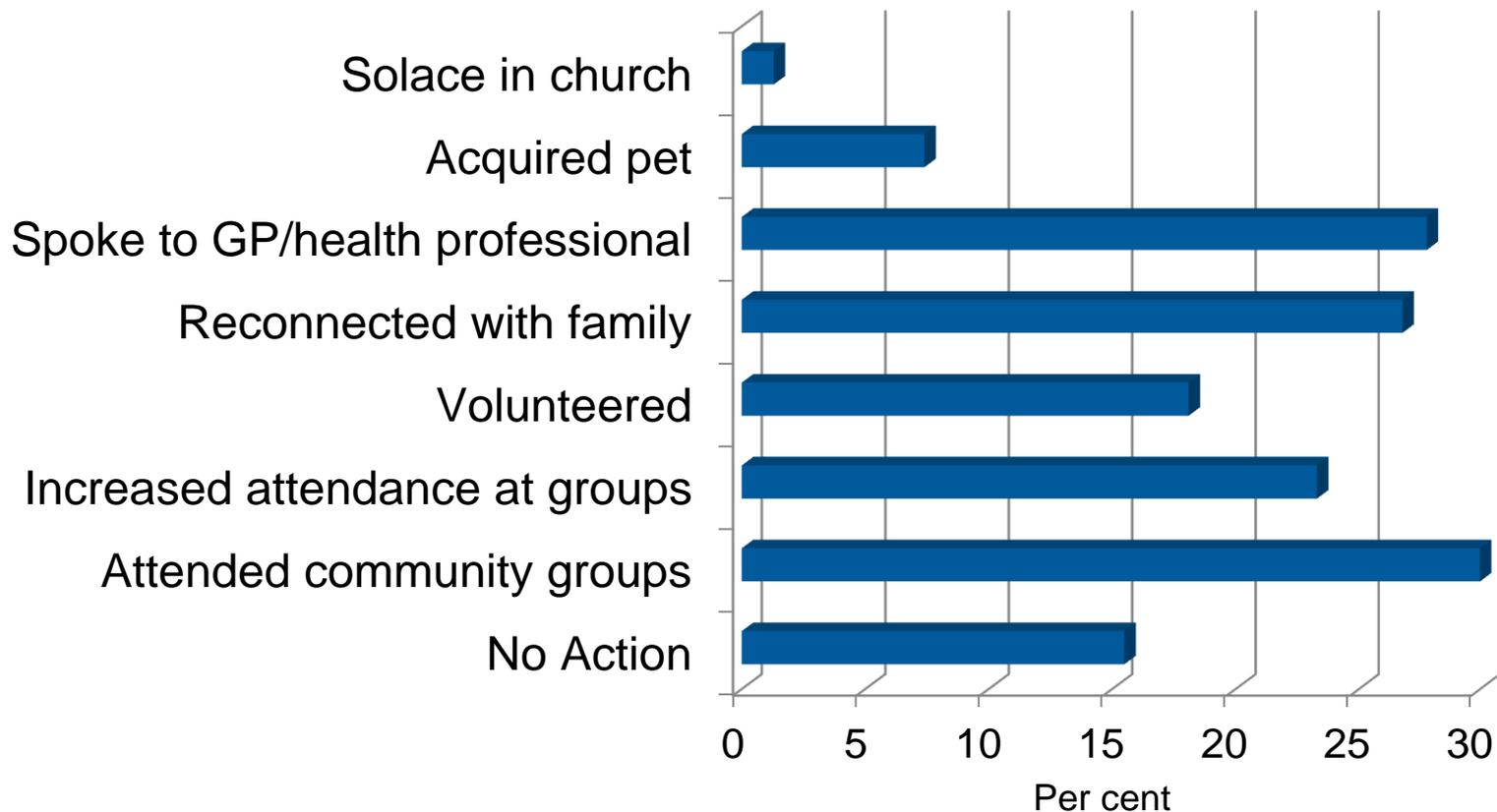


Reasons for feeling socially isolated / lonely

“For many people it is not about having no friends, family or community, it is a feeling of being isolated from mainstream, being looked upon and spoken about as dependent, a ‘burden’. Older people have much to contribute, much to learn, have diverse interests and differing intellectual abilities, as in the general population. You don’t become an old person only interested in playing bowls and volunteering out of choice. You become it because society no longer wants or demands anything else. This is the most isolating thing for me” (Female 65-69)

“Old age: we become an invisible ghost in the crowd, no one anymore looks into your eyes, you just don't exist....until you approach someone for something, shopping, a street directions etc. But...at the local Jazz Club older ladies still pick me up for a dance....and a smile” (...the old Italian still romantically alive...! (Male 80-84)

Actions taken to overcome feeling socially isolated / lonely



Reason taken no action

- Physical and mental health issues
- Being a full time carer
- Mobility issues – loss of driver’s licence; inability to drive
- Finances
- A lack of self esteem

“I feel I have nothing to contribute” (Female 85-89)

“Lack of confidence and ability to trust others” (Male 70-74)

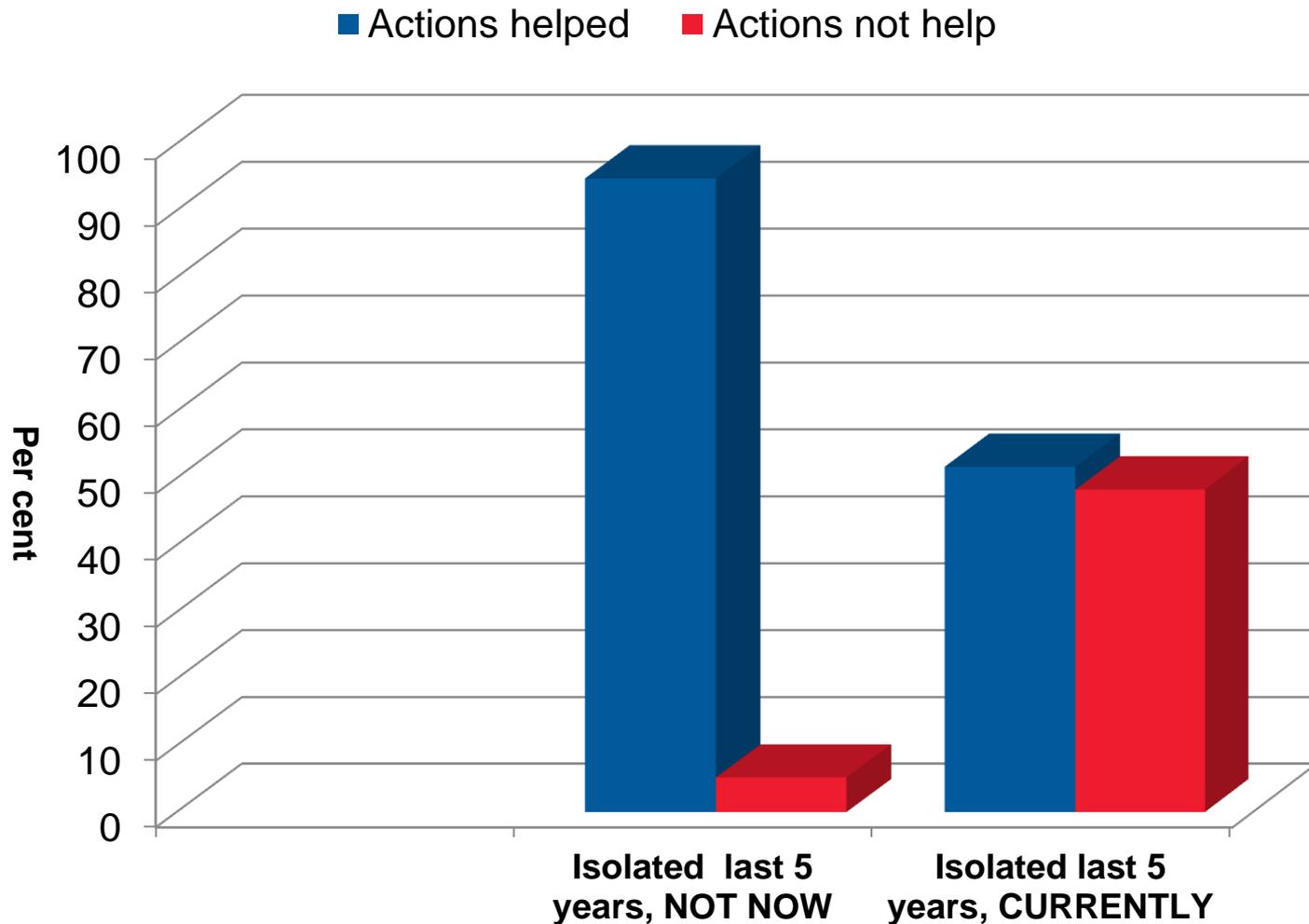
- Don’t know how/where to seek assistance

“Don’t know where to start” (Male 70-74)

“Don’t know how” (Female 80-84)

“Too hard basket. Started to accept fact” (male 70-74)

Effectiveness of actions taken



Reasons actions not worked

- **Family issues**

“rejection by family” (Female 75-79)

- **Health**

“No idea, or maybe because I am not in the best of health and they are not interested in socializing with me (I am 80 y.o.)” (Male 80-84)

- **Death**

“Bereavement cannot be corrected by activities.” (Male 85-89)

- **Caring responsibilities**

“My position as a carer makes it difficult” (Male 65-69)

- **Limited opportunities**

“I live in a small rural town, not many services, no public transport” (female 80-84)

“In my living place council has no activity to help older” (Female 80-84)

- **Finances**

“Losing my job created financial problems” (Female 75-79)

“Cost of travel” (Female 65-69)

Strategies to help stay connected

“Going out of my home most days, even if just for a walk.” (Female 70-74)

“Keep in the community as long as you possibly can. Keep contact with all age groups and still feel part of the community. Do something that makes you feel as if you are doing something useful. And never put off tomorrow what you can do today.” (Male 80-84)

“A certain amount of self-confidence. Local community involvement. The Christian Church.” (Male 65-69)

“By trying to connect/reconnect to new activities I put myself in a position that makes me feel full of energy and occupy my leisure times without getting bored or lonely.” (Male 70-74)

“Just as we direct our activities and education to get a job early in our life, we need to devote a similar amount of time to determine what our remaining life should be after retirement....in the areas of finance, health, domicile, travel plans and community involvement.” (Male 75-79)

Strategies to help stay connected

“Using the internet...I have several communities of friends that only exist in virtual space... In many ways I am more a part of and connected to this community than the holiday town I live in. On overseas trips I have met some of them in person – its great to have a community you belong to around the world you call friends.” (Female 65-69)

“...Having a community visitor once a week plus a carer one hour daily.” (Male 75-79)

“There are plenty of groups and organisations out in the community and it is only a matter of people looking for them and getting involved. However a lot of older people just lack the confidence to approach any new group/organisation for fear they will not fit in. The established groups/ organisations or sporting bodies need to have a very social person whose responsibility it is to make any newcomer welcome. I found especially with older men that unless they feel welcome on the first few visits they seldom return.” (Male 65-69).

“The Men’s shed movement is proving to be wonderful organisation for men to stay connected and find that they can make a contribution and be a valued member of the community.” (Male 70-74)

“Marrying a younger woman :)” (Male 65-69)

GOOD NEWS

3:51pm November 12, 2015

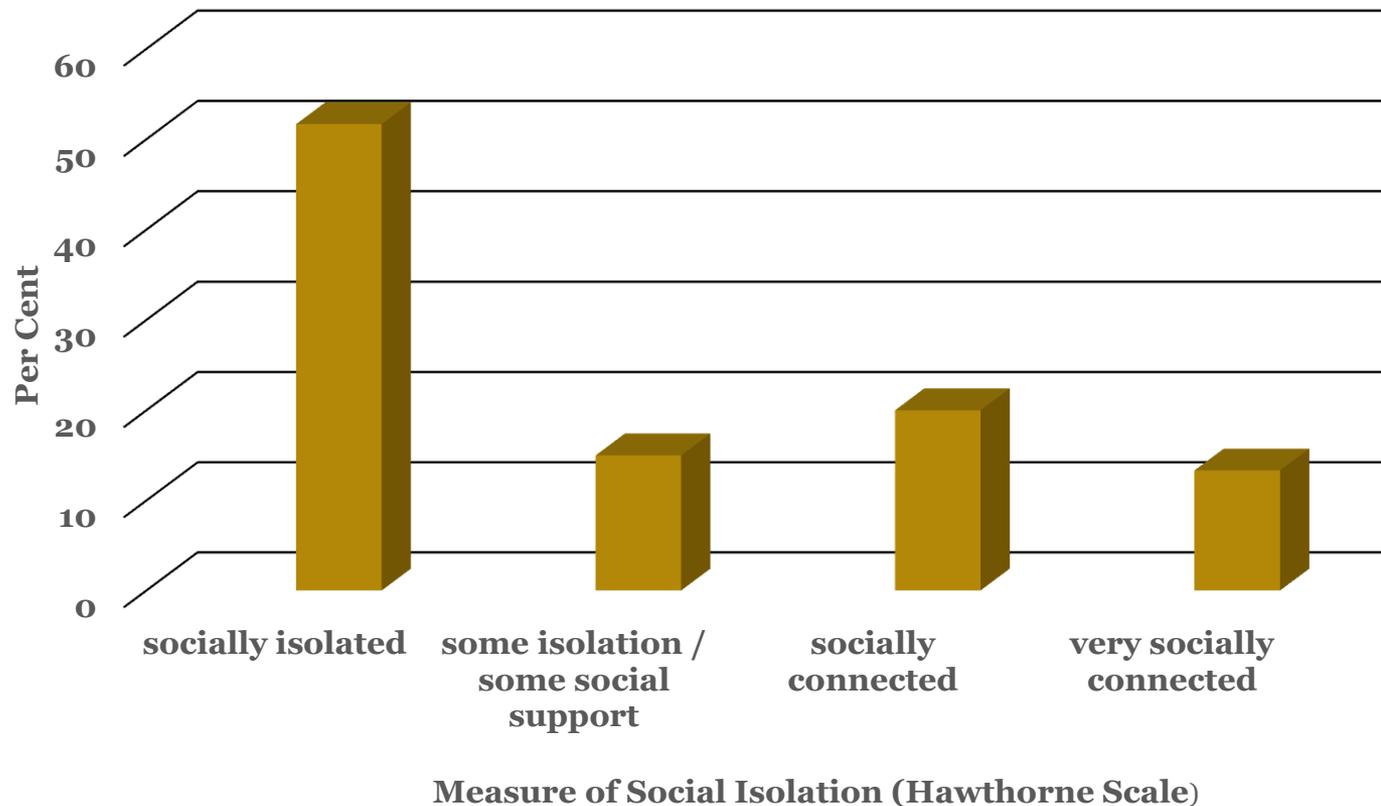
‘Desperately’ lonely elderly couple call emergency services – police officers join them for a cup of tea

Two UK police officers have paid a very special visit to an elderly couple after they dialled an emergency services line in a “desperate” plea for company. The call, placed on November 10, left Greater Manchester Police with concerns that 95-year-old elderly Manchester man “Mr Thomson” had suffered a fall. But when Police Constable Stu Ockwell and his partner arrived at the home they found neither Mr Thomson or his wife required medical attention, and that “in fact the call had been made out of desperation”, [The Telegraph UK reports](#).



Effectiveness of Programs for SI people – longitudinal study

Outcome at Wave 3 for people socially isolated at Wave 1 (60 persons)



Effectiveness of Programs for SI people – longitudinal study

“Mary” age 69

Wave – Friendship Score =3

- Very busy working life (confessed workaholic) until struck down by cancer has no friends outside of work.
- Moved to ILU - Lonely in new residence, is a distance from previous home. Doesn't know anyone.

Wave 3 - Friendship Score =15

“The program has improved my life by making me more open and able to talk to people. They've given me an insight into where I can go and what I can do.”

Effectiveness of Programs for SI people – longitudinal study

“June” age 70:

Wave 1 – Friendship Score =3

- health problems.
- Disappointed with services offered - couldn't provide her with transport or any other services that she required.

Wave 3- Friendship Score-13

- Now receiving services from different provider.
- a cleaner comes fortnightly for 4 hours, BUT
- person takes her shopping; AND
- helped her to join a lunch club where she socialises with other women then plays bingo in the afternoons.

Conclusions

- People are not adverse to identifying as feeling socially isolated or lonely
- Length of time feeling isolated and lonely; can be long term and this influences outcomes
- Need an understanding of every individual's circumstances and needs
- In general there are a wide variety of opportunities for people to be involved in their community
- Difficulties for the community and service system are for people who have health issues or limited or no contact/support from family and friends, have financial issues and are more confined to home
- Need to work as a community to increase social capital and support for older people

References

Step toe A., Shankar A., Demakakos P. and Wardel J. 2013 Social isolation, loneliness, and all-cause mortality in older men and women, Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America, vol 110, no 15 5797-5801.

AARP Foundation 2014 Framework for Isolation in adults over 50, AARP Foundation, US.

Holt-Lundstad, J., Smith T.B., and Layton J.B 2010 Social Relationships and Mortality Risk: A Meta-analytic Review, PLOS medicine <http://journals.plos.org/plosmedicine/article?id=10.1371/journal.pmed.1000316>