

## Study shows older men feel 'excluded, overlooked and cut-off'

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With increasing numbers of older men experiencing loneliness, a new report published April 29 calls for a better understanding of how to tackle the growing public health challenge.

A two-year study, led by the University of Bristol in collaboration with Age UK, highlights the issues faced by older men, many of whom

describe feeling socially excluded, overlooked, cut-off and feeling 'left out of things'—all of which have a range of negative impacts on day-to-day life.

These feelings were triggered by a variety of life events, including loss of a partner, retirement or relocation.

To combat the problem, researchers at the University are calling for changes to the focus of adult social care services – urging for greater priority to be given to the running of groups rather than focusing primarily on care and support for individuals. There should also be more inclusive, tailored groups for older men in marginalised groups.

It follows [a report from Age UK](#) which shows the number of over 50s suffering from [loneliness](#) is set to reach two million by 2025/6 due to a rising number of older people. This compares to around 1.4 million in 2016/7 – a 49 per cent increase in 10 years.

Unfortunately, older men who live alone are more likely to be socially isolated than their female counterparts, having less regular contact with family and friends, and this can exacerbate feelings of loneliness.

The circumstances and experiences that increase the risk of loneliness and isolation appears to rise with age, and among those with long-term health problems and/or disability.

To date, little research has been undertaken into older men's experiences of loneliness and isolation. Researchers at the University of Bristol interviewed 111 men, aged between 65 and 95 and living in the West and South West of England, to identify new ways in which social care and voluntary services could help alleviate the problem.

There was generally a reluctance to speak to others and seek help, often

due to a perception that people wouldn't be interested, or the potential stigma attached to loneliness. Men with adult children avoided speaking to their children as they didn't want to worry them, or it was not in keeping with their role as the father-type figurehead.

The [report](#) highlights the 'critical role' voluntary and independent services play in promoting social wellbeing and loneliness. However, those involved in leading and running these groups say funding cuts are placing a strain on resources and insufficient staff numbers.

A key finding, which researchers hope will influence [policy makers](#), was that men valued mixed-age groups which mirror social interactions in everyday life, as opposed to groups specifically targeting older people. Equally, men valued groups that facilitated emotional and social ties with other men.

Dr. Paul Willis, from the University of Bristol's School for Policy Studies, led the research. He said: "For a growing number of people, particularly those in later life, loneliness can define their lives and have a significant impact on their wellbeing.

"Because loneliness occurs when people's ability to engage with others is inhibited, helping people cope with and overcome these feelings is vital.

"Our research has shown the importance of groups and networks in older men's lives, especially those run by voluntary and third sector organisations. Support for such groups needs to be given greater priority by local authorities, both in terms of support from social workers and long-term funding."

The project focused on older men from seldom-heard groups, including men who were single or living alone in rural and urban areas, men who were carers for loved ones, men living with hearing loss, and gay men

who were single or living alone.

While loneliness and isolation impacted negatively on men's lives across the groups, there were important differences identified. For example, men with hearing loss were often isolated from family and friends in social gatherings and events because of their hearing loss and challenges in keeping up with conversations around them in noisy environments, such as pubs.

For older gay men, experiences of loneliness and isolation were entangled with earlier life-experiences of being reluctant to come out to others in fear of social censure or hostility from family or work colleagues.

For male carers, the companionship of the person they cared for routinely inhibited feelings of loneliness however the caring experience isolated them from others, such as diminished time spent with friends.

There are clear reasons behind the high numbers of lonely older people, according to Age UK. The risk of being lonely is dramatically higher among older people who have financial difficulties, are in poor health or have a disability, are carers or have recently been bereaved.

Loneliness occurs when people do not have someone to open up to and their ability to have meaningful conversations and interactions is inhibited.

Caroline Abrahams, Charity Director at Age UK, said: "This study helps further our understanding about how older men experience loneliness and how best to help.

"Loneliness is a problem among many older people, especially for those who are in poor health or have a disability, who are carers for loved

ones, who have been bereaved, have financial difficulties or who don't have family and friends nearby.

"This study highlights specific issues and challenges for men, who can find it difficult to talk about feeling lonely.

"As more older men live longer we need to appreciate that the numbers who are chronically lonely are likely to increase too—unless we act which we can and we must do. The study also gives service providers, like Age UK, useful tips on how to help older men overcome loneliness, and things to consider when engaging with those from seldom-heard groups."

Based on this new research, Age UK has produced good practice guidance for service providers, tips for [older men](#) themselves and information for families or friends who are worried that an older man close to them might be lonely.

**More information:** Addressing older men's experiences of loneliness and social isolation in later life. [www.bristol.ac.uk/policybristol.../policy-briefings/omam/](http://www.bristol.ac.uk/policybristol.../policy-briefings/omam/)

Provided by University of Bristol

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