

Volunteering and caring for grandchildren protects from loneliness for over 50s, study shows

November 23 2022



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Caregiving for a spouse or partner is seemingly associated with higher loneliness for those over 50 years of age, a new systemic review of published research on the issue shows.

Taking in data from 28 studies, comprising 191,652 participants from 21 countries, the findings, however, also show that volunteering or looking after grandchildren may help reduce [loneliness](#).

Publishing their findings in *Aging and Mental Health*, a team of international experts led by scientists at King's College London, state the results highlight a need to develop targeted interventions to combat loneliness for [older adults](#) who are caring for their partner or spouse.

"Loneliness can leave people feeling isolated and disconnected from others—and can have a wide range of negative effects on their physical and [mental health](#)," says lead author, Samia Akhter-Khan, who is a Ph.D. candidate at the Institute of Psychiatry, Psychology & Neuroscience within King's College London.

"There is a pressing need to identify people who may be more vulnerable to feeling lonely—and to develop targeted solutions to prevent and reduce loneliness in these population groups."

"Our findings suggest that providing care to a partner with complex health conditions, particularly dementia or Alzheimer's disease, is related to higher levels of loneliness—whereas caring for children or volunteering can help reduce loneliness in older adults."

Loneliness has many different causes, which will vary from person to person. Knowing which people are most at risk will lead to targeted approaches toward helping people who are feeling lonely.

Older adults contribute vast amounts of care and other unpaid activities, yet it remains unclear how these meaningful contributions to society relate to loneliness. Caregiving and volunteering may also fulfill a key expectation in older age, the expectation to contribute meaningfully, that has yet not been fully considered in loneliness research and interventions, according to the author's Social Relationship Expectations Framework recently published in *Perspectives on Psychological Science*.

This new systematic review, out today, included 28 studies from countries including the United States, Germany, the United Kingdom, New Zealand, China and many others. The authors examined the relationship between specific types of unpaid activities—including caring for a spouse, looking after grandchildren or volunteering—and loneliness in people over 50 years of age. They found that:

- Caring for grandchildren (or other unrelated children) was linked with lower loneliness in six out of seven studies.
- Providing care to a partner or spouse was consistently associated with higher loneliness.
- Five out of six studies reported a relationship between volunteering and lower levels of loneliness.

"This is the first review of its kind to investigate systematically the relationship between older people's caregiving and volunteering activities and loneliness," adds co-author Dr. Matthew Prina, Head of the Social Epidemiology Research Group at King's College London.

"Further research will now be necessary to investigate the needs of older caregivers—as well as to examine the barriers, opportunities, and

fulfillment of engaging in meaningful activities. This could help shed light on the optimal 'dose' of volunteering and caring for grandchildren and identify ways to maximize their potential beneficial effects on combating loneliness in the over 50s. Respecting older adults for their contributions and valuing their unpaid activities will likely play an important role in mitigating loneliness."

The paper highlights that all of the studies included in this review were conducted in higher income countries and before the COVID-19 pandemic, which led to an increase in the number of people experiencing loneliness.

Future research should take steps to promote evidence from lower- and [middle-income countries](#), such as the authors' recent *Archives of Gerontology and Geriatrics* study on Indonesia, and account for specific external factors—such as global pandemics, lockdowns, conflict settings and [climate change](#)—when investigating the association between people's unpaid activities and loneliness.

More information: Samia C. Akhter-Khan et al, Caregiving, volunteering, and loneliness in middle-aged and older adults: A systematic review, *Aging and Mental Health* (2022). [DOI: 10.1080/13607863.2022.2144130](https://doi.org/10.1080/13607863.2022.2144130)

Samia C. Akhter-Khan et al, Understanding and Addressing Older Adults' Loneliness: The Social Relationship Expectations Framework, *Perspectives on Psychological Science* (2022). [DOI: 10.1177/17456916221127218](https://doi.org/10.1177/17456916221127218)

Samia C. Akhter-Khan et al, Unpaid productive activities and loneliness in later life: Results from the Indonesian Family Life Survey (2000–2014), *Archives of Gerontology and Geriatrics* (2022). [DOI: 10.1016/j.archger.2022.104851](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.archger.2022.104851)

Provided by Taylor & Francis

Citation: Volunteering and caring for grandchildren protects from loneliness for over 50s, study shows (2022, November 23) retrieved 19 January 2023 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2022-11-volunteering-grandchildren-loneliness-50s.html>

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