Older Persons' Existential Loneliness – as Interpreted by their Significant Others

An interview study

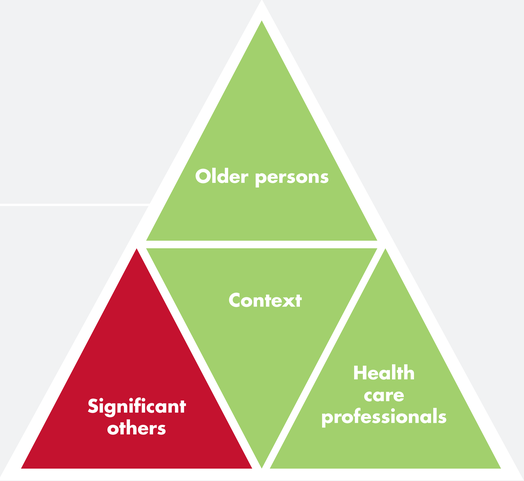
Submitted for publication

Helena Larsson, RN, PhD student[1,2] Margareta Rämgård, PhD, Senior Lecturer[1] Ingrid Bolmsjö, BTh, PhD, Professor[1]

[1]Dept of Care Science, Faculty of Health and Society, Malmö University. [2]Dept of Health and Society, Kristianstad University, Sweden

The LONE study

This study is part of a larger research project, the LONE study, where existential loneliness is explored through interviews with older persons, their significant others and health care professionals. The LONE study is in the development phase of designing a complex intervention.



BACKGROUND

- studies concerning experiences of existential loneliness are sparse
- a complex phenomenon
- no clear definition

Multiple approaches are called for in order to explore and clarify the phenomenon. Therefore, empirical studies in general are needed, and in particular studies exploring the experiences of older people living in the nearness of death. Furthermore, exploring other kinds of views, such as those of significant others, might also generate a deeper understanding of the phenomenon.

AIM

The aim of this study was to explore frail older (>75) persons' existential loneliness, as interpreted by their significant others.

METHODS

- Individual interviews
- Content analysis

SAMPLE

Informants	n=19
Men/women	6/13
Age, median (range)	63 (49-86)
Sons/daughters	5/4
Brother	1
Friend	1
Daughter-in-law	1
Wives	4
Cousin's wife	1
Nieces	2

FINDINGS

According to the interpretation of significant others, the older persons experience existential loneliness

- when they are increasingly limited in body and space
- when they are in a process of disconnecting
- when they are disconnected from the outside world

CONCLUSIONS

The result can be understood as if:

- the older person is in a process of letting go of life
- the body is involved - increasingly limited in his/her physical abilities
- long-term relationships are gradually lost
- increasingly withdrawing into him-or herself and turning off the outside world

The result of this study is consistent with previous research that has shown that existential loneliness is a complex phenomenon, but the implications of this research include a deepened understanding of existential loneliness. In addition, the study highlights the interpretations of significant others.

Kristianstad University Sweden

MALMÖ UNIVERSITY

Contact
Helena Larsson, Department of Care Science
Malmö University, 205 06 Malmö, Sweden
helena.larsson@hkr.se
+46 442503947

The LONE study

Funded by
The LONE study is funded by Vårdal Foundation, Research Platform for Collaboration for Health, Kristianstad University, Crafoordska Foundation, Greta och Johan Kocks Foundation and Gyllenstiernska Krapperups Foundation.

Co-workers in the LONE study
Anna-Karin Edberg[1], Kerstin Blomqvist[1], Ingela Beck[1], Birgit Rasmussen[3], Ingalill Rahm Hallberg[3], Magdalena Andersson[2], Malin Sundström[1,2], Marina Sjöberg[1,2]
[1]Kristianstad University, [2]Malmö University, [3]Lunds University