Research Paper

Prevalence of Loneliness and Isolation and its Effect on Relationships among Geriatrics

Abira Sharma[1]*, Shreya Chhabra[2]

ABSTRACT

Loneliness and isolation are two of the most common psychological phenomena that the world is facing today, especially among the geriatric population. The present study aims to understand the prevalence of loneliness and isolation among the geriatric population as well as their effect on relationships. On the sample of N = 10, comprising the age group (65 and above), in-depth, semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions were used to collect the data. Furthermore, it was analysed through thematic analysis, based on the model by Braun and Clarke (2006) and Attride-Stirling (2001), and eight global themes were found, along with 18 organising themes, followed by 49 basic themes. They had divergent views regarding multiple aspects of the way they lived. The results indicated the homogeneity of responses among geriatrics; however, at the same time, they revealed variation in their opinions about socialisation, childhood experiences, and exploring new things. Cultural and societal expectations, along with personal beliefs, are prime factors in their beliefs and ideas about relationships. A large sample size could have revealed more diverse opinions and led to better generalisability among the elderly population of India.

Keywords: *Geriatric Population, Loneliness, Isolation, Relationships*

The present study focuses on analysing the geriatric population of India and understanding their experiences with feelings of loneliness and isolation. It also attempts to assess how their relationships are affected by loneliness and isolation and how it shapes their world over the time.

Loneliness and Isolation in Geriatric population

Loneliness is a subjective feeling experienced by a person who is deprived of social relations. Isolation refers to the plight of being isolated or separated. The elderly population, also known as the geriatric population, is particularly susceptible to various social and economic difficulties, making them the most vulnerable group. Among these challenges, loneliness and isolation are prevalent concerns for older people. The Geriatric population comprises the age group of 65 years and above.

[1]Student, Department of Psychiatry, Kasturba Medical College, Mangalore, India
[2]Student, Department of Psychology, Lakshmibai College, University of Delhi, India
*Corresponding Author

 Due to their dependency on their children and lack of agility, they experience the feeling of being a burden, useless, isolated, and alone. Social isolation can cause them to feel lonely and is associated with a lot of medical problems as well. According to a survey by PAN Healthcare, loneliness affects more than 64% of older people in India, and it is worse in urban cities. It is noted that 5.7% of senior citizens in India live alone, without the support of family or friends (Dignity, 2023).

Sociability
As people enter into old age, due to significant demands placed upon the body and mind, it becomes difficult to have a social life. The state of interacting with other people and having a social life can be defined as sociability.

Due to this restriction placed upon social interaction, many elderly people experience social isolation and are left feeling alone. In a study, it was highlighted that since they are unable to actively participate in community activities owing to living alone, having no strong family ties, or having less links to their culture of origin, many elderly persons suffer loneliness and sadness. It is natural for people to lose touch with their social networks as they become older, and they also have a harder time making new acquaintances and joining new networks (Singh & Misra, 2009)

Research has shown that having an active lifestyle in old age is important for one's overall health. Being a part of certain groups like art, hiking, or others help older people cope with emotions and is also associated with a longer life-span. It also makes them less depressed and increases feelings of happiness and joy (National Institute on Aging, 2022)

According to research, poor social interactions, which are characterised by social isolation or loneliness, were linked to a 32% and 29% higher risk of stroke and heart disease, respectively (CDC, 2021). Bincy and colleagues (2022) showed that most older people are at risk of being isolated. Poor social networks among the elderly are connected with certain health and quality of life dimensions adversely. Public health services' healthcare intervention programmes must put a special emphasis on safeguarding older people's social wellbeing. The promotion of health and elegant ageing will undoubtedly result from health system alignment to geriatric demands.

Loneliness and isolation with relationships
The quality of one's relationships is significantly impacted by loneliness and isolation. During a cohort study in southern Finland in 2010, it was found that the experiences of emotional loneliness are embedded in the everyday lives and relationships of older adults. Ten in-depth interviews with elderly persons who said they felt lonely frequently or constantly were undertaken. The study demonstrated the complex nature of loneliness and its root causes. The absence of a significant friend, complicated parenting, and upsetting childhood events were found to be the root causes of emotional loneliness, as were lost and unfulfilled connections with a partner who has passed away or is not present, as well as the death of a spouse. The majority of the respondents had experienced loneliness, while for others it has been a problem for almost their entire lives (Tiilikainen & Seppänen, 2016)

Other studies have also shown that the prevalence of social isolation among the elderly in an urban slum in India is high, and the existing evidence shows a rising trend. A lot of factors like socioeconomic status, perception of health, exercise, sleep, and other lifestyle factors were all associated with feelings of social isolation (Kumar et al., 2022). In another study

titled 'Loneliness among older people living in care homes in Sri Lanka', it was observed that older persons acknowledged emotional anguish brought on by feeling cut off from their social network and confined to the nursing home, as well as loneliness as a means of coping with these feelings. These feelings included depression and anxiety about the future. The participants dealt with their loneliness by accepting it, following their faith, keeping in contact with their families, going about their regular business, and taking part in social events (Wijesiri et al., 2019). Kadoya & Khan (2016) in their study "Can concern for the long-term care of older parents explain son preference at birth in India?" demonstrated that son preference in India is primarily due to the long-term care of elderly parents. In contrast to daughters, who are mostly responsible for caring for in-laws, sons are the primary carers for elderly parents.

Cheng et al (2022) demonstrated that both family and social networks have a considerable positive impact on older persons' life satisfaction, with social networks having a stronger impact. Family networks and social networks improve the quality of life for older people, but they are unable to adequately stop emotional abuse. Through a decrease in physical abuse, family networks had a greater impact on improving the quality of life for older persons.

Technology and isolation
Several studies suggest that isolation has grown significantly in the geriatric population in the world. In relation with technology, there have been mixed findings on the effects of technology on isolation among the geriatric population across the world.

In a study, there has been a positive association between internet use and reducing depression and has a much larger effect in increasing mental health well-being in the older adults in America (Cotten et al., 2012). The technology use has also helped to assess cognitive and emotional needs, decreasing the communication gap and connecting families through assistive technology tools (Sen et al., 2022). There has been a finding showing higher perceptions of self-efficacy in older adults who are accepting of internet use than those who are not (Erickson & Johnson, 2011).

However, it has been found that the effects of technology and internet use have been seen as factors of decline in communication with the family, household, less sociability and has shown an increase in the feelings of loneliness and isolation (Kraut et al., 1998). Furthermore, findings indicate that social use of technology and media can help in promoting connectedness in the older adult population whereas face-to-face communication results in avoiding social isolation (Ahn & Shin, 2013).

Strategies for preventing loneliness and isolation in geriatric population
With the increasing levels of loneliness and isolation in geriatric population, several interventions have been suggested in studies to overcome it. A recent study based on eliminating loneliness and isolation in the context of pandemic suggests promotion of social connection, development of assistive and innovative technologies, increasing communication with people around and building communities and networks (Wu, 2020).

Furthermore, various interventions have been formulated to eradicate loneliness and social isolation among the older population. There is no one approach that will fit everyone, and has to be tailored according to the needs of the individuals and groups (Fakoya et al., 2020).

For instance, various policies have been formulated in the following years, where "Campaign to End Loneliness" began in 2010 in United Kingdom (*Safeguarding the Convoy a Call to Action from the Campaign to End Loneliness*, n.d.), and Denmark also held a campaign titled "Danmark spiser sammen" meaning 'Denmark Eats Together' in 2015, as a popular movement to eliminate loneliness and isolation in the older population (Sagen, 2018). A recent study has found that spirituality and yoga are also one of the effective interventions giving hope to geriatric population in India, and there is scope for other interventions like volunteer support, online support and lifestyle modifications (Banerjee, 2021).

Purpose of the study

The present study examines the state of geriatric population of India in relation to feelings of loneliness and isolation and its effect on relationships. Also, it focuses on how social support and experiences can help in lowering down the feelings of loneliness and isolation among the elderly.

METHODOLOGY

Sample

For the present study, purposive sampling was utilised and individuals were chosen from geriatric population ranging from age 65 and above from India (N=10), with males (N=4) and females (N=6), respectively. The inclusion and exclusion criteria for the sample were participants who can read, write and understand English, citizens of India and aged 65 or above.

Measures

In the present study, an interview schedule has been prepared for a semi-structured interview with 11 open ended questions for the collection of data. The questions were constructed upon exploring loneliness and isolation among geriatric populations in India with emerging times and societies evolving around. The interview had the objective to understand the in-depth views about how loneliness and isolation is viewed from the lens of geriatric population. It focused on the following themes: loneliness and isolation faced by geriatric population, reasons behind loneliness and isolation, effect of social media on the interaction and relationships, change in the ways of socialisation among the geriatric population, dependence on family for financial, emotional and social support, past experiences leading to loneliness and isolation and, social support is an expectation of elderly population.

Procedure

One of the essential steps of the study, rapport formation was established with the interviewee and their informed consent was obtained. Interviews were conducted in a naturalistic setting and face-to-face with the interviewee, making them comfortable with the atmosphere around. It took roughly around 30-40 minutes for the conduction of each interview and confidentiality was kept in consideration. After the interview, the participants were thanked for their participation.

The method of thematic analysis used in the present study was based on the guidelines of Braun and Clarke (2006) and Attride-Stirling (2001). The interview data was coded into verbatims and was further analysed into initial codes. The initial codes were sorted and condensed into 49 basic themes, then 18 organising themes and with 8 global themes at the end of the process.

RESULTS

The present study produced 49 basic themes, 18 organising themes and 8 global themes. The global themes are analysed further to understand loneliness and isolation among geriatric population and recent developments related to it.

Paradox in Attitudes Associated with Social Contact

The geriatric population of India had diverse views regarding socialising with people. Some of them mentioned that they like going out, while others were not so fond of going out.

One participant stated that,

"Yes, I like going out and meeting new people. Earlier, I went out more frequently, but now, due to my age and limited mobility, I go twice a week."

Another participant said that,

"I do want to go out, but my mind does not allow me to. I often feel tired and exhausted enough by thinking of going out"

This illustrates that participants had a divergent outlook toward the idea of going out and meeting new people; some of them enjoy socialising while others do not, and there exists a paradox in their attitudes towards social contact.

Perception of Elderly towards Social Media

The elderly population and their account of social media and its effect on relationships highlighted distinct perspectives and their personal experience with using the internet.

Participant 1: "It is a waste of time. I do use the internet, but only for the purpose of either watching videos of god or anything else that is important in society. Besides that, I do not engage much in it and I do not think that other people should either. I know a few people both on Instagram and Facebook.

Participant 2: "I feel that if people search for something useful on the internet, adopt it in their lives, and also teach it to other people, then it is a good thing. However, if someone is glued to the internet all the time, then it is a waste of time. There are a lot of things to do in life except use the internet. Yes, in the modern era, social media does affect relationships. It is a part of one's nature to watch and learn something that attracts them."

Participant 3: "Social media has helped in improving communication in my case but has led to isolation among youngsters and people in general".

Participants revealed their personal experiences with using social media and were further asked by the interviewer regarding its effect on romantic relationships. This showed the elderly's perception towards social media. All participants expressed their thoughts about the role of social media and its effect on their lifestyle.

Exposure to New Endeavours Broadens Mindset

Geriatrics were interviewed about their inclination towards exploring new things and activities and almost all participants took delight in testing new things.

Participant 1:"If I find something interesting, then I definitely like trying it out. And if the activity does not appeal to me and seems like a waste, then I do not invest myself in trying it out."

Participant 2: "I also like to explore new things and activities. Embroidery and gardening are the hobbies that I currently follow."

Participant 3:"Yes, I like trying out new activities. I mean, if I cook something new or try a new recipe, I feel good about it."

Therefore, according to participants' responses, it can be implied that participants are fond of new ventures and believe that it is important for personal growth.

Life Satisfaction through Interconnectedness with Relationships
The older population reflected on their relationships with their friends and family and also shared their choice of living with either their children or alone.
Participant 1: "Family comes first, always. Every individual should take care of their family. There is no such thing as a person's family. Friends come later. I enjoy everyone's company and ….. to others."
Participant 2: "I often find difficulty to adjust with today's generation and its concepts and that makes me a little uncomfortable to spend time with them"
Participant 3: "I love to stay with my children, especially with my grandchildren. It is not my choice, it's more of the circumstances."
Participant 4: "I definitely like staying with my children."
Geriatrics disclosed their opinions about living with family and children and from the responses, one can undoubtedly say that they experience more elation and love around their children in contrast to when they are alone.

Contradictions in Experiences of Relationships with Spouse among Geriatrics
The elderly population addressed how relationships transform as time passes on and with altering norms of society. Many of the occurrences raised questions about the belief that relationships have been central to every person's life constantly. It also highlighted how everlasting love is, despite all of the changes in society over time.
A participant stated that "It is really good. I like doing things for him. I feel I should …... . Earlier, I used to do more for him, but according to the age factor, it is relatively less now", which emphasises love's power to withstand all odds and its unbreakable bonds, yet ageing has played a crucial role in this situation.
Another participant stated "I was really young when I lost my husband, but I can claim that the relationship that I shared with him, and even my friends used to believe that it was incredible. …. ……. exceptionally good" and implies that until and unless there's a belief in it, attachments are eternal. Additionally, when a person feels more certain about their affection for their partner, social acceptance strengthens the bond.

Comprehending the Family Support of Geriatrics through Socio-Cultural Lens
The concept of family support is dynamic, thus it plays an integral role in creating and fostering an atmosphere of comfort for all family members, including the elderly. Because of the rise of digitization and globalisation, families frequently neglect to spend time with one another. In the Indian context, societal and cultural expectations have a significant influence in developing and altering relationships among family members.
Participant 1: " I share a great bond with my children, but yes I feel that they do not take out time for me"
Participant 8: "The parents take care all the while, it's a part of culture that children should take care of the parents……making them feel lonely".
Participant 9: "I like my children a lot. They ask us about our day and ……….they meet us, touch our feet and respect us. I really appreciate that."
The following experiences show how social and cultural expectations have led to the importance of family support in eliminating the possibility of loneliness and isolation. Staying with family is considered desirable as it reflects the collectivistic nature and the human tendency to have social interaction and an exchange of familiarity in sharing the perspective with the family. It concludes with seeking acceptance from people who know them and acknowledging their presence.

Reminiscing the Early Days

Memories of the past often shape how humans understand and weave the world around them. The elderly population stated their experiences that how their childhood reflects back on their memories with their family especially parents and grandparents and how their care has resulted in varying loneliness and isolation among them.

Participant 3: "My experience was extremely great. We never used to live without our grandmother. ……….With my parents as well, my experience was good. ……. Overall, the time spent with both my parents and grandparents was quite pleasant."

Participant 4: "Was not able to see my grandparents. My father and …..they were critical of my decisions".

It shows how childhood also shapes the emotional and social constructs of an individual resulting in varying expectations from their family and society.

Positive Effect of Social Support on Elderly

Social support is one of the major factors that helps in eliminating loneliness, isolation and psychological distress among the elderly population. It helps them in providing them guidance and cathartic interactions which is high on their level of relatability.

Participant 6: "Social support definitely helps. Every old person should have it. There needs to be guidance. My life would have been better if I got social support, and that's one of the reasons I am living alone".

Participant 7: "Having social support is very important in one's life. …….. It enhances one's knowledge and is a must."

Geriatrics expect and crave social support in their life. It results in richness and indulging in understanding in different perspectives further, expanding their horizon of engagement.

DISCUSSION

In the present study, the geriatric population was studied in relation to their experiences with loneliness and isolation. Using qualitative research, in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with 10 participants, both male and female. Eight global themes were identified, and the effect of loneliness and isolation on geriatrics' relationships was assessed. The first theme shed light on the contradictions that exist among older people and their outlook towards socialising and going out. According to research and participants' responses, it can be argued that going out and socialising is important for both physical and mental health. In a study titled 'Loneliness among older people living in care homes in Sri Lanka', it was observed that older persons acknowledged emotional anguish brought on by feeling cut off from their social network and confined to the nursing home, as well as loneliness as a means of coping with these feelings. These feelings included depression and anxiety about the future. In another study, Bincy and colleagues (2022) showed that most older people are at risk of being isolated. Poor social networks among the elderly are connected with certain health and quality of life dimensions adversely. Hence, it can be implied that most participants enjoy going out; however, most of them are unable to due to their age and limited social contact.

Another theme illustrates the role of social media and its effect on geriatrics' relationships. The participants believe that spending time on the internet is only beneficial when it is utilised for learning and informational purposes. Besides that, it is a waste of time and should not be used for any other purposes. It was also revealed that it leads to isolation and feelings of loneliness among them and has damaged relationships. Kraut et al (1998) showed that technology and internet use have been seen as factors of decline in communication with the family, household, less sociability and has shown an increase in the feelings of

loneliness and isolation. These findings can be compared to participants' responses toward the internet and social media. Khosravi et al (2016) has also shown the role that technology can play in alleviating isolation among the older population. It demonstrates that different technologies offer varying interaction opportunities and methods, and that most of them can be used to lessen seniors' feelings of social isolation and loneliness.

The third theme brought attention to the importance of trying out new activities. According to research, maintaining an active lifestyle into old age is crucial for one's general health. Being a part of organisations that involve activities like hiking, art, or other activities can help older individuals manage their emotions and is also linked to a longer life span. They experience more happiness and joy, and their depression is lessened (National Institute on Aging, 2022)

Cheng et al (2022) demonstrated that both family and social networks have a considerable positive impact on older persons' life satisfaction, with social networks having a stronger impact. Family networks and social networks improve the quality of life for older people, but they are unable to adequately stop emotional abuse. Through a decrease in physical abuse, family networks had a greater impact on improving the quality of life for older persons. This sorts out another theme that brings attention to geriatrics' perspective on relationships and their decision to stay with their children. This implies the important role that relationships have in affecting life satisfaction for the older generation. Most participants revealed that they take delight in living with their children and also enjoy the company of their friends and family. Therefore, it can be stated that social contact and connectedness with family have a positive influence on older people's lives.

When the participants were asked about their marital relations, most of them described their relationships with their spouse as satisfactory or good. According to their responses, spending time with their spouse brings them joy and reduces feelings of loneliness. However, a few of them believe that having children around is more important to feeling connected with the family. Studies have shown that emotional and physical intimacy during old age is crucial for overall well-being of geriatrics (The National Council on Aging, n.d.)

Geriatrics described their familial relationships in the interview through a socio-cultural lens. Most of them had divergent expectations of their children's values. A lot of parents in India prefer having a male child over a female child solely due to the care that sons provide during parents' later years. Kadoya & Khan (2016) demonstrated that son preference in India is primarily due to the long-term care of elderly parents. In contrast to daughters, who are mostly responsible for caring for in-laws, sons are the primary carers for elderly parents.

During the interview, the participants were asked to recall their childhood experiences with their family members and most of them disclosed the fact that times have changed with regard to the patterns of living and house arrangements. Nowadays, people prefer living alone or in "nuclear families" and the concept of "joint families" has disappeared.

Tremethick (2018) illustrates the importance of social support in old age in her study, "Thriving, not just surviving. The importance of social support among the elderly." According to the study, older people profit from surroundings that encourage the development of social support networks in terms of their general health, their capability to maintain their independence, and the chance to reuse traumatic gestures through social commerce, allowing them to advance through the experimental task of pride, integrity versus

despair. Health care providers must understand the value of social support for the old, assess for support deficiencies, and offer suitable choices to strengthen support systems since the elderly are at risk of social support deficits. Participants in the study discussed their ideas regarding the gravity of social support. Without it, people cannot flourish and growth is restricted.

However, despite the valuable findings of this study regarding the prevalence of loneliness and isolation among geriatrics in India, there are still numerous inquiries that could serve as avenues for future research. Firstly, the sample size of the study was small and belonged to Delhi, India and adjoining regions. As participants were from upper-and middle-class families, the data from the results may not have fully captured the study's emphasis. Additionally, conducting more interviews over a longer period of time might have revealed a more complete picture of the social and cultural values held by India's older population.

CONCLUSION

The aim of the paper was to analyse geriatrics' experience of emotions like isolation and loneliness and their effect on relationships. It may be argued that the older population of India has a range of perspectives regarding socialisation, childhood experiences, and trying new things based on the eight global themes that emerged from the results. Their attitudes and ideas about relationships are mostly influenced by personal beliefs as well as cultural and societal standards. For the elderly population of India, sticking to one's societal and cultural norms is what leads to harmony and induces feelings of elation and joy.

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APPENDIX

Figure 1 Global Themes of Geriatrics' Experiences with Relationships