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## Ageing and loneliness: how to address it from the point of view of its complexity<sup>1</sup>

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**“Loneliness knows no age”. Exploring multigenerational experiences’ is the first study published by the Loneliness Observatory. The Observatory was founded as a Friends of the Elderly - Spain foundation initiative to create a forum for knowledge and places for reflecting on loneliness, and particularly on loneliness that affects an older person. The aim of this first study is to explore the experiences of different people who feel lonely at a particular time in their lives (adolescence, early adulthood, adulthood and old age), what coping strategies they use when they feel this way and what can be done to help with this loneliness. In this document, we will highlight some of the areas of the study relating to loneliness in ageing processes and the actions and programmes for addressing it carried out in Barcelona city.**

### 1. Loneliness in ageing

Unfortunately, talking about loneliness is fashionable. The media are increasingly reporting the significant consequences of loneliness in society, often with undesirable consequences (such as the many times the fire brigade has entered a home and found the body of an older person whose absence has gone unnoticed by neighbours and family members for weeks, or even years in some cases). The lack of meaningful relationships affects people’s quality of life, the chances of receiving support, and the feelings of belonging and usefulness in the community. This problem doesn’t affect only an older person, but it does have significant consequences on their physical and psychological health.

Along the same lines, research on such loneliness has also been increasing, with a particular focus on the older person (Graph 1), even though a person can be lonely at any point in their life cycle. In fact, this life cycle perspective is fundamental when trying to understand loneliness in the older person. Questions such as, ‘At what point in their life did this person’s feelings of loneliness begin?’ Or ‘How did they face them at other stages in their life?’ are seen as crucial to understanding the complexity of loneliness.

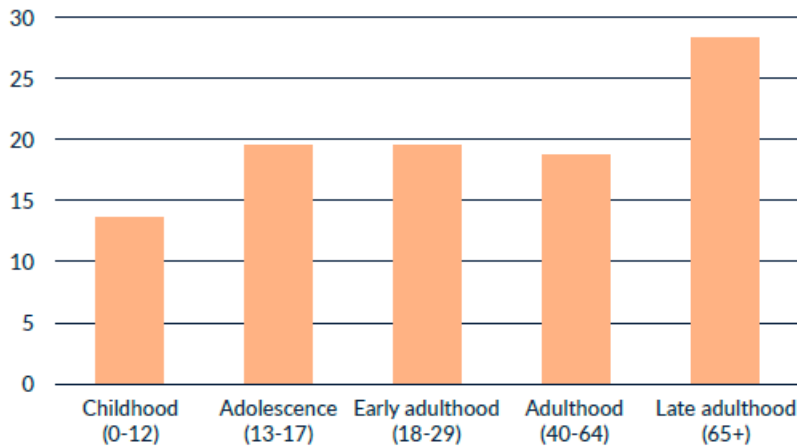
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1. This article has been prepared on the basis of the main conclusions of the study ‘Loneliness knows no age. Exploring multigenerational experiences’ carried out by Observatori de la Soledat [Loneliness Observatory]. You can read the report on: [https://amicsdelagentgran.org/ca/la\\_soledat\\_no\\_te\\_edat](https://amicsdelagentgran.org/ca/la_soledat_no_te_edat)

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**Graph 1. Percentage of publications in the Psycinfo scientific database containing the keyword loneliness based on the age of the study participants**



Source: Original.

For example, some longitudinal studies have associated the presence of loneliness at a specific stage of a person's life, such as childhood, with negative consequences on their health once they reach adolescence, such as a higher instance of symptoms of depression (Qualter, Brown, Munn and Rotenberg, 2010), or loneliness in adolescence and its link to health problems in early adulthood (Goosby, Bellatorre, Walsemann and Cheadle, 2013).

Similarly, it is essential to observe what factors or elements lead a person to a situation of loneliness during the ageing process in the concept of the ageing process itself. In relation to this, there is abundant literature on the risk factors that can lead an older person to experience chronic feelings of loneliness (Table 1).

**Table 1. Loneliness risk factors**

Risk factor	Examples
Changes in the person's social support network	Widowhood Death of friends or other people close to the person Retirement Change of address/city Being a carer
Personality factors/coping strategies	High levels of neuroticism Low levels of responsibility as a personality trait Ineffective coping strategies, such as rumination or resignation
Structural aspects	Structural problems in the home or building Lack of adapted transport Gentrification
Health problems	Mobility problems Bad health Loss of sight or hearing Cognitive loss
Life cycle	Inequalities accumulated over a person's life making them more predisposed to social isolation

Source: Original, based on Cohen-Mansfield, Hazan, Lerman and Shalom (2016), Pinazo and Donio-Bellegarde (2018) and Warburton and Lui (2007).

In a longitudinal study with a 28-year follow-up period, one third of the people aged 60-86 who reported not feeling lonely at the start of the study developed feelings of loneliness in the long term. The factors linked to the appearance of loneliness include losing their partner, a reduction in social activities, an increase in physical difficulties and increased feelings of uselessness, nervousness or lower mood as compared with the start of the study (Aartsen and Jylha, 2011). Another longitudinal study similarly found older people who can escape situations of loneliness, in which elements such as good health as perceived by the subject, a higher frequency of socialisation activities and less stress in family relationships were associated with this reduction in loneliness (Hawkley and Kocherginsky, 2018).

However, not all studies conceptualise and measure loneliness in the same way. The literature usually associates loneliness with a feeling based on a mismatch between the relationships we have and those we would like to have (Gierveld, 1987). Two of the most usual measures for assessing loneliness, the UCLA Loneliness Scale (Russell, Peplau and Ferguson, 1978) and the Jong Gierveld Loneliness Scale (DJGLS) (Jong Gierveld and Kamphuis, 1985), also follow this conceptual line of seeing loneliness as subjective and unwanted. However, people find it difficult to recognise loneliness, particularly if they are not actually alone (being objectively alone and being subjectively lonely therefore do not necessarily go together), as well as because of the negative connotations usually attributed by society to loneliness (such as blaming the older person or assuming they are alone due to some personality trait of theirs).

We must therefore make a distinction not only between this objective component ('I am alone') and the subjective component ('I feel alone') but also between the person's positive or negative assessment of such solitude. There are times in a person's life when they may need or want to feel alone, and this positive need for solitude must also be taken into account (Diagram 1). Although desired solitude hasn't been the subject of many studies, it is also an important feeling in personal development since, in order to achieve a new skill, be creative in a task or make a decision in an autonomous way, it is sometimes necessary to have one's own space in order to get away from everything and spend time on one's own. However, it is not usual for older people to mention this desired solitude (Hauge and Kirkevold, 2010).

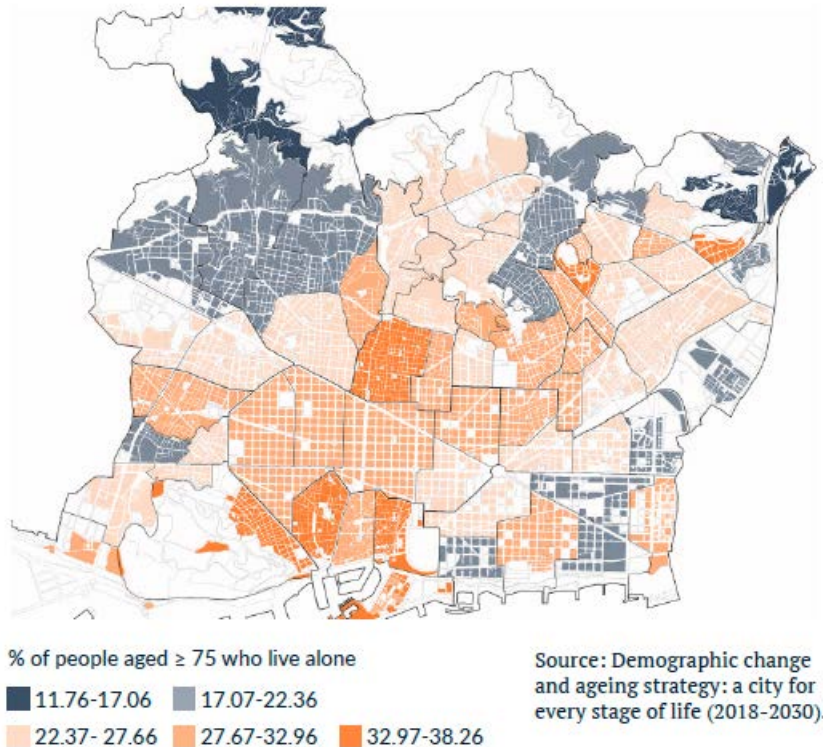
**Diagram 1. Conceptualisation between objective and subjective solitude/loneliness**



Source: Original.

If we look at the data on these types of solitude/loneliness in our territory in relation to objective solitude, the data from Barcelona shows that the city follows the same trend as other European cities in relation to the ageing of its population. We can also see that many older people, particularly from the ages of 75-80, live alone, and that this solitude is unevenly distributed between the various districts and neighbourhoods of the city (Figure 1).

**Figure 1. Percentage of people over  $\geq 75$  living alone out of the total population**



The data becomes more varied when we look at feelings of loneliness in the older person. Thus, while data about the European population suggests that the percentage of loneliness in people over 65 is 12% (and higher in women than in men) (Fernández, Abellán and Ayala, 2018), according to other surveys it is as high as 39.8% of the older population (la Caixa, 2019). The same study by Fernández et al. (2018) found a link between living in a single-person household and a higher level of perceived loneliness. Data from organisations such as Friends of the Elderly – Spain highlights that 1,758 of the older people it supports feel lonely, and 64% of these live in Barcelona city. The average age is 87 years old, and 84% are women as compared with only 16% who are men (Friends of the Elderly – Spain-, 2019).

The importance of addressing loneliness can be seen in its consequences on the physical and psychological health of the older people who suffer it. In fact, for authors such as Walsh, Scharf and Keating (2017), this lack of good social relations is one of the six dimensions of social exclusion in ageing. This is in addition to the dimensions of: 1) neighbourhood and community; 2) services and mobility; 3) material and financial resources; 4) social and cultural aspects; and 5) civic participation. In the long term, chronic subjective loneliness has consequences such as worse physical health (both objective and subjective) and increased morbidity and mortality. In addition, it is a risk factor for cognitive decline and is associated with lower self-esteem and sense of identity in the older person (Courtin and Knapp, 2017; Hawkey and Cacioppo, 2010).

The Friends of the Elderly – Spain foundation was created in 1987, under the guidance of the French foundation Les petits Frères des Pauvres, with the aim of addressing such feelings of loneliness and their consequences on the older person's health and welfare. In addition to the constant improvements achieved by its social action programmes, awareness-raising projects and volunteer training and involvement, in 2018 the organisation decided to take a step forward by creating the Loneliness Observatory<sup>4</sup> with the aim of generating and sharing new knowledge around the complex issue of approaching loneliness in the older person. The publication 'Solitude

4. [://amicsdelagentgran.org/ca/observatori\\_soledathttps](https://amicsdelagentgran.org/ca/observatori_soledathttps)

knows no age. Exploring multigenerational experiences', on which this article is based, is one of the observatory's first results.

## 2. Methodology

Four discussion groups with people in a particular age range (Table 2) were created for this publication, as the aim was to share the experiences they were going through at that particular time in their lives (adolescence) that could have the feeling of loneliness as their common denominator. Each discussion group followed the same sequence of four thematic blocks: 1) their own experience of loneliness; 2) loneliness coping strategies; 3) the perception of loneliness in relation to the older adults; and 4) proposed actions.

**Table 2. Summary of the qualitative methods of the study on loneliness**

Metaplan® group moderation method or structured brainstorming	4 discussion groups	Teens (16 to 18)	Young adults (19 to 35)	Adults (36 to 65)	Older adults (over 65)
	Script based on thematic blocks on solitude and...	1) experience, 2) coping strategies, 3) perception in other generations, and 4) proposed actions.			
Bibliographic research, analysis of results and discussion					

NB Civil society persons, both individually and as members of: the Ciutat Vella Centre for Senior Citizens, the Àgata Group (Catalan Association of Women Affected by Breast Cancer), the Roure foundation, Saràu Associació d'Oci Inclusiu [Saràu Association for Inclusive Leisure], the Friends of the Elderly foundation.

## 3. Main conclusions

### 3.1 Loneliness knows no age

Feelings of loneliness are present at all stages of a person's life and are linked to our need as human beings to relate to each other, to have bonds, significant attachments to meaningful people that can ensure that our need for belonging, self-esteem and recognition, among others, are met (Table 3).

**Table 3. Elements of loneliness over a person's life cycle**

	Childhood	Adolescence	Early adulthood	Adulthood middle age	Late adulthood
At this stage...	Acquisition of essential skills and needs for development	Possibly the time during which desired solitude plays the most significant role	Process of building a life project	Coping with the demands that may result from the various roles acquired	Loneliness in the older person becomes the most studied type
Specific elements...	Attachment	Peer group	Partner	Being a carer	Loss of the person's social network
	"Kids of the Key" <sup>1</sup>	Singularity	Loneliness and difficult times	Maternity	Reflection on social changes
	The importance of play	School bullying Social media	Blaming	Empty nest	New technologies Expectations

Source: Original.

1. This term was used in order to talk about those children of working families who are often left home alone, and therefore are carrying their home's key.

The discussion group with the oldest people was the only one that did not mention being alone as something they sought or wanted, whereas both adults and teenagers did see the need to feel alone as a positive thing. While teenagers sought to be alone in connection with the vital need to find themselves, adults considered solitude as a privilege, particularly if they had to look after other people or had heavy workloads either at work or with their family.

### 3.2 Different ways of coping

The discussion groups considered a number of actions that each person could carry out in order to address, mitigate or eliminate feelings of loneliness. It is worth noting that using a strategy does not necessarily mean that it actually works, but it is important to know what a person can spontaneously do when they feel lonely (Table 4).



Table 4. Ways of coping with loneliness

Sphere	Type	Description	Contributions of the discussion groups
INDIVIDUAL relating to...	Thinking	Strategies of a more cognitive and emotional nature, focusing on the interior of the individual	'Screaming and crying' 'Not repressing loneliness' 'It needs to be destigmatised' 'Having an open attitude'
	Doing	They place themselves more in the action, emphasising behaviour or the visible management of the problem	'Watching YouTube videos' 'Available entertainment resources' 'Asking for help' 'Engaging in new activities'
SOCIAL such as...	Formal	They take place within a functional structure, in an organisation or institution	'School protocols' 'Engaging in associative activities' 'Creating help groups' 'Volunteering'
	Informal	These happen spontaneously, in a non-institutional context	'Associating with similar people' 'Maintaining contact with old friends' 'Having a family in which everyone gets on with each other' 'Socialising with a variety of people'

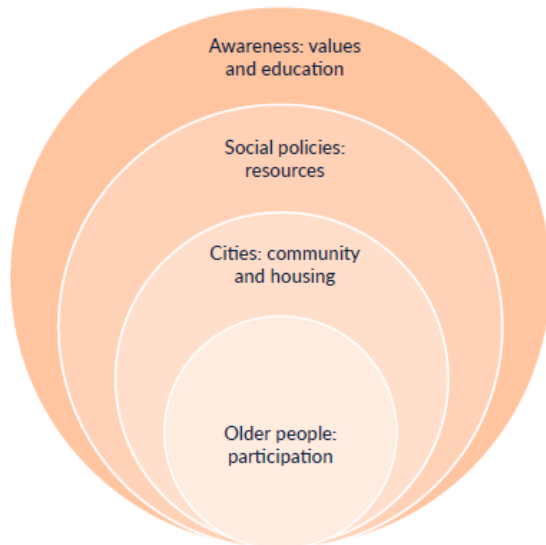
Source: Original.

Of the answers analysed, it is interesting to see that the oldest people in the discussion group:

- Particularly highlighted the strategies that focused on thinking and using cognitive and attitude-related mechanisms to cope with loneliness.
- Emphasised the importance of ensuring that older people do not lose their autonomy when deciding the type of relationships they want. Paternalistic actions in which professionals or relatives end up making decisions about the older person's daily life which, even if made with the best intentions, would infringe the principle of the person's autonomy to make their own decisions (Cicirelli, 1992).
- Sometimes young and older people mentioned the same coping actions in the 'doing' area (entertainment or distractions), but they differed in the specifics. For example, while teenagers talked about watching videos of influencers on platforms such as YouTube, older people sought this kind of 'company' on the radio.
- In the formal sphere, the usefulness of the various facilities available in cities such as Barcelona (for example, centres for senior citizens, civic centres and libraries) in helping people socialise are particularly worth noting. Actions that can be undertaken by older people themselves, such as volunteering or helping in an organisation at community level, were also highlighted.
- Finally, in the field of informal actions, older people talked about the ability to diversify their social relationships and about going out and taking part in cultural activities. The group of older people was the one that least mentioned family as a resource for informal relationships to reduce feelings of loneliness.

### 3.3 Proposed actions

The various proposed actions that arose in the discussion groups were examined by topic. It is worth noting how, in many cases, they talked about creating a service or programme of some kind without mentioning any specific ones that might already exist (such as intergenerational homes). This may suggest the need to better publicise the range of resources to deal with loneliness that are currently available. Diagram 2 shows the four major actions proposed by the discussion groups, from the macro level to the smallest micro level (the closest to older people).

**Diagram 2. Proposed actions for dealing with loneliness**

Source: Original.

However, the proposals that were mentioned most often related to the city environment and the social relations experienced in communities, with neighbours or at home. It was also surprising that, in the discussion group composed of older people, no one mentioned any actions regarding raising awareness of the problem of loneliness among the general population. Table 5 contains examples of each of these areas of action, specifying programmes or actions that already exist in Barcelona city.

**Table 5. Actions and programmes against loneliness in the older person**

<b>1. Awareness and education about loneliness</b>	
Raising awareness of loneliness among the general population	'Soc gran, i què?' ['I'm old. So what?'], an initiative to debunk stereotypes about the older person 'Roses contra l'oblit' ['Roses against forgetting'] (Friends of the Elderly)
Introducing contents and methods to promote the values of solidarity and respect into the school curriculum	Centre Promotor d'APS [Learning and Service Promotion Centre]
<b>2. Promotion of public policies</b>	
Increasing the public resources, both financial and professional, allocated to the older person	Services, research, minimum guaranteed income
Promoting the achievement of a balance between care tasks and work life, as well as the need to look after the carer	Respite units Espai Barcelona Cuida [Barcelona Care-Related Services]
Providing more support and assistance to organisations in the third sector that work with the older person	Networking, loneliness surveillance and detection services
<b>3. Housing, coexistence and social relations</b>	
Creating homes or neighbourhoods/communities for the older person	Homes with services, the Sostre Cívic cooperative housing project, Fundació Llars Compartides
Promoting intergenerational housing	Viure i Conviure [Living and Coexisting] (Roure Foundation)
Residential services that foster intergenerational relationships and adapt to people's preferences	Support in homes for the elderly (Friends of the Elderly), RESIVOL (Caritas)
Increasing shared living spaces that promote shared responsibility and mutual help	Radars and Vincles projects
Cities that are friendlier towards the older person	Friendly Cities Network
<b>4. Fostering participation</b>	
Creating mechanisms to ensure that older person people are the central focus of the measures and areas that affect them, as well as facilitating communication between the older person and public bodies	Advisory Council for the Elderly of Barcelona, Council of the Elderly of Catalonia
Facilitating and promoting activities that are meaningful to the older person	Federation of Associations of the Elderly of Catalonia (FATEC)
Intergenerational involvement in order to avoid losing the social capital associated with older person people's knowledge and values	Voluntary senior business advice association (SECOT)
Providing home-based leisure activities for older person people with mobility problems	Home-based social gatherings (Friends of the Elderly), 'Baixem al carrer' ['Let's go out'] project (Poble Sec Community Plan)

Source: Original.

#### 4. By way of reflection

The publication 'Solitude knows no age. Exploring multigenerational experiences' is a turning point in the Friends of the Elderly – Spain foundation's history of over thirty years of social work fighting loneliness. Thanks to the ability to generate knowledge and share synergies with other organisations, we are able to continue growing and adapting to the new needs of a population that is increasingly ageing but that at the same time has more diverse personal, social and cultural characteristics.

Loneliness not only affects everyone at some point in our lives: in addition, the way we deal with it at any given time will affect our emotional baggage and the social skills we need to address the various challenges involved in the ageing process. The most cross-cutting view in this study also enables us to analyse how people who are currently between 50 and 60 years of age will experience loneliness. Many in this age range are taking on the role of carers for other dependants, something that not only has consequences in the present (due to the extra work of having to look after someone without the necessary support from the environment) but also in the future (Serrano et al., 2018). According to the studies carried out on this segment of the population in our cultural environment (Rodríguez et al., 2013), there will soon be an ageing generation that has a higher compulsory education background, makes greater use of ICTs and has different expectations regarding their autonomy when making decisions or establishing their role in society and communities. Some of the future challenges of fighting loneliness during ageing can be found summarised in the following table (Table 6).

**Table 6. Final reflections as a result of the study on loneliness over a person's life**

Expectations and loneliness	Care and family support	Multigenerational learning and stereotypes
Generational and cultural factors	The family as a source of help	Fighting stereotypes
Mediterranean societies and family	Socio-economic changes increase tensions	Preferred coping strategies when designing programmes
Improving the reality and modifying or adjusting expectations	Senior citizens are the witnesses of change	Similar meanings of loneliness
Effects of the discourses we construct	Valuing quality care Supporting prevention	

Source: Original.

**Expectations and loneliness:** Barcelona city and its society are changing at lightning speed. The way we build relationships in the city's communities and neighbourhoods is strongly linked to the way people relate to each other and, therefore, to how they can fight feelings of loneliness. In addition, changes to family configurations and the rise of certain values such as individualism are important when designing social policies that help construct a good network of social relationships throughout life and particularly in the ageing process.

**Family care and support:** Family support and care for older people have been linked to feelings of loneliness and the risk of social isolation not just for the carer but also for the older person. Looking after the main carer (not just with support groups or programmes to make them better carers but also to ensure they do not neglect other areas of their own lives and lose important social relationships) is an intervention goal that should be highlighted (Kovaleva, Spangler, Clevenger and Hepburn, 2018). In addition, the feelings of loneliness that can be experienced by the carer receivers, particularly in cases of dementia, are often not taken into account. This raises new opportunities for social action in the support of older people with dementia, particularly in the early stages of the illness (Balouch, Rifaat, Chen and Tabet, 2019).

**Multigenerational learning and stereotypes:** Finally, this first study conducted by the Observatory has revealed the similarities between the forms of loneliness that appear during people's lives and how they deal with them. This can open doors to the possibility of multigenerational ways of addressing the problem of loneliness while helping fight the usually negative stereotypes associated with ageing. Intergenerational housing programmes, intergenerational culture and work spaces and intergenerational education are forms of exchange



between people of different ages that can help innovate in educational and community work over a person's life.

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