

New framework for understanding older adults' loneliness

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Researchers from the Institute of Psychiatry, Psychology & Neuroscience (IoPPN) at King's College London have created an

innovative framework, titled the Social Relationship Expectations (SRE) Framework, to explain the mechanisms behind loneliness in older adults and inform future research on interventions.

The research, published in *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, identifies what [older adults](#) expect from their [social relationships](#). These expectations get at the core of how loneliness is commonly defined: as the gap between expected and actual social relationships.

To create the framework, the authors drew upon a large body of previous research, including qualitative research from lower- and [middle-income countries](#) and prominent psychological theories of lifespan development. The framework pinpointed four universal and two age-specific expectations that could help to inform future loneliness interventions:

- Proximity: the availability of social contacts
- Support: feeling cared for and relying on others
- Intimacy: feeling close, understood, and listened to
- Fun: sharing interests and enjoyable experiences
- Generativity: having opportunities to contribute meaningfully
- Respect: feeling valued and actively included

"Successful interventions for loneliness will need to address older adults' expectations for generativity and respect. That is, older people may feel less lonely if they are given opportunities to contribute meaningfully, for example, by caregiving or volunteering, and if they feel valued and respected by society," says Samia Akhter-Khan, King's IoPPN.

A common misconception is that loneliness is the same as [social isolation](#). Yet, social isolation refers to an external situation in which a person experiences a lack of nearby social contacts. The researchers clarify loneliness as a subjective experience that results from a person's

unfulfilled expectations regarding the quantity and quality of their relationships. Thus, a person can feel lonely even when they have many social contacts around them.

Most people experience loneliness from time to time, and loneliness is not necessarily harmful when it occurs occasionally. But persistent and chronic loneliness can be a risk factor for developing depression, cognitive impairment, and Alzheimer's disease.

Looking ahead, the SRE framework can help clarify the mechanisms behind older people's loneliness and help clinicians create tailored interventions to help people meet their expectations and feel less lonely.

"When we want to create successful interventions for loneliness," said Samia Akhter-Khan, the study's first author from King's IoPPN "we need to get down to the core mechanism of what [loneliness](#) actually is, which refers to the expectations that people have for their relationships. The SRE framework can help us think about how people's expectations may differ across cultures, contexts, and the lifespan."

A main point of the SRE framework is the need for older people to have opportunities to contribute meaningfully and fulfill their expectations for social relationships. The researchers of this framework suggest that future research should be based in participatory approaches that draw on the wisdom of [older people](#) themselves.

"Understanding and Addressing Older Adults' Loneliness: The Social Relationship Expectations Framework" was published in *Perspectives on Psychological Science*.

More information: Samia C. Akhter-Khan et al, Understanding and Addressing Older Adults' Loneliness: The Social Relationship Expectations Framework, *Perspectives on Psychological Science* (2022).

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