Loneliness and it's predictors in older age: Findings from the English Longitudinal Study of Ageing

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Background

Loneliness is perceived as a problem of later life because it compromises quality of life and is associated with a range of negative health outcomes. There is only limited evidence describing changes of loneliness over time and what factors are associated with those changes. We use the English Longitudinal Study of Ageing (ELSA) to examine loneliness, its changes and predictors over a 10 year follow-up period in representative sample of the population aged 50+ years.

Method: Data from 5,316 ELSA core members were used in multivariable regression analysis to establish loneliness prevalence (using short-version of the UCLA loneliness scale) and its association with possible predictors such as available socio-demographic and health-related variables.

Results

The prevalence of loneliness was 17 to 20% in each wave of ELSA and increased with increasing age. In pathway analysis 72% of respondents were 'never lonely', while 7% were 'always lonely'. Longitudinal changes in loneliness ('moving into', 'moving out' and 'fluctuation') were reported between 5 and 8% of respondents. Higher risk of loneliness was related to older age, being female, living alone, being retired, and being classified in low socioeconomic group. Expectation of loneliness and age-related stereotypes of loneliness among those reporting 'not-lonely' in Wave 1 were also found to have strong association with reported loneliness later on in Wave 6 (OR 2.98 (95%CI 2.33–3.75) and 2.65 (95%CI 2.05–3.42)).

Conclusions

Results suggest that the prevalence of loneliness is approximately stable over time in English population aged 50+, and that there is set of factors strongly predicting later loneliness. It is shown that ageist stereotypes are strongly embedded in the public. Our findings could suggest where interventions should be focused- to change public attitudes about old age and eliminate ageism views.

Key message

- Characterising sub-groups of loneliness in population and reporting rates of loneliness and factors that are linked with its increase could enable to target loneliness in later life more precisely