

# All the lonely people

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UC Irvine psychologist Karen Rook can trace her interest in how loneliness affects the elderly to her childhood, when she saw a much-loved, once-robust grandmother decline markedly after losing her husband.

Unable to manage the family farm on her own, her [grandmother](#) moved into an apartment. After breaking her hip in a fall, she ended up frail and forlorn in a nursing home, away from the life and friends she had once known.

"The [sadness](#) and loneliness of many nursing [home residents](#) is simply heartbreaking," Rook says. "[Family members](#) can do only so much. We visited my grandmother every week, but at the end of each visit, she would become very quiet and struggle to fight back tears. It tore my father apart. Because of these experiences, my first life's goal was to build better nursing homes." But she chose a different path.

Through her research, Rook is working to draw attention to seniors' social needs and prevent them from spending their last days in painful [isolation](#). The UCI associate dean of research in social ecology and professor of [psychology](#) & social behavior has studied relationships and their effect on people's health and well-being for 30 years.

"My work — and that of many other researchers — shows there's something fundamentally important about having relationships," she says. "Without them, there's a risk to our mental health, our longevity and our quality of life."

Social connections are important to all age groups, but Rook focuses on older adults because they're frequently coping with the death of loved ones as well as increased physical limitations.

"I was drawn to this field because a great deal of change occurs in people's social networks when they reach their 70s and 80s. The loss of a spouse and the loss of close friends are common. Declining health and mobility also can make it more difficult to get together with others," Rook says. "It's important to question how seniors' social needs are met when such losses and declines occur."

She wondered, for instance, whether making new friends or reviving existing relationships improved the mental outlook of recently widowed older women. Findings from the 2004 study surprised her.

"We asked to what extent new or rekindled social ties helped alleviate loneliness," Rook says. "We found little evidence of benefits. It takes time for new relationships to gel, of course, but it also may be inherently difficult for them to offer psychological benefits comparable to those of a decades-long marital relationship."

Even when adult children provide a great deal of emotional and practical support, widowed [seniors](#) may still feel lonely. "They continue to miss the companionship and unique connection supplied by the spouse," she says.

"Companionship is important to our well-being. It's not just who you can count on for support in times of stress but who you spend time with on a day-to-day basis."

Friendship is a topic Rook has explored among all age groups. Whether you're 25 or 85, she notes, "getting together with good friends is restorative, because it provides a respite from daily stresses and worries.

It's also affirming. It signals, without needing to be spoken, that you're valued enough by others that they just want to spend time with you."

Still, being lonely isn't always enough to motivate people to try to meet others and risk rejection.

"Lonely people want companionship but sometimes fear that their overtures may not be reciprocated. Their hesitation can cause loneliness to persist," Rook says. "Making friends later in life isn't easy. When you're younger, you can meet people through school or work who have things in common with you. The elderly usually are retired from the workforce and don't have the ready access to peers with similar interests that schools provide."

In a current study of more than 900 older people, she's finding that the loneliest individuals are reluctant to forge relationships, but if they can overcome that initial resistance and make new friends, their happiness increases.

"We're fortunate to have Professor Rook shedding light on some of the mysteries of aging in a way that better prepares us to respond to some of its challenges," says Valerie Jenness, dean of social ecology.

"Understanding the nexus among aging, changing social relations and health is not only important to further our knowledge of developmental psychology, it's an imperative first step toward creating policies sensitive to the needs and desires of an aging population."

Rook is frequently moved by seniors' stories and struggles. "Later life is a time when there's not just vulnerability but also incredible fortitude," she says. "Older adults often exhibit truly impressive resilience."

She hopes her research will facilitate interventions to help alleviate

[loneliness](#) and enhance well-being in the elderly — which could lead to better [nursing homes](#) after all.

Provided by University of California, Irvine

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