

Having a partner more important than children to staving off loneliness during pandemic, new study finds

August 3 2022



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A new study released in the *European Journal of Ageing* found that having a partner had a greater impact than having children in helping to

stave off loneliness among older adults during the pandemic's first wave. Researchers at the University of Rhode Island, University of Florence, University of Maryland Baltimore County and the SGH Warsaw School of Economics analyzed data on more than 35,000 adults aged 50 and older from the Survey of Health, Ageing and Retirement in Europe to examine if unpartnered and childless older adults reported more loneliness and how that changed over the course of the pandemic.

Prior to the [pandemic](#) when asked "have you felt lonely recently?" those [older adults](#) who lacked one tie but had the other (unpartnered parents or partnered childless) were at greater risk for loneliness. However, during the pandemic, this combined status mattered less. More significant was the independent status of being either without a partner or childless. And specifically, not having a partner had the greatest bearing on loneliness.

During the pandemic's first wave respondents were asked "have you felt lonely recently?" and "have you felt lonelier than before the pandemic?" While those without a partner and those without children were both more likely to experience loneliness, the unpartnered were more likely to undergo a more significant shift in their loneliness.

According to URI Assistant Professor of Health Studies Nekehia Quashie, one of the authors of the study, "what we found is that those without a [partner](#) had a higher risk of being lonely—even if they were not lonely prior to the pandemic. They had a higher risk of moving into loneliness—more so than those who had no children."

Those who were lonely prior to the pandemic were less likely to exit loneliness, regardless of their status, said Quashie.

In the decade preceding the pandemic academics and public health officials have been increasingly concerned about loneliness, particularly among older adults, for a variety of reasons. With the advent of the

COVID-19 pandemic and mitigation efforts centered squarely on measures like "physical distancing" and minimizing social interactions outside one's immediate household, this heightened concern—especially for groups that were already at a greater risk for loneliness, said Quashie on the reason for the study.

Interestingly, "kinless" older adults (unpartnered and childless), while still at risk for loneliness, were not lonelier than the other two groups (unpartnered parents, partnered childless) prior to the pandemic. To researchers' surprise, this held true over the course of the pandemic.

"With those who are 'kinless,' it's possible they have developed a range of resources and different coping strategies to manage a situation where they don't have [large networks](#) to rely on—whether that is an immediate personal crisis or, as we saw in the pandemic, a major public [health crisis](#)," said Quashie.

She added, "remember that the concept of loneliness is very subjective—essentially we see loneliness arise when one's desired or expected social interactions don't match with their reality. So people have different thresholds for loneliness."

While the study did not examine well-being outcomes such as anxiety and depression, the results highlight the increased risk for loneliness among certain groups—both prior to and during the pandemic. As the population of unpartnered and childless older adults grows globally it will be important for [public health officials](#) to take into account how measures intended to mitigate the spread of COVID-19, which limited [social interaction](#), affected those groups already at higher risk for [loneliness](#) and consider approaches which limit social isolation.

More information: Bruno Arpino et al, Loneliness before and during the COVID-19 pandemic—are unpartnered and childless older adults at

higher risk?, *European Journal of Ageing* (2022). [DOI: 10.1007/s10433-022-00718-x](https://doi.org/10.1007/s10433-022-00718-x)

Provided by University of Rhode Island

Citation: Having a partner more important than children to staving off loneliness during pandemic, new study finds (2022, August 3) retrieved 25 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2022-08-partner-important-children-staving-loneliness.html>

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