

Volunteering combating loneliness

The burden of loneliness

In recent years, the topic of loneliness has attracted more attention in the public sphere. The fact that loneliness has more or less entered the political and social debate in Europe only recently, does not mean that it is a new social phenomenon. On the contrary, the modern age brought a culture of social distancing long before Covid-19 did. And while it is not yet entirely clear to scientists how the coronavirus works, they have known for some time that social isolation and loneliness can seriously affect our health. Individualism, longer life expectancy, the race for existence, demographic change, rural depopulation and digitalization have created a space for isolation that can be a heavy burden of loneliness for some people. Evidence suggests that, even if it affects people on an individual level, it has effects on society as a whole.

Social isolation is defined as a lack of meaning and belonging, social engagement and quality of relationships with other people, while loneliness or emotional isolation is defined as a subjective and feeling of lack of social belonging. It varies from person to person and can have different meanings for each individual.

The results based on the European Social Survey 2019¹ suggest that society is changing rapidly towards more people experiencing loneliness and isolation. According to findings, 30 million adult Europeans often feel lonely; Loneliness is more prevalent in Eastern and Southern Europe than in Western and Northern Europe; Poor health, unfavourable economic circumstances and life itself are associated with higher rates of loneliness; Loneliness affects all age groups. The importance of loneliness for the well-being of the individual and social cohesion should not be underestimated. The study further highlights that in an increasingly connected world, lonely and socially isolated people face the potential double punishment of suffering from poorer health conditions and are stigmatized as socially incompetent.

A survey in Denmark² shows that the largest proportion of lonely people is between the ages of 16-24. Every tenth young person (16-24 years old) feels lonely. Several studies show that high demands on work performance, and especially the feeling that it is difficult to meet

¹ EU Science Hub, The European Commission's science and knowledge service: How lonely are Europeans?: <https://ec.europa.eu/jrc/en/news/how-lonely-are-europeans>

² <http://www.danskernessundhed.dk/>

them, are one of the reasons why an increasing number of young people feel lonely. Adults aged 65 to 74 are the group with the least lonely population, after 75 years - and especially after 85 years - the proportion of older people who often feel lonely is growing rapidly.

SHARE Slovenia (Health, Aging and Retirement Survey in Europe³) identifies how one in three people over the age of 50 describe themselves as »sometimes lonely«, while below 5% admits that he is »very lonely«. Not surprisingly, loneliness is often accompanied by depression - 70% of »very lonely« are depressed.

Based on the findings of an Irish study on »Loneliness, Social Isolation and Disagreement among Older Adults«⁴ almost a third of adults over the age of 50 in Ireland experienced emotion loneliness at least for a while and 7.0% often felt lonely. Lower levels of education and living alone were associated with higher levels of loneliness. Poor self-esteem, functional limitations, and chronic conditions were associated with higher levels of loneliness as well as significantly poorer quality of life.

Evidence suggests that this is not just an individual problem and does not affect just one age or one social group, nor that the causes of loneliness can be found in the same place. In fact, these findings raise a number of questions about various social aspects that may be relevant. The prevailing culture and mechanisms in education and the definition of success are areas where we need to set new indicators of well-being. The fight against loneliness begins with tackling poverty and inequality and continues to attach greater importance to education for life, strengthening the emotional abilities and social competencies of children and young people, instead of fostering competitiveness and the education imperative for the labour market alone.

Lack of a welfare state, growing social inequality, pressures for subsistence survival, exclusivity and discrimination, domestic violence, neglect of mental health, poor public services and community programmes for vulnerable groups can lead more people to isolation and a sense of collective abandonment and loneliness. To solve the complex problems of exclusion, isolation and loneliness, comprehensive solutions must take into account all of the above.

The role of civil society

Special attention should be paid to the positive potential of the civil sector that comes from active participation, focusing on social change and networking. Due to the specific »invisible« nature of isolation and loneliness, as well as the fact that civil society organisations are closest to the perspective of people and communities who bear the burden of this problem, the civil sector is a key partner in preventing and reducing negative consequences. Address-

³SHARE - Raziskava o zdravju, procesu staranja in upokojevanju v Evropi: http://www.share-slovenija.si/strani/raziskava_share

⁴ Loneliness, social isolation, and their discordance among older adults Findings from The Irish Longitudinal Study on Ageing (TILDA): https://tilda.tcd.ie/publications/reports/pdf/Report_Loneliness.pdf

ing a specific type of problem, there are significant benefits of community-based programmes, ranging from local populations recognizing the need to a well-organized community network that can facilitate tailored support by building trust and inclusion in a spirit of equal dignity.

Many of the existing initiatives dealing today with loneliness and isolation under the pressure of the COVID-19 crisis are gaining in importance as the effects of social distancing can become more serious and complex.

Volunteering as a powerful force

There is significant evidence that volunteering can be helpful in supporting better mental health and well-being in the community. Social isolation and weak social integration are growing challenges in which volunteering can play a key role in providing support to people facing loneliness and isolation. The ecosystem for volunteering is wide and that is an advantage. Among its many forms and sizes, it focuses on community building, allowing people to own what they care about and practice methods that build bridges and thus create the potential to unite people and rebuild social fabric. Volunteering, which is characterized by proactivity in reaching people at risk of isolation, is one way of fostering a diverse and inclusive community in which people can freely and actively engage, regardless of background or ability, and achieve full participation and integration.

Based on the findings from the »Impact of Volunteering on the Health and Welfare of Volunteers«⁵ there is a strong link between volunteering and benefits. The analysis shows that volunteering can have a significant positive impact on a person's health and well-being.

A study conducted by ABC for mental health at the National Institute of Public Health⁶ among more than 14,000 people in Denmark, Sweden, Norway and Finland show that those who volunteer at least once a week are twice as likely to do what scientists call successful mental health compared to those who do not volunteer. The results of the study apply to everyone, regardless of age, social and economic background, health and any disability of the volunteers. And this suggests that there is a link between volunteer engagement and successful mental health regardless of your background and economic status.

One of the most important link between volunteering and wellbeing is the opportunity to build new social relationships. And we know that the quality of our social networks are key to a meaningful life and personal development.

⁵ Volunteer Ireland: The impact of volunteering on the health and well-being of the volunteer: https://www.volunteer.ie/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/Volunteer_Ireland-Report_FINAL.pdf

⁶ Formal Volunteer Activity and Psychological Flourishing in Scandinavia: Findings from Two Cross-sectional Rounds of the European Social Survey: <http://abcmentalsundhed.dk/media/1501/frivilligt-arbejde-fordobler-ens-chancer-for-at-blomstre-mentalt.pdf>

Transnational cooperation

The COVID-19 pandemic crisis has drawn even more attention to isolation and loneliness as important components of an individual's well-being, as well as to the role of civil society in combating it. The same way we need stronger community networks we need transnational cooperation creating a wider space to find better ways to specifically build civil society capacity. We also need much broader approach to preventing loneliness, isolation and social exclusion while recognizing that this is one of the many benefits that can come from investing in our social infrastructure and strengthening the fabric of our society. Civil society organisations have similar challenges and opportunities across EU and can benefit from transnational exchange and joined development. There is asymmetry in levels of development of awareness and activities of tackling loneliness and isolation and different or no strategies in different parts of EU, so mutual exchange will allow the compensation of knowledge and practice.

To fully realize the potential that civil society can offer, we must build a strong and humanistic public service in partnership with civil society and be even more determined to advocate for just, equal and inclusive societies.⁷

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⁷This article draws on the insights from the process of creating the transnational project CLOSE - Combating Loneliness, Isolation and Social Exclusion through Volunteering aiming to stimulate and support civil society organisations by opening a wider dialogue space, bringing more data and knowledge, sharing best practices, new skills and recommendations that will make us abler to meet the challenges of the 21st century. Project was created by Volunteer Centre Osijek- Croatia, Volunteering Ireland, Volunteer Centre and Self-help Denmark (FriSe), Slovene Philanthropy, The National Network for Civil Society (BBE) and Centre for European Volunteering CEV.