

Loneliness is a major health risk for older adults

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University of Chicago psychologist John Cacioppo will speak at a seminar on "The Science of Resilient Aging" at the 2014 annual meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science. Credit: Robert Kozloff/University of Chicago

Feeling extreme loneliness can increase an older person's chances of premature death by 14 percent, according to research by John Cacioppo, professor of psychology at the University of Chicago.

Cacioppo and his [colleagues](#)' work shows that the impact of [loneliness](#) on [premature death](#) is nearly as strong as the impact of disadvantaged socioeconomic status, which they found increases the chances of dying early by 19 percent. A 2010 meta-analysis showed that loneliness has twice the [impact](#) on [early death](#) as does [obesity](#), he said.

Cacioppo, the Tiffany & Margaret Blake Distinguished Service Professor in Psychology at the University, joined other scholars at a seminar on "The Science of Resilient Aging" Feb. 16 at the American Association for the Advancement of Science Annual meeting in Chicago.

The researchers looked at dramatic differences in the rate of decline in physical and mental health as people age. Cacioppo and colleagues have examined the role of satisfying relationships on [older people](#) to develop their resilience, the ability to bounce back after adversity and grow from stresses in life.

The consequences to health are dramatic, as feeling isolated from others can disrupt sleep, elevate blood pressure, increase morning rises in the stress hormone cortisol, alter gene expression in immune cells, and increase depression and lower overall subjective well-being, Cacioppo pointed out in a talk, "Rewarding Social Connections Promote Successful Aging."

Cacioppo, one of the nation's leading experts on loneliness, said older people can avoid the consequences of loneliness by staying in touch with former co-workers, taking part in family traditions, and sharing good times with family and friends – all of which gives older adults a chance

to connect others about whom they care and who care about them.

"Retiring to Florida to live in a warmer climate among strangers isn't necessarily a good idea if it means you are disconnected from the people who mean the most to you," said Cacioppo. Population changes make understanding the role of loneliness and health all the more important, he explained.

"We are experiencing a silver tsunami demographically. The baby boomers are reaching retirement age. Each day between 2011 and 2030, an average of 10,000 people will turn 65," he said. "People have to think about how to protect themselves from depression, low subjective well-being and early mortality."

Although some people are happy to be alone, most people thrive from social situations in which they provide mutual support and develop strong rapport. Evolution encouraged people to work together to survive and accordingly most people enjoy companionship over being alone.

Research by Cacioppo and his colleagues has identified three core dimensions to healthy relationships —intimate connectedness, which comes from having someone in your life you feel affirms who you are; relational connectedness, which comes from having face-to-face contacts that are mutually rewarding; and collective connectedness, which comes from feeling that you're part of a group or collective beyond individual existence.

It is not solitude or physical isolation itself, but rather the subjective sense of isolation that Cacioppo's work shows to be so profoundly disruptive. Older people living alone are not necessarily lonely if they remain socially engaged and enjoy the company of those around them. Some aspects of aging, such as blindness and loss of hearing, however, place people at a special risk for becoming isolated and lonely, he said.

—William Harms

Provided by University of Chicago

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