

Loneliness in midlife—the risk of becoming lonely is not limited to old age

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Maike Luhmann from the University of Cologne and Louise C. Hawkley from the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago were able to find out in which phases of their lives people are most at risk of becoming lonely. Their findings show that loneliness most often affects people in old age, beginning at approximately eighty. But there are also phases in midlife at which the risk is high.

Loneliness is a widespread condition. It can make people depressed and even physically ill. The psychologists Maike Luhmann and Louise C. Hawkley conducted a representative survey among 16,132 participants of the Socio-economic Panel (SOEP) in 2013. They published their findings under the title "Age Differences in Loneliness From Late Adolescence to Oldest Old Age" in the journal *Developmental Psychology*.

Their research shows that the loneliness elderly people experience is often due to their decreasing social interactions and oftentimes low income. But there are also phases in early and mid adulthood in which people tend to be lonely, for example in their early thirties and in their fifties. These high values cannot be explained by the usual factors that cause loneliness; their causes are yet to be explored. Approximately at the age of sixty, the loneliness people often experience in their fifties decreases again, reaching a low point at approximately seventy.

In which [age groups](#) does loneliness in midlife tend to be at its highest and at its lowest? Why are there age differences in the level of

loneliness? Are certain [risk factors](#) for loneliness more prevalent in certain age groups than in others? These are the sorts of questions Luhmann and Hawkey pursued in their study. They controlled for a number of well-known risk factors such as income, gender, health and social contacts. "If we eliminate these factors from the overall result, the drastic increase of loneliness on old age disappears and a complex nonlinear trajectory is discernible," says Maike Luhmann, junior professor at the Department of Psychology. "This means that we can explain fairly accurately why old people tend to get lonely, but we do not yet know why there are phases in young and mid adulthood in which loneliness is more pronounced." The rise in loneliness in old age is mainly attributed to the loss of one's spouse or to health problems. Both risk factors are widespread in this age group.

High income seems to be a protective factor: the higher a person's income is, the less likely it is that he or she will become lonely. However, this correlation is particularly strong in mid adulthood – money is more important in this phase than in early or late adulthood. Professional status is also especially important in mid adulthood. Having a good job safeguards against loneliness in this life phase. Other factors influencing loneliness are distributed to different degrees across age groups, but always have an impact on loneliness, regardless of [age](#). Amongst others, they include health restrictions and the frequency of social interaction.

The psychologists now want to explore why the risk of [loneliness](#) is particularly high in certain phases in early and mid adulthood.

More information: Maike Luhmann et al. Age Differences in Loneliness From Late Adolescence to Oldest Old Age., *Developmental Psychology* (2016). [DOI: 10.1037/dev0000117](https://doi.org/10.1037/dev0000117)

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