

# **Loneliness and the Developmental Challenges of Later Life**

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- There are 1.2 million chronically lonely older people in the UK (Age UK 2016).
- Half a million older people go at least five or six days a week without seeing or speaking to anyone at all (Age UK 2016).
- Over half (51%) of all people aged 75 and over live alone (Office for National Statistics 2010. General Lifestyle Survey 2008).
- Two fifths all older people (about 3.9 million) say the television is their main company (Age, U.K., 2014. Evidence Review: Loneliness in Later Life. London: Age UK).
- There are over 2.2 million people aged 75 and over living alone in Great Britain, an increase of almost a quarter (24%) over the past 20 years (ONS).

- A rising divorce rate is creating a generation of lonely middle aged men and women – nearly a third of those aged between 45 and 64 now live on their own – 2.43 million – up 50% on 1996 (when the figure was 1.59 million) – as a consequence of an increase in people who are divorced or who never married.
- The figures for relationship break- up in later life are rising – 6% higher in 3 years – and there are reported to be 107 000 – so-called ‘silver splitters’.
- Almost a quarter of all divorces involved women over the age of 50 – and the proportion of the population in this older age group is increasing as the ‘baby boom generation ages.

- *‘ The fact that there are significantly greater numbers of older people living alone and the suggestion that this trend is expected to intensify in the years to come has really big implications for policy and practice. In particular it means that there is an increased likelihood of loneliness among the older population and the demands on public services, especially health and care are set to rise to a greater degree than may have yet been recognised.’* Caroline Abrahams, director of Age UK

- *Jack is nearly always present in my dreams. It is twelve years since he died, but at night he returns, not always recognizably himself, but a shadowy dream companion figure that I always know to be him. (Lively, 2014, pp 44).*

Amongst the key risk factors for loneliness and social isolation in later life include:

- **marital status and mental**
- **physical health status** (Scambler et al 2015).

- *“There is an unease and awkwardness about being with someone with Alzheimer’s Disease and the people who come to visit with Martin and me has dwindled away to nothing....People find it hard to understand that I am strongly connected to him...Being wanted and supported as part of a couple is still relevant now – being recognised as linked. When I go out socially, people respond as though I am alone and don’t recognise that I am part of this couple, that Martin is at home that I have a bond with him.”*

- For couples, the experience of dementia occurs in the context of a relationship that pre-dates the dementia often by the best part of a lifetime, and the pre-existing quality of the relationship affects how the dementia is experienced (Ablitt et al 2010).
- People who feel that their relationship has been less satisfying prior to the dementia tend to experience more depression and distress (Gilleard et al 1984, Knopp et al., 1998), greater strain (Morris et al., 1988*a*), and more emotional difficulties in response to the challenges of caring for their partner.
- Emotional factors are of crucial importance and the carer's experience of loss of intimacy and understanding of their partner with dementia has been found to be one important issue (Morris, Morris, & Britton, 1988*a* and Morris, Morris, & Britton, 1988*b*).

- Loss of intimacy is associated with carer spouse depression, and low levels of positive interaction between the partners in the marriages of people with dementia predict the move to residential care (Wright, 1991; 1994).
- Norton et al (2009) found that closer relationships between carer and the person with dementia are associated with slower decline in Alzheimer's disease, and this effect is highest for couple relationships, highlighting the importance of our finding ways to intervene clinically to support such couples.

# *The Living Together with Dementia intervention*

- Draws upon therapeutic methods developed in working with parents and children which use video.
- Uses everyday domestic activities as opportunities for shared involvement for the couple.
- Focusses on the emotional meaning and potential of these everyday activities to support inter-dependency between the partners
- Aims to support couples to maintain, or recover, protective aspects of their relationship, which research indicates are to do with emotional contact and understanding, shared activity and involvement.