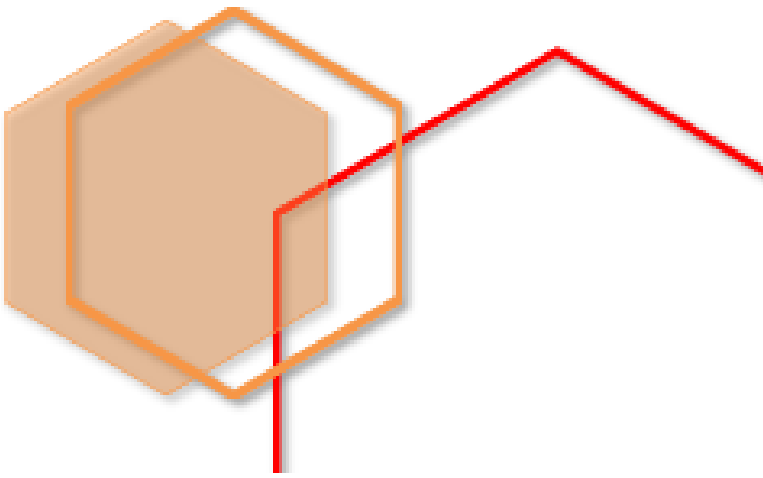
Project number:
2020-1- ES01-KA204-083167

IO2 – TRAINING MATERIALS FOR THE COMMUNITY

HEALTHY LONELINESS PROJECT

Summary



Introduction

Current document was developed in the framework of the Erasmus+ project Healthy Loneliness. It is aimed at presenting the training materials dedicated to the community in order to help them to identify seniors living in loneliness, helping them to fight the feeling of loneliness and to provide with some tips or good contacts. Theories on loneliness emphasize the role of the social environment in the experience of loneliness, hence the role of the community at tackling this problem is key at providing support for identification, detection and interventions. Thus, the generation of awareness and knowledge about loneliness at community level, arises as a powerful tool to fight against it.

It will describe the phenomenon of loneliness among seniors, as well as its causes and consequences, followed by the regional patterns of frequent loneliness and social isolation in Europe. Then, it will present some tips on how to approach seniors in loneliness. Finally, useful local contacts and resources will be listed in each city in order to guide and support senior citizens in their everyday life.

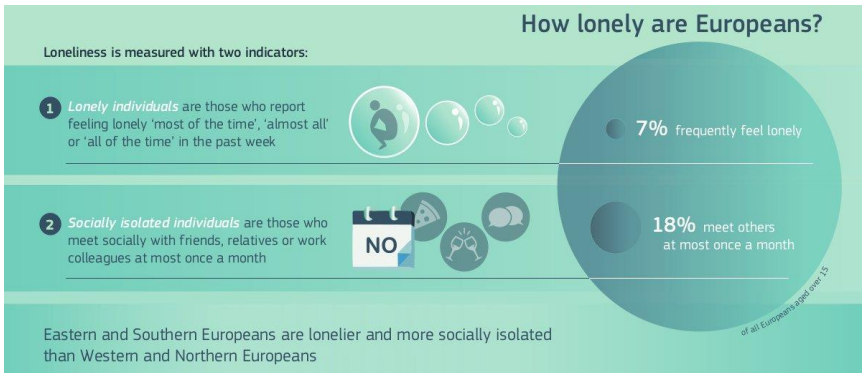
What is loneliness

Loneliness is a negative feeling and distressing emotional state that arises from a discrepancy between one's desired and achieved levels of social connectedness. Although loneliness is an emotion common to human beings, it is and remains a very complex and unique experience to each individual.

As a result, it is important to distinguish loneliness from being alone or in solitude, which is an objective state, and can be a free choice. Being alone or in solitude is not a prerequisite for experiencing loneliness because not everyone feels lonely when they are alone. Loneliness can also be experienced in the presence of other people. However, active participation in family and community activities is, indeed, a source of life satisfaction.

Loneliness is often associated with fear, frustration, disappointment, despair, shame, anxiety and yearning. Moreover, it increases mortality risk, CVD, neurodegenerative diseases, depression and increases the burden on health and care systems.

We can measure loneliness by directly asking people about their subjective feelings of loneliness. Indirect measures probe into specific determinants of loneliness such as the frequency of meetings with friends or having someone to talk to about intimate matters.



Source: https://ec.europa.eu/jrc/en/news/how-lonely-are-europeans

The effects of the spread of the recent pandemics COVID-19 and the lack of knowledge on how to manage the pandemic has forced governments to impose mobility restrictions to the general population, including strong lock-downs and confinements. These measures are generating a big international debate and each country is adopting them differently (conducting to different results and situations). Several studies based on surveys and demographic analysis conclude that there will be an increase in mental health problems as a repercussion of the current pandemic, which may be particularly important for older adults with multimorbidity.

Comprehensive care for aging people is one that globally meets the needs of people throughout their lives. And it refers to both physical and biological needs, as well as cognitive, emotional and social needs, as well as community needs.

Understanding the situation of loneliness among seniors

According to the World Health Organization, unwanted loneliness is one of the greatest risks for the deterioration of physical health and mental wellbeing, just as dangerous as smoking and twice as much as obesity. In Europe, as stated by the European Commission's science and knowledge service, around 30 million European adults feel frequently lonely and around 75 million are facing social isolation. Recent studies show that loneliness has a negative effect on physical and psychological health. Indeed, the risk of death by 26% and social isolation can increase the risk of cognitive decline and dementia by 50%. It can also cause sleep problems and insomnia.

For a variety of reasons, seniors often struggle with loneliness and social isolation. Loneliness is a personal and unique experience to each individual, multicausal because of the role of the social environment and can be triggered by the interaction among several variables or factors.

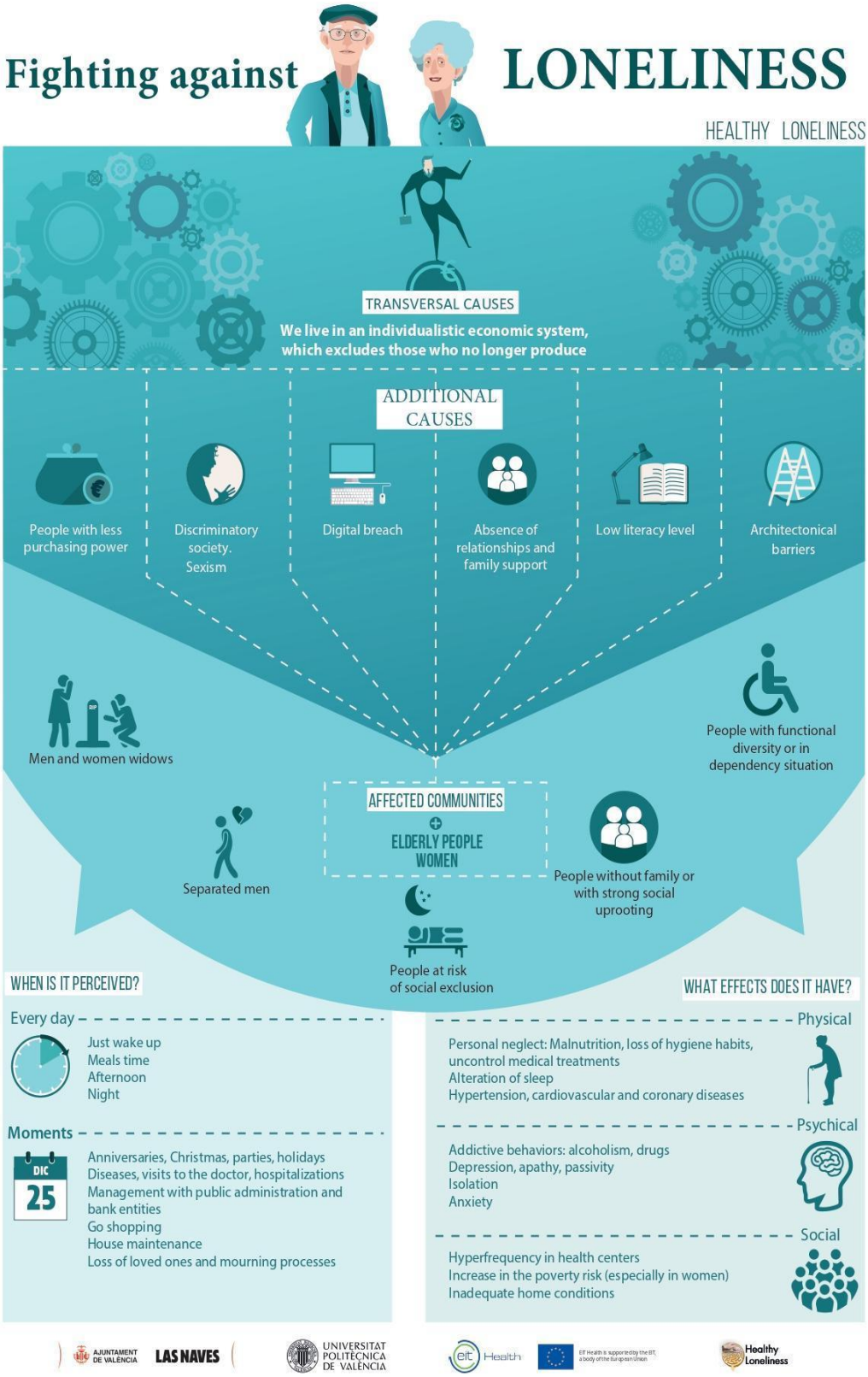
Causes that contribute to the appearance of the feeling of unwanted loneliness[1]:

- Loss of identity. In a society that places a high value on job position or economic status, retirement sometimes implies a loss of social value.
- Loss of autonomy. Loss of physical autonomy is often understood as loss of total autonomy and decision-making capacity over all other aspects of life, although this should not be the case.
- Loss of belonging. Related to the lack of spaces for older people to participate in society and to do so with equal opportunities.

[1] https://www.amigosdelosmayores.org/es/soledad-vejez

- Demographic factors. The increase in life expectancy and the lack of opportunities for intergenerational interaction beyond the family context.
- Cultural factors. These include ageism [negative stereotypes and prejudices about older people] and age discrimination.
- Economic factors. Chronic illness, mobility problems and other deteriorating health conditions can be exacerbated by limited social support.

Indeed, seniors often face external factors that can affect their physical skills such as health related problems (hearing problems, reduced mobility or handicaps) that could prevent seniors from meeting new people, going out or doing new activities. Studies show that seniors with poor health are 10% more likely to be lonely and socially isolated than their healthier counterparts. Likewise, seniors often face situations that can isolate them even more such as separation, divorce, death of spouses and friends, or even recent departure of children from the parental nest; therefore, affecting their psyche and leading to depression, loss of vitality and enthusiasm. Similarly, seniors with a lower socioeconomic and educational level often have more difficulties accessing cultural and social activities, care and support services, which aggravates their situation.



Source: Project Healthy Loneliness 2019 1

This past year, we have witnessed a considerable increase of seniors in loneliness and social isolation due to restrictions imposed by governments across the

world in order to control the spread of Covid-19. However, members of the community such as neighbours and family members can contribute to make seniors feel more integrated and appreciated in the society. In fact, during lockdown periods, community networks emerged at neighbourhoods in cities all around the world, providing support to older people buying food, medicines for them, for instance, as well as emotional support. This document aims to provide an overview on this issue as well as suggestions and contacts for the members of the community that would like to get involved and help seniors tackle loneliness.

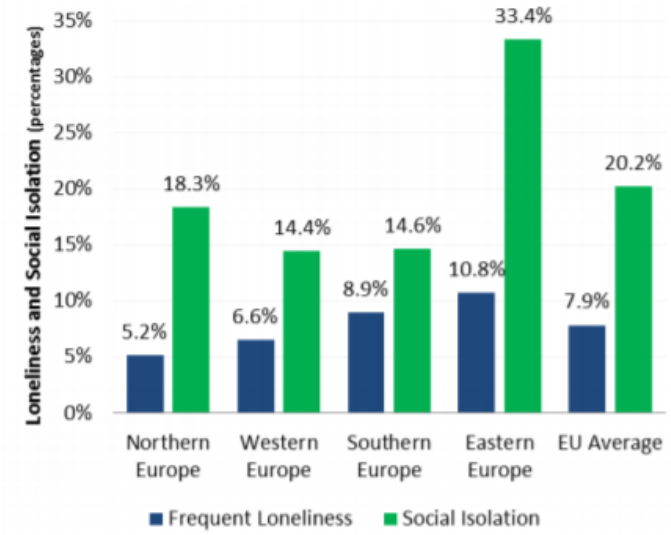
Regional patterns of frequent loneliness and social isolation

According to the JRC, around 7% of European adults frequently feel lonely. This number rises up to 10% in Eastern Europe. The lowest share of people who feel lonely is found in Northern Europe.

If only 7% of adults in Europe feel lonely, the analysis shows that many more adults in Europe (18% or around 75 million people) are in reality socially isolated.

Differences between countries are also much larger in this area than for subjective loneliness. Regional patterns may explain some of the differences in individual characteristics of populations in Europe, but they are also shaped by a broader socio-cultural context.

In Southern and Eastern Europe, family ties are strong. Cohabitation between older people and their adult children is more common than in Western or Northern Europe. Expectations for social ties could therefore be higher than elsewhere.



Source: https://ec.europa.eu/jrc/sites/default/files/fairness_pb2018_loneliness_jrc_i1.pdf

Tips and routine to address seniors in loneliness

There are several factors that can indicate that a senior is struggling with loneliness, like lack of appetite, increased amount of time spent at home, change in buying habits, decrease of social interactions and change of routines, restless sleep, deterioration of appearance and hygiene.

If you know someone that might be feeling lonely, you can help by:

- **Being there for them:** sometimes seniors and their caretakers can isolate themselves from society without realizing it. You can check on them by paying them a visit or calling them. Ask them how they are feeling or if there's anything you can do to help them. It is always comforting to have someone who is willing to listen.
- **Being patient:** being lonely often comes associated with poor physical or mental health, which means that they can also get irritable or feel misunderstood by others. By being patient with them, you can support them and help them to make new social connections that will allow them to tackle loneliness. Each person is a unique case and may need different kinds of support.
- **Teaching ICT tools:** You can also teach them how to use ICT tools like Whatsapp or Skype, so that they can reach you whenever they need to. ICT tools will also allow them to feel more independent. Videochat is also a good way of keeping in touch with seniors while you are far from them.
- **Adopting a pet:** the companionship and unconditional love pets offer helps seniors in loneliness. They also contribute to lowering your blood pressure and pulse rate while encouraging them to keep an active lifestyle!

Source photo: https://ec.europa.eu/jrc/en/news/how-lonely-are-europeans

- **Encouraging a hobby and physical activity, better if group activities, and with an objective of empowering them:** new activities can be beneficial for seniors since it stimulates them and contributes to their mental health and cognitive stimulation. It can also help them to create new connections. Joining a local association, a dancing group, a choir, a book club, a training activity or volunteering can be a good start. You can also advise them to join a local exercise group of seniors. Empowerment through having more information and knowledge is always motivating.
- **Help them to define and maintain daily routines**, that include times for personal hygiene, meals, hydration, physical activity, cognitive activities, telematic or face-to-face social interactions, for each day.
- **Re-connecting them with the community** to keep them informed of activities and to keep social interactions, it may be just a matter of meeting for a cup of coffee or tea once a week with other older adults. The objective has to be to generate new social interactions and connections so that they increase their social network.
- **Proposing them to get a roommate:** even though most people think that having roommates is something you only do before getting married

and having kinds. However, it can be a good way to make new connections for seniors, get some extra help with chores and maintenance and get a good friendship out of it!

- **Encouraging self-love:** some seniors might struggle with ageing or being overweight, which can make them feel self-conscious and affect their self-esteem. Do not hesitate to compliment them, give them positive comments and make them feel loved.

If you'd like to get more involved, you can contact local NGOs that work in the field to support them.

These are general recommendations that need to be adapted to each person and his or her personal situation, considering the level of autonomy and respecting their wishes, avoiding paternalism and ageism.

List of organisations or entities to help seniors

There are quite a lot of contacts, organizations and networks that have been created to tackle loneliness of older adults.

For instance, in France there is an on-line portal assembling all good practices tools and websites that are available for seniors in France called **Les Lutins bleus** (blue elfs). Thanks to Les Lutins Bleus, people can discover and compare all the senior offers on all possible themes: health, home help, housing, technology, mobility, clothing, food, media, leisure, travel, employment, meetings, etc.

The "Silver Economy" is full of offers for seniors and their careers. Finding your way around is sometimes difficult. Indeed, the major players in the market very often rise to the top of the search engine results. At the same time, the smaller players, who do not have the same resources, appear much further down the results. However, they often offer products of just as high quality, and therefore deserve to gain visibility.

Source: *https://www.leslutinsbleus.fr/*

The Lutins Bleus are therefore working to identify all the offers on the market and to present them objectively. It is then up to the senior or carer, to make the choice according to your own criteria.

Also, organizations like **La Croix Rouge** or **Les Petits Frères des Pauvres** in France are used to help people in loneliness and to guide them by proposing some tips to have an active and social life. They propose helplines and support lines free of charge for people suffering isolation and loneliness.

Les **Petits Frères des Pauvres** also proposes 5 ways to help seniors to preserve human interactions: call an elderly person, send them a postcard or a note, keep in touch with them via digital tools, provide service to seniors (like do shopping or take their medicines from the pharmacy) and **the "Solitud'écoute" helpline**.

If you'd like to take part of these actions, you can call these organizations to: 0800 47 47 88 (Les Petits Frères des Pauvres) and 0800 858 858 (La Croix Rouge).

Seniors can also address their local social centres, district's initiatives or town hall to receive support or news about new activities.

In Spain, in the city of Valencia, the main references to find resources for active and healthy ageing of older adults are:

- Primary Health Centers, where GPs do social prescription of physical activity and other community resources.

- City Council social services web, where the following information and resources can be found:
  - Summary of resources, equipment and social services available for older adults;
  - SAD, municipal Home Care Service;
  - TAD, municipal teleassistance service;
  - Menjar a casa, municipal food home delivery service;
  - 12 Municipal Social Services Centers.

- City Council Active Ageing Department web
  - Municipal services for older adults;

- OMAM, Oficina Municipal de Atención al Mayor: OMAM is the service that centralises the municipal attention of the City Council of Valencia to older adults; offering face-to-face, telephone and telematic attention to all citizens.
- Defensor/a de la Persona Mayor: The Ombudsman for the Older Adults has the mission to provide a service of advice, information, care and assistance to citizens over 60 years of age of the citizens over 60 years of age in the City of Valencia, in their relations with the Municipal Municipal Administration and the rest of the bodies and entities that depend on it, in the administrative actions.
- Network of Municipal Activity Centres for the Older Adults has launched a program whose aim is to identify older adults in risk of unwanted loneliness and to provide them with the municipal resources and services more suitable for each case. City Council will train older adults as volunteers at each Municipal Activity Centre (there are around 45 across the city, in all districts). These volunteers will be responsibles for identifying the cases and refer them to municipal social workers.
- Financial education programs for seniors at Municipal Activity Centres for the Older Adults.

- In some districts of the city, there are community networks that identify and provide support to people in risk of unwanted loneliness, such as Conectando San isidro, Benimaclet Vincles, Valencia Saludable, la Zona santiago, Consell de Salut República Argentina- SAlvador Pau y Chile.

In Poland there are a lot of governmental and non-governmental institutions, which are helping elderly people in various ways. The most significant are:

Regional governmental institutions called City Nursing Homes intended for people requiring round-the-clock care due to age, illness or disability, unable to function independently in everyday life, who cannot be provided with the necessary assistance in the form of caring services resulting from the individual needs of people staying in them.

Daily Residence Homes provide assistance to post-working age people who do not take up employment, unemployed retirees and disability pensioners and non-working disabled people in organizing free time and social activation by: enabling stay and rest in the House; meeting social and cultural needs; participation in activities

aimed at maintaining psychophysical fitness depending on the needs of participants and the capabilities of the House; provision of full board.

Non-governmental foundations, usually helping seniors through educational courses or providing psychological assistance: Foundation for the Promotion of Mental and Somatic Health Vis Salutis, Stowarzyszenie Hipokamp, or Caritas Lodz.

In Portugal, people suffering from loneliness can find support by telephone by contacting organizations like Fundação Bissaya Barreto “SOSSolidão” or SOS Voz Amiga.

A pilot project to tackle Loneliness in Lisbon has been launched by "La Caixa Foundation" (January 2022) and will be launched in the first semester in Porto. Social care providers will implement La Caixa Foundation toolkit on "Sempre Acompanhados" program to support elderly people suffering from loneliness.

Healthy Loneliness

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