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Bulletin on Ageing

The Loneliness of the Elderly

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Introduction: Objective loneliness/subjective loneliness

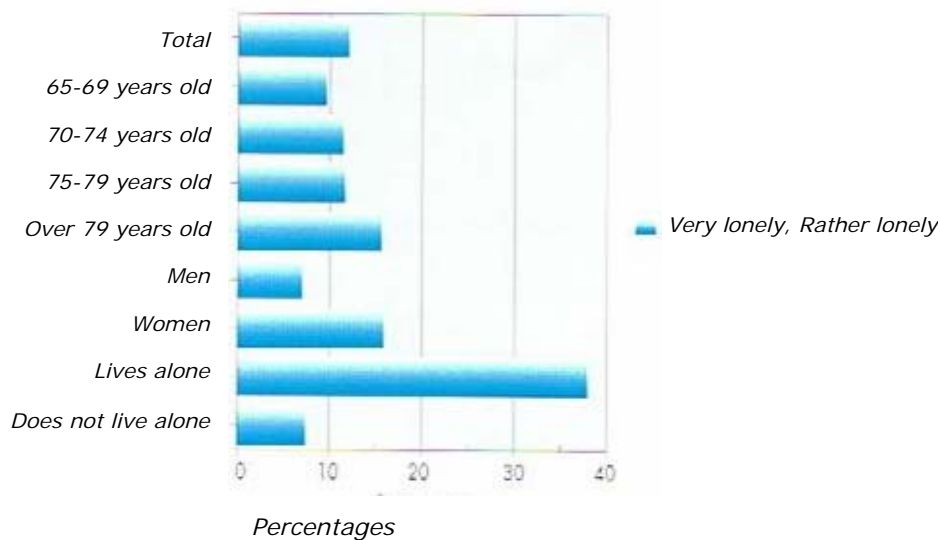
Reaching old age brings about a series of crucial changes that extend beyond the mere fact of just being a few years older. Events such as the children leaving home or the death of a spouse have as a possible outcome, among others, that many elderly people stop living with their families and are left to themselves. Adapting to the new life is no easy matter and depends on the personal, family and social resources of the elderly people involved. These changes might cause them to experience loneliness, a feeling which is considered to be so crucial by them that IMSERSO, in collaboration with the CIS and the University of Granada, undertook two complementary studies which tackled the issue. The first of these, (*Loneliness in the Elderly*. Study N° 2.279. IMSERSO/CIS, 1998), sought to analyse the situation of the elderly by carrying out a survey that gathered the opinions of 2,500 elderly people on various topics— socio-demographic data, family, habits, etc. The second study (*The Loneliness of the Elderly*. Julio Iglesias De Ussell. School of Social Sciences. University of Granada) consists of a qualitative type of research that construes loneliness as a consequence of retirement and widowhood. These studies provide a set of conclusions which may account for the feeling of loneliness in elderly people as well as suggest which measures are necessary to prevent it.

In order to understand what loneliness in elderly people actually means, it is necessary to distinguish between objective and subjective loneliness. The former refers to the absence of company, either temporary or permanent; in other words it involves those people who *are alone*. This type includes those people who do not live with anybody, and they account for 14% of the total of elderly people who live in their homes. Among the elderly the tendency to live alone is a function of the person's gender, marital status and the size of the town or city they live in. *Women live alone (20%) more frequently than men (7%); elderly people who are separated or divorced (55%) form the largest group of people living alone, followed by unmarried women (36%) and widows (31%); the larger the size of the population in a town or city, the higher the number of people living alone.*

Objective loneliness does not always mean an unpleasant experience: it may become a sought after and enriching experience. Most elderly people living alone, however, have been compelled to do so. Fifty-nine percent of them declare that they have been led to

do so, though they have learned to adapt; 36% prefer to live alone; and 5% would like to live with their children or their families. Loneliness is more highly valued when it is temporary. Elderly people can find the moments they need to attend to their personal affairs, knowing that after a few moments of "withdrawal" they can count on other people's company.

Graph 1: Elderly people feeling lonely, in relation to age, gender and personal situation



Source: CIS-IMSERO, *The Loneliness of the Elderly*, study 2.279.

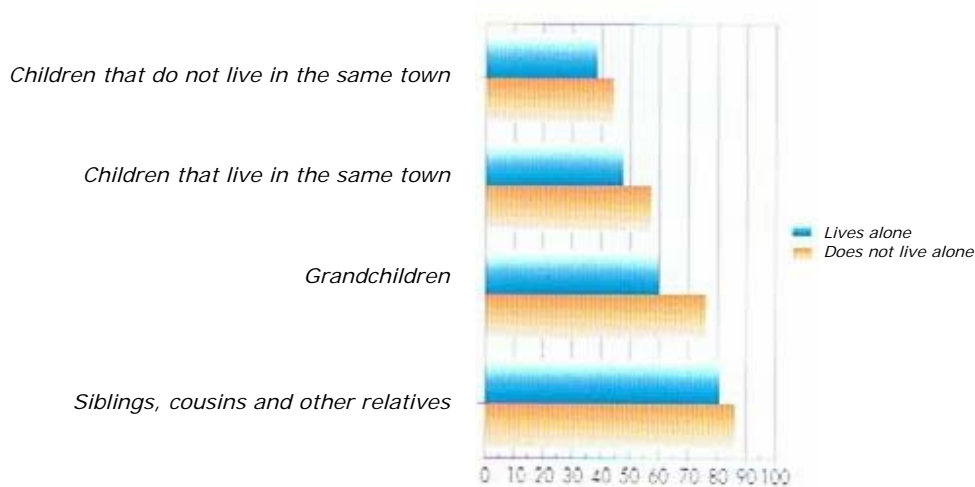
Subjective loneliness, on the other hand, is undergone by those people who *feel lonely* (Graph 1). It consists of a painful feeling and one which is feared by 22% of the elderly. Consequently, it is never an intended situation—as objective loneliness might be— but is always enforced by the individual's personal situation. The feeling of loneliness increases with age. 27% of the people in the 65-69 age group declare that they feel alone, and the percentage rises to 36% for people in the over-80 age group. As with objective loneliness, gender and marital status have an effect on the feeling of loneliness. This can be seen in the statements made with respect to feeling a certain degree of loneliness: *More women (39%) than men (21%) feel lonely. People who have separated (68%) as well as unmarried and widowed people (39%) have a higher tendency to feel lonely than married people (17%).*

However, and even though we have distinguished objective loneliness from subjective loneliness, the two are related. Out of the people who live alone, 38% feel miserable because of loneliness, while among those who live in the company of others the figure reaches only 8%.

1. REASONS FOR FEELING LONELY

Although loneliness may be caused by diverse reasons which depend on each individual, there are three personal contexts which can trigger off the feeling among elderly people: deteriorated family relations, social isolation and diminished participation in pleasure-giving activities.

Graph 2: Degree of satisfaction with family relations, in relation to personal situation



Source: CIS-IMSERSO, *The Loneliness of the Elderly*, study 2.279.

Elderly people are in contact with other people quite often. Forty-five percent hold social relations on a daily basis, 26% do so between one and six times a week, 14% once a week, and only 15% claim not to hold any weekly social relations. Although the frequency of social relations does not depend on the degree of loneliness, the latter does affect the quality of these social relations. Seventy-eight percent of the elderly people who feel lonely are satisfied with their social relations. This figure, though quite high, is lower than the figure for those who do not experience loneliness (98%). The satisfaction that is obtained depends on the closeness of the kinship relation and the nearness, geographically speaking, of the people with whom they relate. Relations with next of kin are more agreeable than relations with friends or acquaintances, though these two are also satisfactory. Within kinship relations the most satisfying ones are those held with grandchildren or children, particularly if they live in the same town. (Graph 2).

The feeling of loneliness can also appear when no pleasurable activities are carried out, since these activities prevent the appearance of negative thoughts. Those people who claim not to feel lonely are more active in their leisure time. They carry out a great variety of activities. They go for walks in the park (73%), they read (54%), they go to pubs and coffee-shops (35%), or they attend a club for retired people (26%), all these figures being higher than those for people who experience loneliness and also perform these activities (64%, 46%, 26% and 18% respectively).

2. MANIFESTATIONS OF LONELINESS

Although the feeling of loneliness is always a painful one, it is not always experienced in the same way (*Table 1*). People who feel lonely dwell on the feelings of emptiness and misery connected with loneliness more persistently than those who do not suffer from it. However, people who do feel the companionship of others conceive loneliness as the lack of company due to the loss of their loved ones or of someone whom they could turn to. Elderly people's conception of loneliness varies in relation to their marital status. Divorced and separated women are the ones who most often point out the feelings of emptiness and misery; the absence of someone to turn to is highlighted by unmarried women, while widows prove to be the most sensitive to the loss of their loved ones.

Table 1: Conceptions of loneliness, in relation to loneliness perception and marital status

Loneliness is ...	<i>Unmarried</i>	<i>Married</i>	<i>Widowed</i>	<i>Separated</i>	<i>Feels lonely</i>	<i>Does not feel lonely</i>
A feeling of emptiness and misery	36	43	48	51	54	39
Not having someone to turn to	21	17	12		12	17
Having lost your loved ones	12	13	17	7	12	15
Others	18	16	14	16	14	17
Undecided/ no answer	13	11	11	12	7	12

Marital loneliness is ...	<i>Unmarried</i>	<i>Married</i>	<i>Widowed</i>	<i>Separated</i>	<i>Feels lonely</i>	<i>Does not feel lonely</i>

Not having a steady partner	28	38	43	26	42	37
Having an insensitive partner	22	31	19	54	22	29
Others	4	4	10	13	7	6
Undecided/ no answer	46	27	28	14	29	28

Source: CIS-IMSERSO, *Loneliness in Elderly People*, study 2.279.

The reference to *marital loneliness* suggests to most elderly people the absence of a companion or spouse (38%), although 27% consider it connected to the lack of communication with one's spouse. In this conception the feeling of loneliness also has an effect; accordingly, elderly people who feel lonely highlight the lack of a spouse or companion to a higher degree than those who feel in company; moreover, insensitivity is also underscored by this group. Furthermore, marital status also determines the perception of loneliness. Widowed people are the ones who most emphatically point out the absence of a steady partner, whereas separated and married people highlight the partner's insensitivity.

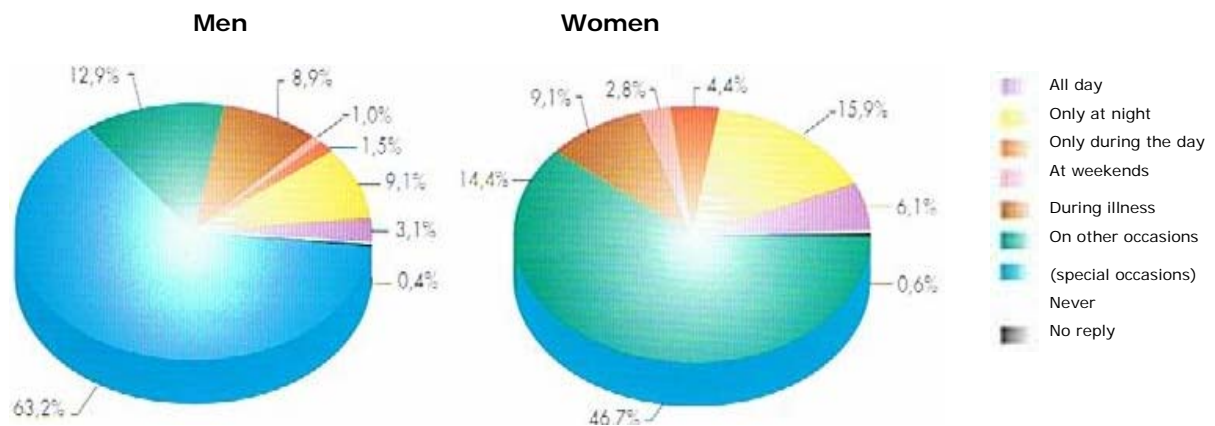
3. STRATEGIES FOR OVERCOMING LONELINESS

According to the report by Dr. Julio Iglesias De Ussell mentioned above, loneliness in elderly people can be prevented or overcome by performing activities that are incompatible with the thoughts that generate it, in particular if the activities foster the development of satisfactory social and kinship relations. Elderly people, faced with loneliness, watch television (28%) or go out for a walk (23%). However, the activities that imply communicating with others are not habitual. Only 5% of elderly people talk with their neighbours when they feel lonely, 3% go out to visit people and 2% visit a retired people home. Now, when it comes to putting into action effective strategies that can defeat this feeling, in what ways do people who feel lonely act differently from those who do not? Contrary to what might be expected, there are no significant differences between the strategies applied by the two groups. What varies, then, might be the degree of efficiency in alleviating loneliness. Notwithstanding this, it *is* true that people who experience the feeling of loneliness are more passive. They resign themselves (13%) and watch television (31%) more frequently than those who do not feel lonely (9% and 26% respectively). These, for their part, prefer to go out for a walk (25%) or engage in a pastime (9%) more frequently than those who habitually feel lonely and dejected (23% and 6% respectively).

4. MOMENTS MOST AMENABLE TO LONELINESS: NIGHTTIME AND ITS SURROUNDINGS

Any moment of the day can give rise to a feeling of loneliness. However, the feeling appears more frequently when people feel most vulnerable, and this happens at night or when they are ill. Twenty-five percent of the elderly people who complain about their loneliness experience it with greater intensity at nighttime. Sleepless early risings, during which silences alternate with strange sounds, induce insomniacs to harbour negative thoughts connected with the deterioration of their health, their death, their spouse's death or general insecurity—all these being usual thoughts when they are ill or feel unprotected. The feeling of loneliness often sets in at the end of the afternoon when they shut themselves in for the rest of the day. During the night they find it more difficult to find the company and relief needed to drive away loneliness, especially when they live alone. Besides, the night is not the moment to do activities that entertain them and banish the thoughts that bring on misery and loneliness. On the other hand, among the elderly people who claimed not to feel lonely, 68% has never experienced this feeling, 13% experiences it at nighttime, 7% when they are ill and the rest at any other moment of the day. As can be expected, then, the feeling of loneliness is not very frequent among these people; nevertheless, nighttime turns up once more as the most propitious moment for loneliness. On the other hand, and notwithstanding the fact that loneliness is quite a habitual feeling, women feel lonelier than men throughout the day or the night (*Graph 3*).

Graph 3: Moments at which elderly people feel most lonely, in relation to gender.



Source: CIS-IMSERSO, *Loneliness in Elderly People*, study 2.279.

5. CHILDREN LEAVING THE HOME, WIDOWHOOD AND RETIREMENT: THREE EVENTS THAT CAN RESULT IN LONELINESS

With the passing of time, and mainly in old age, people go through very hard experiences which bring about a break with their previous way of life. These experiences may have serious emotional consequences for those who undergo them (e.g. depression, loneliness, loss of self-esteem, etc.). The first significant event that elderly people have to face is the children leaving the parental home to start an independent life. This event can lead to depression and loneliness in elderly parents if they do not keep up fluent relations with their children (*Empty-nest Syndrome*). Moreover, parents expect their children to assist them in times of illness or dependence. Not complying with this duty—which many elderly people consider essential— can deteriorate the parent-child relationship and give rise to feelings of loneliness and helplessness.

The feelings that appear when children leave the parental home can be overcome and even prevented if the married couple is a source of companionship where the spouses can share interests and love. Because of this, the death of one of the spouses is the most traumatic event elderly people go through. When the couple has a close relationship, the emotional impact on the death of one of the spouses will be all the greater, and the feelings of loneliness and misery will not be alleviated by any other person.

The other important event in the lives of elderly people is their withdrawal from the labour market. After retirement, people have more free time and, more often than not, they do not know what to spend it on. Moreover, the lower income that is part of the new situation restricts the possibilities of enjoying the moments of leisure. Another of the effects of retirement might be social isolation. People in certain professions foster social relations among colleagues, but they give them up when they stop working. These circumstances contribute to the fact that, on retirement, many elderly people busy themselves by doing activities only at home and as a result lose all contact with friends. Social isolation is, as was already expressed above, one of the main causes for the feeling of loneliness in elderly people.

6. CONCLUSION

Loneliness in elderly people is a serious problem, and it is clear that preventive or palliative measures must be taken. Loneliness brings about a series of negative feelings such as misery, the feeling of emptiness and lack of communication. The cure for loneliness is contained in its very same causes: the deterioration of social and family relationships as well as a decrease in the fulfilment of pleasurable activities. Elderly people must therefore be encouraged

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Ana Madrigal Muñoz. *Research and Statistics Service*.

The Elderly People site of the IMSERSO presents you the Web page:

<http://www.imsersomayores.csic.es>

to have access to a large information about elderly people.

Concerning the concrete item we discuss in this International technical Meeting, we indicate you the above links:

Link:

<http://www.imsersomayores.csic.es/documentacion/documentos/registro.jsp?iPos=0&ndId=0&idReg=1391>

La autonomía como valor en alza. 2005

Autor: Juan López Doblas - Premio IMSERSO "Infanta Cristina" - 2004

Link:

<http://www.imsersomayores.csic.es/documentacion/documentos/registro.jsp?iPos=7&ndId=2&idReg=777>

Análisis cualitativo sobre la soledad en las personas mayores: Influencias personales, familiares y sociales.

Autor: Julio Iglesias de Ussel

Link:

<http://www.imsersomayores.csic.es/estadisticas/encuestas/index.html>

Estudios cuantitativos sobre la soledad en las personas mayores.

Link:

<http://www.imsersomayores.csic.es/documentos/documentacion/estudiosyresultados/perfiles/boletinsobreenvejec03.pdf>

Boletín número 3 sobre el Envejecimiento del Observatorio de Personas Mayores.

Link:

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Las personas mayores en España. 2004. Actualmente en proceso de edición: Las personas mayores en España 2006.