



**Older Men At The Margins:**  
Loneliness, isolation and help-seeking  
experiences of men (65+) from  
marginalised and seldom heard groups.

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## The research study

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# Older Men at the Margins

guidance for practitioners and services  
providing groups for older men.

the Older Men at the Margins project 2016-2019



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## Older Men at the Margins study (2016-19)

### **Overarching objective:**

To develop an in-depth understanding of the formal and informal ways in which seldom-heard or hard-to-reach groups of men (65+) seek to maintain social engagement in later life and combat loneliness.

Includes experiences of participation in groups targeted at reducing loneliness and isolation for older men.

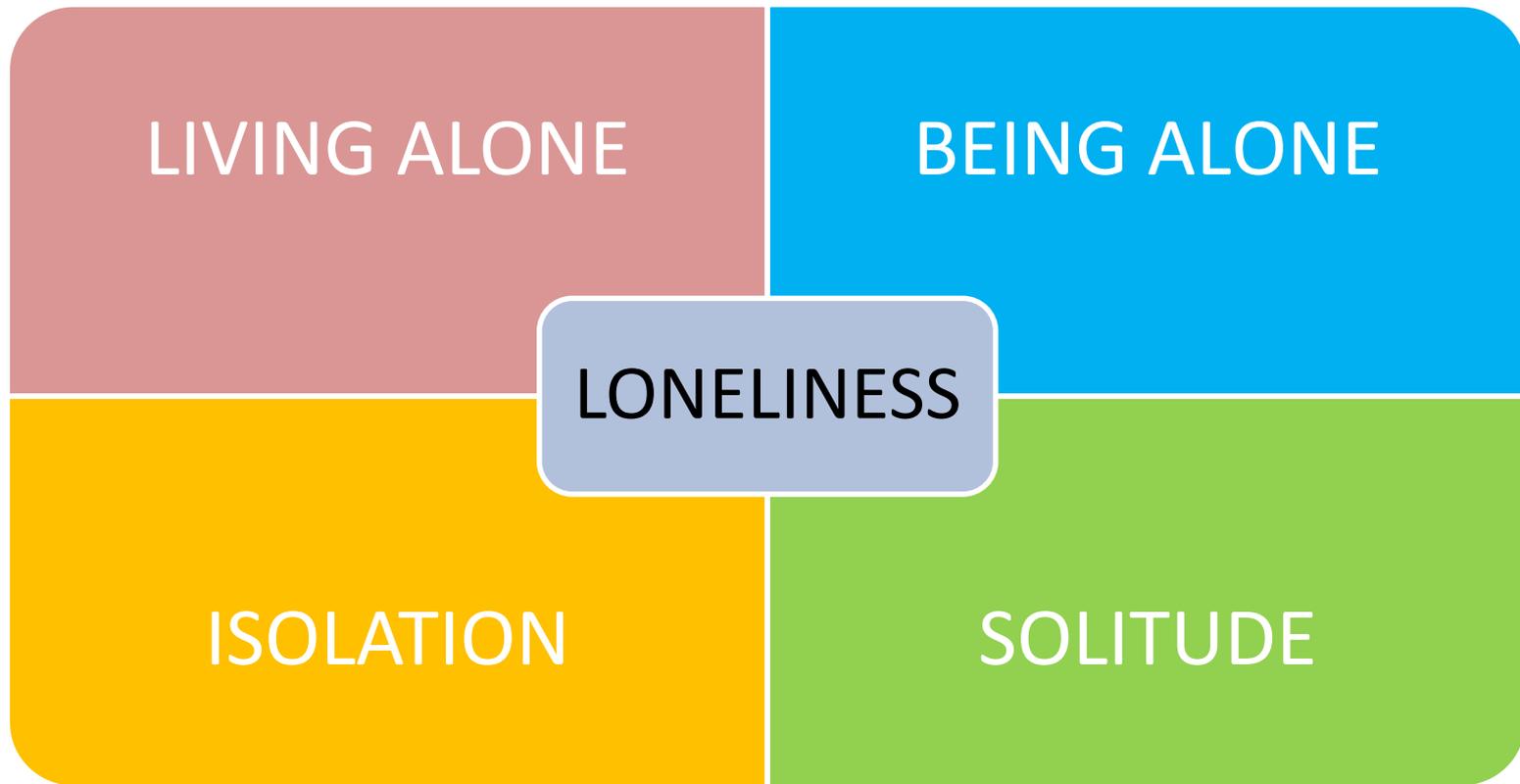
## Today's presentation

- Focus on 'loneliness talk' - experiences and perceptions of loneliness
- Focus on older men's experiences as carers for significant others:  
1) How do older male carers experience loneliness and social isolation? 2) In what ways do caring responsibilities shape these experiences?

New paper: Willis, P., Vickery, A. & Symonds, J. (Forthcoming). 'You have to get your backside, otherwise you'll never get out': older male carers' experiences of loneliness and isolation. *International Journal of Care and Caring*.

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## UNTANGLING CONCEPTS



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## Types of loneliness

### Emotional

- Notable absence of a specific companion or significant other (Weiss, 1973)

### Social

- Perceived absence of an engaging social network and dissatisfaction with one's social network (Weiss, 1973; De Jong Gierveld and Tilburg, 2006)

### Existential

- Deeper sense of social separation, alienation and disconnection from social life around you (Bolmsjö, Tengland & Rämgård, 2018)

## Why focus on men?

- Women more likely to have wider social networks than men across their lifetime.
- Older men more likely to be reliant on their (female) partner for maintaining social networks than older women.
- Greater percentage of older men (50+) report moderate to high levels of social isolation.
- **Older men without partners report higher levels of loneliness and isolation than women without partners**

(Beach and Bamford, 2013; Davidson, Daly & Arber, 2003; Davidson, 2004; Dykstra & Fokkema, 2007; Milligan et al., 2015)

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Research  
design:  
qualitative,  
cross-  
sectional

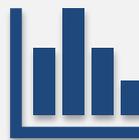


**Recruitment sources** – men’s groups, clubs (mixed/ men only), older people’s community services and forums, carers support services and groups



**Method** – Semi-structured interviews (1.5-2 hours duration). Indirect and direct questions about loneliness

Using social convoy model and UCLA loneliness scale items



**Analysis** – Thematic/ phenomenological using Framework Analysis

## Who did we interview?

Gay men who are single or living alone	Men who are single or living alone in rural areas	Men who are single or living alone in urban areas	Men who are carers for significant others	Men who are living with hearing loss
Number: 21 Ages: 65-85	Number: 22 Ages: 69-88	Number: 22 Ages: 65-95	Number: 25 Ages: 68-92	Number: 21 Ages: 65-92

## Men single and/or living alone (n=72):

In their loneliness talk, men convey perceptions of:

- Being socially discarded
- Not having a purpose
- Being of little value to others ('feeling like nobody cares')
- Cut off from broader society.

Indications of **social** and **emotional** loneliness across men's descriptions.

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Loneliness to me means I'm entirely on my own, nobody is with me. To me, that's what loneliness is. And I feel that there is nobody around me, nobody sitting with me, there is nobody to talk to me. You know. I feel discarded, I feel left by human society and things like that. That's my feeling, how I feel. [M10, 74, heterosexual, single]

Estranged. You're estranged from what goes on out there. And the more you sit at home, with or without daytime TV, the more you're estranged from what's going on out there. You feel as though you're in a different world. [M38, 74, heterosexual, single]

## Emotional loneliness – seeking companionship

It's not just the physical thing of being physically alone, it's the emotional thing that is important... **I miss that opportunity for intimacy, for ordinary everyday affectionate gestures and acts and the lack of opportunity to do something spontaneous and enjoy it with someone else.** [M21, 68, gay, single]

## Life events associated with loneliness

- Death of spouse/ partner
- Relationship changes: divorce, separation
- Living alone, infrequent contact with others
- Restricted by physical disability, mental health problems or long-term illness
- Retirement and associated losses of role, responsibility and social bonds at work
- Longer-term loneliness – being a **'lone wolf'**

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## Is loneliness a problem for older male carers?

- Between 75-84 years: equal proportions of female and male carers
- 85+ years: just over half (59%) carers are men
- Carers of all ages report loneliness and social isolation as issues
- Issues for older carers – challenges of caring exacerbated by ageing; majority caring for spouses with dementia; living with own health conditions and concerns.
- Older men as carers – managerial, task-oriented approach to caring; reluctant to seek help and support.

(Russell, 2004; Ribeiro et al, 2007; Carers UK, 2015; Greenwood et al., 2019)

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## Is loneliness a problem for older male carers?

Our study: 25 carers (68-92 years).

Caring for spouse (19); close friend (2); adult children (four); grandson (1).

- Loneliness described as **fleeting experience**, not a constant concern.
- Caring as a buffer to loneliness - companionship of the care recipient.
- Loneliness as a future rather than current problem – one of several future-oriented concerns.
- Feeling cut-off from others, especially in crisis situations.

Well, the fact that we have each other, that takes the loneliness away and I can - if I was left on my own, I could imagine that I could feel lonely. [M43, 80, cares for spouse]

I think my loneliness comes from the total responsibility... Yes, because you've got to do everything, so whether that confuses your brain to say that, you know, well, you're on your own, you're basically on your own. When there are people here, it's fine: if they come and look after her, I go away, but I come back to it.

[M53, 72, cares for spouse with dementia]

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- Social life shrinking outside the caring relationships - diminished contact with friends and social groups.

I think since the Alzheimer's has kicked in whether it is loneliness or whether it is a feeling of, "I don't want to do this anymore. I wish I could go out and have a pint." That happens more frequently.

[M57, 81, cares for spouse with Alzheimer's]

## What did older men value about groups?

- Increased opportunities for social interaction and forming new friendships
- Mixed-generational groups (heterosexual *and* gay men) - not wanting to be siloed in groups for 'old people'
- Groups that facilitated emotional and social ties with other men
- Group roles and activities that bring purpose and an **active contribution**. Includes volunteering roles.

## Perceived benefits of carers' groups (n=12)



Gaining social and emotional connections



Receiving emotional support and practical help with caregiving.



Mutual support from other carers –connecting over shared experience



Counter-acting isolation – 'not the only one'

There are some lovely people there, everybody is lovely. They are very sympathetic. There are some of us who can get to grips with the labyrinth of social services and things better than others... It is also quite useful to hear that other people are doing the same things. **That is the main thing, in a way you are not the only one.**

[M57, 81, cares for spouse]

## Troubles with carers' groups

- Structure and content of sessions unappealing.
- Staff turnover - frustrated by continual changes in group facilitators.
- Less contact with healthcare professionals – more emphasis on ‘doing activities together’
- Worries about spouse/ partner attending – falling asleep, difficult to discuss intimate topics.
- Groups often majority women members – problem only for one man

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## Concluding thoughts.... Recognising loneliness

- Need to recognise how older men from diverse backgrounds and circumstances experience loneliness in different ways and plan interventions appropriately.
- Feelings of loneliness accompanied by wider messages of social estrangement and exclusion – raises questions about fostering social inclusion of older men single and living alone.

**For carers** - social loneliness and isolation from others more concerning.

**For men single and/ or living alone** – emotional and existential loneliness more apparent.

## Concluding thoughts... Running groups for older men

- Men across sub-groups valued being active contributors to group design, delivery and management – not passive recipients. Preferred mixed generational groups.
- Some carers seeking more instrumental/ professional support – majority of carers seeking both instrumental and emotional support through groups.
- Carers groups highly valued – but need for flexibility in delivery and consistency in professional input. Implications during COVID-19 lockdown?

## Outputs & resources with Age UK

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- Four-page research summary
- Guidance for practitioners and service providers on what works with running groups for older men
- Information sheet for older men and their families and friends
- Three short films capturing the perspectives of older men (including carers) – produced by Beeston Media

Visit: <https://www.ageuk.org.uk/our-impact/policy-research/older-men-at-the-margins-how-men-combat-loneliness-in-later-life/>



# Older Men at the Margins

Guidance for practitioners and services  
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THANK YOU



Thank you!

Any questions?

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**#MenAtTheMargins**

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