Positive Ageing Together: A group-based approach to understanding and fostering resilience in older adults during and after COVID-19.

Policy implications

- Positive ageing identity promotion and community interventions need to be a key focus of post-pandemic loneliness reduction efforts
- Opportunities should maximize on contributions older adults make to supporting their communities
- Messages about older adults should not use negative age-based stereotypes
- Digital inclusivity for older adults needs to address feelings of dependency and disconnection

Background

Surveys of population health demonstrate that loneliness poses a threat to health equivalent to that of smoking and obesity[1,2]. Loneliness disproportionately affects older adults[3] and reflects the range of social and psychological challenges encountered at this stage of life[4]. The loneliness epidemic among older adults has prompted public health initiatives worldwide to understand and tackle loneliness within the context of local communities. In the UK, the 2016 Jo Cox Commission brought about changes made by the government in 2018, including appointing a Minister for Loneliness, working groups and cross-government strategies[5]. Outreach, community mobilisation, personalised support, activities and infrastructure, measurement and evaluation, have all been prioritised[6].

The COVID-19 pandemic has considerably exacerbated this challenge. The need to reduce the spread of the virus has led to government restrictions (e.g., quarantines, 'lockdowns', and social distancing) which disrupted daily community life and activities leading to social isolation and loneliness among vulnerable groups and reducing the reach and efficacy of supports and interventions[7,8]. Our research addresses the urgent need to understand the pandemic's impacts on older adults, and to identify strategies to support their resilience and autonomy within community settings.

Our Research

Study 1: Family Focus Groups	Study 2: Loneliness Over Time
8 men 25 women Focus groups with: • Older people who lived alone • Older people who lived with one other person • Multigenerational households	2 older men 7 older women Repeat interviews at three times to explore changing experiences of loneliness: Pre-pandemic: November 2019 During UK national lockdown: May 2020 During UK national lockdown: January 2021

Study 1 findings: A story of loss & resilience

The household focus groups described lockdown measures as facilitating loss in their social and emotional lives:

- Loss of opportunity to live their previous social lives (such as grandparent or member of a local group)
- Loss of control over their own lives
- Loss of usefulness in society

The participants discussed their responses and strategies for resilience:

- They created support from feeling connected to community (feeling like we are all in It together)
- They emphasised positive ideas around older adults, such as being resilient war babies
- They became more useful by emphasising the support they could give to others, including friends and neighbours

Study 2 findings: Lowered wellbeing due to increasing fears

Participants explained to us how age and health had reduced their social contacts, and the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated losses, over five stages:

- Social contact was threatened by pandemic shielding measures;
- Due to these threats, participants were restricted from gaining any new contacts, or maintaining existing connections;
- Shielding measures made participants keenly aware of being both older and vulnerable;
- Participants felt less able to reciprocate or return support leading to feeling dissatisfied with their connections;
- Finally, participants' wellbeing was impacted by fears for their safety and fears of being forgotten. This reflected loneliness related worries and thoughts.

Conclusions

- An under-recognised factor in loneliness is the breakdown in social support given by older people to others in need, affecting their life satisfaction, self-worth, and feelings of vulnerability
- Loneliness during COVID-19 should be addressed in context of older adults' relations with their families, community, and society
- Many older adults displayed resilience nonetheless and had meaningful contact with people and their community, and found ways to maintain a positive identity

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