

New study highlights health benefits of social engagement among older people

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A study investigating the impacts of loneliness on older people in Ireland conducted by Professor Brian Lawlor, Connolly Norman Professor of Old Age Psychiatry and Clinical Director, NEIL Programme at Trinity College Institute of Neuroscience, has demonstrated a decrease in loneliness among those who received a volunteer visit to promote social connection for 10 weeks compared to usual treatment.

With loneliness now recognised as an important public health challenge in Ireland the study findings provide compelling empirical evidence for future public policy, according to Professor Lawlor. The study also showed that both volunteers and participants benefitted from the experience.

Entitled 'Only the lonely: a randomised controlled trial of a volunteer visiting programme for [older people](#) experiencing loneliness' the study findings, which were presented at a recent conference in Dublin, investigated how befriending interventions can be used to support [older adults](#) who may experience loneliness. The project consisted of 10 home visits to the participants from a volunteer, themselves an older person and was carried out in conjunction with the Mercer's Institute for Research on Ageing in St James's Hospital, funded by Atlantic Philanthropies and supported by Age Friendly Ireland.

The research adds Irish data to our understanding of the physical and emotional impacts of loneliness among older people. International evidence has shown that loneliness is linked to a range of conditions

from depression to an increased risk of clinical dementia in later life and that it also increases the risk of heart disease, accelerates the process of ageing and is associated with increased mortality. However, while there are a wide variety of interventions aimed at reducing social isolation and loneliness to overcome these challenges, few studies have provided clear evidence of what works, particularly in an Irish context, in reducing loneliness.

According to Professor Lawlor: "The main study finding was very positive. The primary outcome, loneliness, decreased in the intervention group at one month and three month follow-up. Potential benefits for the volunteers were also identified, in particular a decrease in loneliness. Both participants and volunteers reported that they enjoyed the intervention."

"The intervention is low cost and could be incorporated into existing support services or non-government organizations caring for community dwelling older adults. It is a potentially scalable model to deal with the major societal challenge of loneliness," added Professor Lawlor.

As part of the study, community-dwelling older adults who might be experiencing loneliness were identified through GPs, public health nurses, parish staff and other working with older people in the community. A group of local volunteers, also aged over 55, were then recruited. Volunteers visited the participants for an hour once a week for 10 weeks over a three-month period. Initially the aim was to develop a rapport with the participant, but also to encourage the participant to identify a social connection they would like to make and that would be sustainable beyond the timeframe of the study. The impact on [loneliness](#) was then compared to a similar control group of older people receiving only their usual individualised care from community services.

Hugh O'Connor, CEO of Age Friendly Ireland, said: "Loneliness is a far

too common aspect of life for older people in Ireland. More than one in three community-dwelling people over 65 report being lonely. And this is not just about emotional wellbeing. Loneliness has very real impacts on physical wellbeing and has been shown to increase rates of depression, hypertension and even death."

More information: The study is available online:
[agefriendlyireland.ie/wp-content ... FN Loneliness B5.pdf](https://agefriendlyireland.ie/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/FN_Loneliness_B5.pdf)

Provided by Trinity College Dublin

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