

# **Loneliness in the life course of older adults**

*A qualitative inquiry exploring loneliness in the life course of older adults (65+)*

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Word count: 9.998

August 2021



**Utrecht University**

## Abstract

**Background:** Loneliness is increasingly seen as a public health issue for older adults. Over the years, several interventions to alleviate loneliness have been developed. The evidence of the effectiveness of these interventions is inconclusive. The limited success of interventions may be caused by an insufficient understanding of the roots of loneliness. To gain a better understanding of loneliness in late adulthood, it may be helpful to take a life course perspective. This qualitative study contributed to the literature on loneliness by researching how older adults make sense of loneliness in their life course. More specifically, this study investigated how life events affect feelings of loneliness, how older adults perceive loneliness and how older adults utilize(d) coping strategies to manage or alleviate loneliness throughout their lives. **Methods:** 11 in-depth interviews were conducted among older adults between the ages of 68-88 with current or past experiences of loneliness. Interpretative phenomenological analysis was used for the data analysis. **Results:** Findings show that there is not one way in which older adults make sense of their loneliness experiences, because participant's life stories are very different. Loneliness is not confined to old age as participants identified a range of life events related to loneliness at different stages of their life course. Participants mentioned the interplay between life events, their perceptions of loneliness and how they coped when they talked about loneliness, emphasizing the importance of addressing these three topics to gain a comprehensive understanding of a person's experience of loneliness. **Conclusion:** This study shed light on how life events affect loneliness, how loneliness is perceived by older adults and how older adults cope with loneliness. These insights emphasize the value of a life course perspective to increase our understanding of loneliness. These insights can contribute to the development of effective interventions to alleviate loneliness.

**Keywords:** *life course perspective, experience of loneliness, interpretative phenomenological analysis, coping with loneliness, older adults*

## Introduction

Loneliness is increasingly seen as a public health issue, especially for older adults. Although loneliness affects people of all ages (van Tilburg & De Jong Gierveld, 2007), older adults are seen to be more at risk for loneliness because the frequency of social interactions can decrease due to the death of loved ones, deteriorating health and the loss of social roles through retirement (Pinquart & Sorensen, 2001).

Loneliness is difficult to conceptualize because it is a subjective experience. To date, de Jong-Gierveld's (1984) definition of loneliness is the most frequently used. It defines loneliness as an intolerable lack (or quality) of certain social relationships. Loneliness is distinct from being alone or socially isolated. Being alone indicates a more controllable situation, one can be alone but not lonely. Loneliness differs from being alone in that it is an involuntary negative feeling (Vasiliki, Papadopoulos & Randhawa, 2015). Social isolation is distinct from loneliness in that it can be described as an absence or small number of relationships that is observable from the outside (van Tilburg & De Jong Gierveld, 2007).

The topic of loneliness deserves attention for various reasons. At the individual level, loneliness is a complex and negative experience that influences everyday life and wellbeing of older people (Kitzmüller et. al., 2017). At the societal level, loneliness is associated with several negative health outcomes. It has been associated with increased risk of morbidity and mortality (Hawkey & Cacioppo, 2010), increased risk of Alzheimer's disease (Wilson et al., 2007) and consequently, higher health costs (Mihalopoulos et. al., 2020). Thus, addressing loneliness is not only important for improving the quality of life of older people, but it can also benefit the health-care system.

Since there is reason to be concerned about the repercussions of loneliness for older adult's wellbeing, several interventions to alleviate loneliness have been developed. Examples are befriending interventions and leisure skill/development interventions (Gardiner et. al., 2016). Unfortunately, evidence of the effectiveness of these interventions is inconclusive (Gardiner et. al., 2016; Fakoya, McCorry, & Donnelly, 2020). When interventions do report some effectiveness, this is often weak (Gardiner et. al., 2016).

The limited success of interventions may be caused by an insufficient understanding of the roots of loneliness (Dickens et. al., 2011). To gain a better understanding of loneliness in late adulthood, it may be helpful to take a life course perspective. A key principle of the life course perspective is that late adulthood is shaped by earlier conditions and events (Elder, Johnson & Crosnoe, 2003). In accordance with this perspective, loneliness at a certain point in

time can be considered an outcome of both early- and later life circumstances (de Jong-Gierveld & Fokkema, 2015). However, the dynamic nature of loneliness has been primarily overlooked in previous research as most studies on loneliness have been cross-sectional, focusing on the prevalence of and risk factors for loneliness (e.g. Teater, Chonody & Davis, 2020). Little is known about the groups most at risk of loneliness in later life and pathways into and out of loneliness. Therefore, Victor (2015) makes a plea for studying loneliness from a life course perspective, arguing that treating loneliness as a homogeneous experience, assuming that the nature and antecedents are the same for all older adults has made it difficult to develop effective interventions to mitigate loneliness.

This qualitative study seeks to contribute to the literature on loneliness by researching how older adults aged 65 and over make sense of loneliness in their life course, following Victor's (2015) recommendation to take a life course approach. More specifically, this study investigates how life events affect feelings of loneliness, how older adults perceive loneliness and how older adults utilize(d) coping strategies to manage or alleviate loneliness. This is important because previous research has shown that older adults are not passive actors and employ strategies to cope with loneliness (Kharicha et. al., 2018). Interpretative phenomenological analysis will guide this study (IPA). IPA is an approach to qualitative and psychological research and allows for a rich and deep understanding of the personal lived experience of a person (Smith et. al., 2009). While there is a variety of quantitative research on loneliness, there is a lack of research on how older adults perceive it (Cohen-Mansfield & Eisner, 2020). Thus, a qualitative in-depth study of the loneliness experiences of the elderly is needed to develop effective interventions and to increase our understanding of the roots of loneliness.

## **Previous research**

### **Experience of loneliness**

To tackle loneliness, tailored approaches must be developed to suit the needs of different individuals (Fakoya, McCorry & Donnelly, 2020). This stresses the importance of gaining a comprehensive understanding of elderly person's experiences of loneliness. Although there is a scarcity of qualitative research on loneliness among older people (Cohen-Mansfield & Eisner, 2020), there is a growing body of qualitative research emphasizing the importance of understanding subjective experiences of loneliness (Cohen-Mansfield et. al., 2020; Graneheim & Lundman, 2010; Stanley et. al., 2010; Kitzmuller et. al., 2017; Dahlberg, 2007). These studies reveal that the experience is complex and intertwined with the past, present and future, underscoring the value of addressing loneliness over the course of one's life.

Qualitative research also sheds light on what it is like to be lonely. Feeling abandoned (Graneheim & Lundman, 2010) and loneliness as a private negative experience (Stanley et al., 2010) are feelings expressed by lonely older adults. Dahlberg (2007) reported that older adults understood loneliness as a feeling that emerges when important people are not there, either through rejection or rejection by choice. Loneliness was perceived as a barrier that separated older people from their surroundings in a meta-synthesis (Kitzmuller et al., 2017).

Most studies describe loneliness as a negative experience, yet some describe it as something positive or powerful. According to Dahlberg (2007), being lonely can provide a sense of calm and serenity. However, this is only the case when loneliness is a personal decision. Another study (Graneheim & Lundman, 2010) found that the experience is twofold. The negative sides of loneliness involved feelings of abandonment and loss, but loneliness could also spur self-development and creativity.

All studies highlight the importance of understanding the complexities of loneliness and factors that contribute to the experience of loneliness. This study contributes to research on the experience of loneliness by examining how loneliness is embedded in different life stories of older people. In addition, this study investigates how older adults perceive loneliness. Even though previous qualitative research provided valuable insight into what loneliness feels like for older adults, the literature on these feelings from the perspective of older adults remains limited.

## **Loneliness in the life course**

Loneliness can be considered an outcome of both early- and later life circumstances (de Jong-Gierveld & Fokkema, 2015). Two studies (Kamiya et al., 2013; Nicolaisen & Thorsen, 2014) show the importance of childhood circumstances in understanding loneliness in late adulthood. Loneliness in late adulthood was associated with poor childhood socioeconomic status and parental substance abuse (Kamiya et. al., 2013). According to the findings of Nicolaisen and Thorsen (2014), loneliness in older men (60-80) was associated with childhood bullying and conflicts in the parental home.

A recent study (Ejlskov et al., 2019) found that adversities in social interactions throughout life continue to have an impact on loneliness in late adulthood, although current social relationships are more strongly associated with loneliness. Another study found that loneliness in late adulthood was associated with social engagement and that these patterns were established twenty years earlier (Dahlberg, Andersson & Lennartson, 2018). Only one qualitative study (Ciobano & Fokkema, 2020), which focused on a specific group of migrants, used a life course approach to loneliness. The study highlights the value of a life course approach by demonstrating how experiences throughout one's life contribute to feelings of loneliness as well as factors that protect against loneliness in later life.

The findings of these studies show the importance of a life course approach, as loneliness is influenced by experiences from childhood to later life. However, the limited research that takes a life course approach is mostly quantitative. More research is required to understand how experiences throughout one's life influence feelings of loneliness. This study aims to fill this gap by conducting a qualitative study into loneliness-provoking experiences from the perspective of older adults.

## **Life-events**

The goal of this study is to provide insight into how one's life experiences influence loneliness. Life experiences are examined in this study by looking at "major life events." Major life events occur over the course of a person's life and are defined as: "time discrete transitions that mark the beginning or end of a specific status" (Luhmann et. al., 2012, p.594). Major life events strongly predict social network compositions (Wrzus et. al., 2013), which in turn, can affect loneliness. A recent study (Buecker et al., 2019) was especially relevant for the current study because studies examining changes in loneliness surrounding major life events are scarce. The study found that changes in loneliness were mostly associated with family-related life events. Immediate and long-lasting increases in loneliness occurred after

the transition into parenthood, widowhood and divorce.

Even though major life events are seen as potential triggers of loneliness, research on loneliness surrounding major life events is limited. The current study adds to the body of knowledge about loneliness by providing insight into the mechanisms that induce loneliness after experiencing a major life event.

## **Coping**

It is acknowledged within the life course perspective that it is important to consider how individuals shape their lives (George, 2020; Elder, Johnson & Crosnoe, 2003). This also applies to older people, as previous research has shown that they are not passive actors and use strategies to cope with loneliness (Kharicha et. al., 2018). More research is needed to understand how older adults themselves manage loneliness (Morgan & Burholt, 2020).

Nonetheless, several qualitative studies on how older adults cope with loneliness were identified. Responses to loneliness were influenced by life experiences, whether people lived alone or with others, and their social networks. Many older adults stress the importance of staying active. Some prefer to distract themselves by engaging in solitary activities such as watching television, gardening, and reading, whereas others actively seek the companionship of others by volunteering and making new connections. Cognitive strategies, such as positive re-framing or lowering expectations for social interactions, are also common (Kharicha et. al., 2018; Morgan & Burholt, 2020; Rokach, 2018).

This study seeks to fill two gaps in the existing coping literature. First, while some studies mention that life experiences shape coping strategies (e.g., Kharicha et al., 2018), it is not always clear what experiences were addressed or how they influenced participants' coping strategies. This study therefore focuses on the coping strategies that participants use to alleviate loneliness during or after a life-event. Second, most coping studies include a sample of older adults who are currently lonely. This study also includes participants who overcame loneliness, which can shed light on the effective coping strategies used by these older adults.

## **Conceptual framework**

The purpose of this study is to investigate how older adults aged 65 and over make sense of loneliness throughout their lives. More specifically, this study investigates how life events affect feelings of loneliness, how older adults perceive loneliness and how older adults have used coping strategies to manage or alleviate loneliness. Because no existing theory on loneliness addresses all these issues, this study employs an exploratory framework, which takes into account how older adults make sense of loneliness in their life course, the life course perspective (Elder, Johnson & Crosnoe, 2003) and coping frameworks (Folkman & Lazarus, 1980; Rokach, 2018).

### **Sense making**

This research will be guided by interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). People are viewed as sense-making creatures in this methodology (Smith et. al., 2009). The idea behind sense making is that when people are confronted with a major life experience, they will spend a significant amount of time reflecting, thinking, and feeling to figure out what it means to them. As a result, the meaning that a participant assigns to an experience can be said to represent the experience itself (Smith et. al., 2009). Therefore, this study aims to capture older people's sense-making processes in terms of how they make sense of loneliness throughout their lives.

### **Life course perspective**

There is a consensus in the literature that loneliness is a subjective experience caused by a discrepancy between individual's desired and achieved levels of social relationships (Peplau & Perlman, 1982; Ciobanu & Fokkema, 2020). Understanding what drives our perceptions of the quality and quantity of our social relationships seems the key to a better understanding of what causes loneliness (Ejlskov, 2019). Such an understanding may be found by using a life course approach to loneliness. Therefore, the life course perspective (Elder, Johnson & Corsnoe, 2003) was incorporated into this study. Although the life course perspective has not been frequently used in loneliness research, more scholars are recognizing its importance in studying loneliness (Ciobanu & Fokkema, 2020; Victor et. al. 2015; Ejlskov, 2019).

The core propositions of the life course perspective are that lives unfold over time and that events and circumstances in earlier stages of the life course have long-term consequences



in later life. The life course perspective is founded on five core principles: time, historical context, interpersonal relationships, and human agency (Elder, Johnson & Corsnoe, 2003; George, 2020). Because this study investigates how life events affect feelings of loneliness over the course of a person's life and how older adults have utilized coping strategies to manage loneliness, the principles of time and human agency are relevant. The meaning of these principles will be explained below.

*Timing and critical periods:* First, this dimension recognizes that events or experiences can have different effects on an outcome depending on the age at which they occur. There are few studies in loneliness research that test this hypothesis, but there is some evidence that adverse childhood experiences can influence loneliness in late adulthood (Kamiya et al., 2013; Nicolaisen & Thorsen, 2014). Second, critical periods are times in one's life that have a large impact on subsequent life outcomes. This study analyzes critical periods by investigating how life events affect feelings of loneliness.

*Human agency:* It is acknowledged within the life course perspective that it is important to consider how individuals shape their lives (George, 2020; Elder, Johnson & Crosnoe, 2003). This also applies to older people, as previous research has shown that they use strategies to cope with loneliness (Kharicha et. al., 2018). This study incorporates the principle of human agency by examining older adults' coping strategies. Coping can be defined as: “the cognitive and behavioral efforts made to master, tolerate, or reduce external and internal demands and conflicts among them.” (Folkman & Lazarus, 1980, p. 223). In this study, two coping frameworks are combined to examine the coping strategies of older adults: coping theory developed by Lazarus and Folkman (1980) and the six dimensions of coping by Rokach (2018). Each will be explained below.

Coping theory (Lazarus & Folkman, 1980), is one of the most influential frameworks of stress and coping, and is frequently used in studies on coping with loneliness (e.g. Schoenmakers et. al., 2015). A distinction is made between two coping strategies:

1. Problem focused coping involves endeavors to deal with stress by actively targeting the issue at hand. An example is taking action to improve one's social relationships.
2. Emotion focused coping refers to attempts to control one's emotional responses to a stressful situation. An example is seeking distraction.

The evidence of the effectiveness of these coping strategies seems inconclusive. A review of the literature on the relationship between loneliness and coping strategies found that

problem-focused coping styles were associated with lower levels of loneliness, whereas emotion-focused coping styles were associated with higher levels of loneliness (Deckx et. al., 2018). However, the findings of Schoenmakers and colleagues (2015) found that neither coping strategy reduced the likelihood of loneliness. This study may shed more light on the efficacy of these coping strategies.

Rokach (2018) conducted qualitative studies to study how individuals perceive the efficacy of their coping strategies. The variety of effective coping strategies could be grouped into six dimensions:

1. *Acceptance and reflection* is focused on the opportunity of being with one's self and becoming aware of one's fears and needs. Reflection and acceptance indicate the need for an encounter with oneself and direct confrontation with one's loneliness.
2. *Self-development and understanding* refers to the increased self-awareness and growth that often occurs as a result of professional guidance.
3. *A social support network* needs to be re-established or altered if it is not satisfactory. Individuals who are satisfied with their social support network are more likely to be optimistic and resilient.
4. *Distancing and denial* include attempts to deny the experience or to distance oneself from the pain and desperation that loneliness can cause. Denial may offer some temporal relief and some space to process the situation one is in, but it is not seen as effective in the long-term.
5. *Religion and faith* allow individuals to gain strength, inner peace and a sense of belonging when connected to an entity or God.
6. *Increased activity* includes strategies in which a person pursues activities that create opportunities for social contact.

Outside of the founding author's research, these six dimensions have been used to a lesser extent, but it appears promising to qualitatively structure participant accounts of coping and is an addition to coping theory because it offers a broader categorization of coping strategies. The dimensions will be used in this study to group older adults coping strategies and how they perceive the effectiveness of these strategies.

## Research questions and expectations

As illustrated, studying loneliness over the course of older people's lives is a promising avenue to increase our understanding of the roots of loneliness. Furthermore, more research is needed to understand how life events affect feelings of loneliness and how older adults cope with loneliness.

Therefore, the main question is: *How do older adults make sense of loneliness in their life course?* Which is followed by these sub-questions and expectations:

*How do life-events affect feelings of loneliness?*

Based on the life course perspective and literature on loneliness provoking life-events (Nicolaisen & Thorsen, 2014; Kamiya et. al., 2013) this study expects to find that both early- and later life events affect feelings of loneliness. In addition, based on the findings of a study by Buecker and colleagues (2019), this study expects to find that mainly family related life events induce feelings of loneliness.

*How do older adults perceive loneliness?*

Based on the literature on the experience of loneliness (e.g. Kitzmuller et. al., 2017) this study anticipates that loneliness is perceived as a predominantly negative experience by older adults.

*How have older adults utilized coping strategies to manage or alleviate loneliness throughout their life?*

Based on the literature on coping (Kharicha et. al., 2018), this study expects to find that older adults adopt a range of strategies to cope with loneliness. In addition, following coping theory (Lazarus & Folkman, 1980) and Rokach's (2018) six dimensions of coping, this study anticipates that participants who overcame feelings of loneliness used predominantly problem-focused and/or coping strategies classified in the six dimensions of coping, whereas participants who feel lonely employ emotion-focused coping styles.

## **Methods**

### **Research design**

A qualitative approach was chosen because loneliness is a subjective experience and an in-depth qualitative study of the experiences of older people is needed to increase our understanding of the roots of loneliness. More specifically, this study is guided by interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). IPA is an approach to qualitative and psychological research and allows for a deep understanding of the personal lived experience (Smith et. al., 2009). As such, IPA appears suitable to study a complex experience such as loneliness which has been given a variety of definitions and meaning. This approach is also relevant to research areas that are understudied (Smith et. al., 2009) and therefore considered appropriate for this study, as research has rarely sought to situate loneliness in the life course of older people.

A two-stage interpretation process is central to IPA (Smith et. al., 2009). On the one hand the participant is trying to make sense of their experience. On the other hand, the researcher is trying to make sense of the participant trying to make sense of their experience. It is crucial to engage with the life world of the participant, yet a thorough IPA analysis also involves stepping back to critically analyze the participant's account (Smith et. al., 2009). This two-stage interpretation process was evident throughout this study. In-depth interviews allowed the researcher to get close to the participants' loneliness experiences, and rich experiential descriptions based on the participant's own descriptions were established; yet the analysis also included a critical examination of emerging patterns in participants stories.

### **Sample**

This study was carried out in the municipality of Lochem, located in the Dutch province of Gelderland. The municipality has a relatively high number of older inhabitants, with 28.1% being over the age of 65 (CBS, 2020). In 2016, 39% of older adults aged 65 and over expressed feelings of loneliness (RIVM, 2016). The sample for this study compromised 11 older adults: 9 women and 2 men between the ages of 68 and 88. Table 1 displays the characteristics of the participants.

Participants were included if they were 65 or older with current or past experiences of loneliness. The recruitment process was executed in collaboration with the research internship organization, Stichting Welzijn Lochem (SWL) (local welfare organization). The author developed a flyer with a description of the research and eligibility criteria. The flyer was

distributed via social media of SWL and in the newspaper for volunteers of the organization.

Some of those who initially responded decided not to participate in the study because they were too affected by the subject. Since several dropped out prematurely, the recruitment process took longer than expected. Additional recruitment strategies were needed, and some participants of this study were approached directly during an online activity organized by SWL.

**Table 1.** Sample characteristics of participants

Name*	Age	Gender	Living status	Marital status	Nationality	Ethnicity	Duration of the interview
1. Emma	88	Female	Living alone	Widowed	Dutch	White	1 hour 17 mins
2. Margaret	80	Female	Living alone	Widowed	Dutch	White	1 hour 10 mins
3. Lisa	77	Female	Living alone	Divorced	Dutch	White	1 hour 50 mins
4. Ria	74	Female	With partner	Relationship	Dutch	White	1 hour 10 mins
5. Ellen	70	Female	Living alone	Divorced	Dutch	White	2 hours
6. Amy	70	Female	Living alone	Divorced	Dutch	White	1 hour 30 mins
7. Tom	83	Male	Living alone	Widowed	Dutch	White	2 hours 50 mins
8. Erica	68	Female	Living alone	Divorced	Dutch	White	2 hours
9. Eric	74	Male	Living alone	Divorced	Dutch	White	2 hours
10. Cathy	78	Female	Living alone	Divorced	Dutch	White	2 hours 30 mins
11. Irene	84	Female	Living alone	Widowed	Dutch	White	2 hours

\*Names provided are all pseudonyms

## Data collection

The researcher conducted semi-structured interviews (in Dutch), which is the most common data collection instrument in IPA studies (Smith et. al., 2009). Semi-structured interviews are flexible, and the initial questions can be altered based on participant responses to further explore interesting areas that may arise during the interview. A topic list with questions was developed (see appendix C). The topic list was developed with sensitivity to the theoretical framework and literature, covering three broad areas: the experience of loneliness, an exploration of life events that caused feelings of loneliness, and coping strategies used to manage feelings of loneliness.

The author of this study conducted the interviews, which lasted between 1 and nearly 3 hours. The researcher wanted to make sure that the participants felt at ease before questions about loneliness were introduced. The first few questions addressed how the participants were faring during the corona pandemic, what kept them busy etc.

Despite the pandemic, most interviews were conducted at the participants homes (at 1,5-meter distance) but some preferred to be interviewed outside of their home in a private area of the internship organization. Field notes were taken after each interview to provide a preliminary interpretation of the interview.

All participants were informed about the study and provided active consent prior to the interview. The researcher also asked participants for permission to contact them via phone a few days after the interview to ask how they were doing and to refer them to the internship organization's elderly advisor when necessary. Some agreed and were approached 2-5 days after the interview.

### **Data analysis**

The main analytic focus in IPA research is to gain a deeper understanding of the participant's attempts to make sense of their experiences. The methodology is characterized by common processes such as moving from the particular to the shared and a commitment to understanding the participant's point of view (Smith et. al., 2009). A set of steps to analysis is provided by Smith and colleagues (2009), these steps were followed and described below.

First, all interviews were transcribed verbatim, resulting in a data set of 220 pages. After transcribing, each transcript was read several times, and the left-hand margin was used to note anything interesting or relevant. The field notes were also incorporated during this process to reflect on initial interpretations. Second, a theme box<sup>1</sup> was created for every participant. These included an overview of the participant, their loneliness experience(s) and how they coped with loneliness along with supporting text and illustrative quotes. This strategy was chosen to keep an idiographic commitment to the data. Idiographic in IPA means a detailed examination of what an experience is like for a certain individual (Smith et. al., 2009). After completing the theme boxes, the researcher incorporated a form of investigator triangulation (Noble & Heal, 2019) by presenting the on-site supervisor with a few anonymized transcripts and theme boxes to examine whether there was a shared consensus about the most emergent themes in participant's stories. The interpretations of the themes turned out to be similar, increasing the validity and credibility of the findings (Noble & Heal, 2019).

Finally, all theme boxes were uploaded in Nvivo to start the identification of broader shared themes in the data. A combination of theory driven deductive codes and emerging

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<sup>1</sup> Theme boxes can be made available upon request.

inductive codes were used to code the data. Relevant sentences or words were coded using 'open coding' until saturation was reached, at which point no new codes were required to label relevant fragments (Boeije & Bleijenbergh, 2019). When patterns emerged in the data, the open codes were rearranged to establish categories using 'axial coding' (Boeije & Bleijenbergh, 2019). Coping strategies of participants were mostly coded deductively, utilizing categorizations based on coping theory by Lazarus and Folkman (1980) and the six dimensions of coping by Rokach (2018). Life events and participants perceptions of loneliness were inductively coded. The researcher took notes and memos throughout the research process to document the analytical process and personal interpretations. See appendix A for the final code tree.

### **Data management**

The data was stored according to the data management rules of Utrecht University. All interviews were audio-recorded on a secure device from Techsupport Utrecht University. The audio recordings were immediately stored in Yoda and removed from the device. After transcribing, the audio recordings and transcripts were stripped of all data and information that can be traced back to the person. A separate document was created in Yoda with the contact information of the participants who want to be informed of the study's findings. This document will be removed after the participants are informed about the study's findings. The data analysis took place on a secure laptop from Utrecht University.

## **Findings**

The findings of the data analysis are presented in this section. Findings are presented for each research question and are structured by identified themes that emerged from the data. Quotes<sup>2</sup> from participants are presented with a pseudonymized name.

### **How do life-events affect feelings of loneliness?**

The participants described a range of life events that they associated with loneliness at various stages of their lives (see table 2). Most participants experience loneliness as a result of family-

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<sup>2</sup> Quotes were translated from Dutch to English. The quotes in the Dutch language can be made available upon request.

related life events (divorce and widowhood). These life events will be described, followed by accounts demonstrating how childhood adversities can influence loneliness later in life. Finally, some examples of life events unique to participants stories are presented.

## **Divorce**

Divorce was the most frequently mentioned life event that influenced participants' feelings of loneliness. The emotional impact was large regardless of the age at which they got divorced. One clear example was given by Eric (74). He divorced for the first time in his twenties, but the divorce when he was seventy had the largest impact on him, demonstrated by his post-divorce feelings: *"yeah I.. some kind of despair and not seeing a way out.. how on earth do I have to get out of this, I couldn't sleep, I was up all-night wandering through the house. Drinking a cup of tea.. trying to read something, trying to listen to the radio.. I slept so bad. I was exhausted."*

Lisa (77), a participant who divorced three times in her life, describes the loneliness she felt after each divorce as losing a piece of herself and her identity: *"so yeah loneliness, that is when that ends, you lose a piece of your life. I went way too much into the direction that the men wanted to go, and I lost a piece of myself, my own me. And when that disappears you are lonely."*

The loss of family and friends following a divorce was a recurring theme that contributed to loneliness for participants. Mutual friends continued without them, causing feelings of pain and close relationships with a former partner's family ended.

## **Losing one's partner(s)**

Two participants lost their partner(s). Emma (88) lost three partners in her life, which made her feel lonely at the time, but she understands and accepts it as a part of life. The loss of a partner in her story is not only related to their death but she also lost her last partner in a way before he passed away: *"He got a cerebral infarction and spent a year in a care home before he died. He was such a sweet caring man but changed completely after the event. That is loneliness, what you loved the most changed completely and is no longer there."*

Margaret (80) recently lost her spouse and misses the attention she used to get from him. She also emphasizes the need to build a new social routine as an individual as she is no longer part of a couple.

Irene (84) is different from the other participants, in that she lost her husband two years ago, but never identified the event as something that made her feel lonely. She is



surrounded by a support network that she had her entire life, which appears to be a buffer against loneliness. She also appears to be capable of entertaining herself when she spends time alone: *“Someone said to me last week you live alone and that must be lonely, and I said, there is always something to do, and I never feel lonely.”*

### **Early life circumstances and a lasting influence on loneliness**

Two participants mentioned childhood difficulties that had a lasting impact on loneliness later in life, one of them being Cathy (78). She was diagnosed with ADHD two years ago. When she was younger, no one knew about it or was diagnosed with it. Cathy felt mistreated in her childhood home, and no one seemed to understand her: *“in my family they always said.. when I couldn’t do a chore or something I was dumb and lazy and I wasn’t capable of anything. I heard it so many times.. as a child you don’t know what to do anymore”*. She was also bullied by other children in her childhood. It became apparent that these events had a long-term influence on her feelings of loneliness: *“I feel like I don’t belong anywhere.. many don’t know what it is like to have no one to talk to or who understands you.. [crying] that someone loves you and likes you.. and that is all related to my childhood [crying].”* Cathy appears to have experienced so much rejection that she finds it difficult to recognize when people are sincere. Several times during the interview, she mentions positive occurrences involving other people, but she primarily dwells on what she perceives to be negative.

Ria (74), a participant who is currently lonely, demonstrates how moving at a young age can have a long-term impact on feelings of loneliness throughout one's life. When she was 16, she moved to another city: *“moving children at that age isn’t good, if they are four or five they can adjust but not at the age of 16/17.. it decided the course of my life.. from that moment it was never pleasant again [cries].”* Her parents did not provide her with the necessary support, and she explains, without going into detail, how she ended up in some bad relationships. Her loneliness is worsened by the realization that her life could have turned out differently.

### **Other life-events related to loneliness**

Some life-events in the life course of participants were unique and not present in the stories of other participants. An example is Erica (68). She has a rare medical condition that makes her hypersensitive to various chemicals. This makes interaction with people difficult, as exposure to certain chemicals cause an allergic response. She describes how she felt the

moment she got her diagnosis as follows: “*you have nothing left but a strict diet, a label that doesn’t solve anything and injections that you have to force in every day but won’t help. And there you are, no husband, no stepchildren no job and then you think yea.. what is the point of all this now*”.

Erica was in a very dark place and questioned for who or what she was still living causing intense loneliness. She still feels lonely, but her situation improved because she learned to manage it in a way, which will be discussed under coping.

Another example is from Emma, the only participant who describes loneliness after losing a child: “*I lost my first child, a son. He passed after three weeks. That is such a.. it hits hard. And I remember standing by the phone and my husband was a bit further down the hall, and I had to tell my family that my son passed away. Well.. if I think about that moment [emotional].. I thought I had a husband that would take care of me, but he couldn’t, he was too sensitive.*”

**Table 2.** Life-events associated with loneliness

Life-events	Present in participants accounts
Marriage troubles and divorce	Ellen, Cathy, Eric, Lisa, Erica & Amy
Personal illness	Erica
Losing a child	Emma
Losing partner(s)	Emma, Margaret & Irene
Troubles in childhood	Cathy & Ria
Living with ADHD	Cathy
Left alone at birth	Emma

## How do older adults perceive loneliness?

During the analysis, several shared themes related to participant’s perceptions of loneliness were identified: ‘alone and loneliness’, ‘Timing of loneliness’, ‘rejection and disappointment’, ‘loneliness as reminiscence’, ‘loneliness as not belonging’ and ‘existential loneliness’. However, many distinct and complex perceptions and feelings of loneliness were not shared by more participants, emphasizing the subjective nature of loneliness. Shared

themes will be described below and table 3 includes unique perceptions and feelings of loneliness.

### **Alone and loneliness**

Participants understood being alone as related to loneliness yet being alone does not always cause loneliness. Irene describes herself as being alone, but never feels lonely. Erica describes being alone as a situation that is twofold: *“the positive side to it is freedom and the negative side is loneliness”*. Emma understands loneliness and alone as related but both phenomena can also be present on their own: *“Being alone is a status, a sense of being. Loneliness is a feeling, a feeling of being closed off from everything and everyone, both phenomena can be present on their own but also at the same time.”*

### **Timing of loneliness**

For most participants, feelings of loneliness were most prominent in the evenings and weekends when there is less distraction. It was also mentioned in some interviews, that the intensity of loneliness can vary by day, week, or month.

### **Rejection and disappointment**

Some participants who are currently lonely feel rejection and disappointment when attempts to connect with people go unanswered. Feelings of rejection and disappointment were also present when a social situation or person did not live up to their expectations. Having experienced rejection can become a barrier to reach out to others, as some participants are afraid that they will be rejected again.

### **Loneliness as reminiscence**

Loneliness was associated with memories for some participants. Tom for example, actively compares his youth to his current life: *“I think, how is it possible that once you get older all these friendships just disappear. We used to go to church together and go out dancing and that is gone. Kind of strange but that happens when you get older. And that is something I think about a lot, I used to have a great life compared to now.”*

### **Loneliness and not belonging**

Two participants perceive loneliness as not belonging to other people but the meaning they assign to not belonging differs. Cathy expresses that no one cares about her and that she

is not accepted by others. She also experiences a lack of belonging because people do not invite her to activities. For Lisa, the feeling of not belonging became salient after her divorces, the people that once belonged to her disappeared: *“a feeling that the people you care about don’t belong to you or no longer belong to you, when you get married a large catholic family with a lot going on.. that is there for you when trouble arises. When you divorce that disappears and you will miss that.”*

### **Existential loneliness**

Several participants gave descriptions of loneliness that resonated with existential loneliness. In the literature, existential loneliness is the outcome of a deeper separation from the nature of existence, specifically an absence of meaning in life (Larsson et. al., 2019). Tom, for example, states that a lack of meaning in his life contributes to his feelings of loneliness. This lack of meaning is expressed by him as follows: *“I would like to mean something in this life.. that is what we all want, that is what you hear from a lot of people, they want to do something useful or else you are useless. In fact, if I sit here a whole week doing nothing but eating, reading and drinking then you are useless. I still want to mean something, even though I am old.”* Some participants perceptions of loneliness relate to a fundamental separation from others, as expressed by Erica: *“what it really comes down to is that you are always alone.. that isn’t related to unwillingness of people, but the crucial moments of birth, death.. in the deepest of deep you are on your own.”*

**Table 3.** Participant's unique perceptions and feelings of loneliness.

Theme	Sub theme(s)	Participant	Extract
Loneliness as a feeling that you can or cannot do something with		Emma (88)	“you go.. because what is loneliness? I found an expression for it but.. I think it is predominantly a feeling. In my case, it is a feeling that you can or cannot do something about or with. But that is dependent on your own character and the circumstances.”
Loneliness as a feeling of sadness and anger			“it was.. it was something between sadness and anger. It was the same as when my mother referred me to the bible and did not answer my questions. Yeah then you get.. that was not only sadness but then you get angry. Darn it, I want to know something, I need something, and I do not get it.”
Loneliness as a moment of unhappiness when thinking about life		Tom (83)	“And then I sit here alone thinking about my own life.. how it is. And I feel bad. I think well this is it..you sit here and this is what you are now, and someone can say oh but you are old now but that isn't relevant because you are as you are. And I have those moments where you say I don't feel like I should, that you think life is beautiful. Actually, there is nothing to it you think.”
Loneliness as a confrontation with the self	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Importance of staying close to yourself</li> <li>Loneliness as despair after divorce</li> </ul>	Eric (74)	“but you know when you think you are so flexible and that you can just flutter through everything.. that you can manage to solve everything.. yea that is fun and may be useful but you forget to stay close to yourself.. and that is what I was confronted with in the silence and loneliness.”
Loneliness as a feeling of despair and restlessness			“yeah I .. some kind of despair and not seeing a way out.. how on earth do I have to get out of this, I couldn't sleep, I was up all-night wandering through the house. Drinking a cup of tea.. trying to read something, trying to listen to the radio.. I slept so bad. I was exhausted.”

Loneliness as a lack of feeling secure and protected	Lack of feeling secure and protected with partner and in society.	Ria (74)	“in this day and age.. organizations don’t do much for you. They say do this and that.. but people don’t.. they used to guide you but now they just give you addresses and that’s it. A lot has changed the last twenty.. maybe longer, here you have addresses, and you have to work it out for yourself. But people don’t want that if you feel like this.. they can’t do it anymore. That is it.. and that is what is going on in society now”
Loneliness as behavior		Amy (70)	“loneliness is a verb.. loneliness is behavior, are you going to be pro-active or are you going to be the victim, it is related to the choices that you make in your life and am I going to let myself slide into a certain state or am I going to actively try to alter the situation.. I think that is at the core of loneliness”.
Loneliness as feeling soggy and related to self-discipline		Erica (68)	“if you are lonely everything is related to self-discipline, the freedom I have means that I need self-discipline to do the things that are important”
Loneliness can be good for a person		Lisa (77)	“you are redirected to yourself, and that is what is positive about the current corona measures. Life was such a rat race, and everything was entertainment. Do nothing for a bit and see if you can still be bored, it would be good if people would get bored and realize what is happening to them. If you are bored, you realize what is truly important to you and that can be different for everyone”
Not being able to share things with someone		Ellen (70)	“I am mostly bothered by not being able to share things with someone else, when I come into the house for instance and it was cold outside, I can’t say, it was very cold.”

## **How have older adults utilized coping strategies to manage or alleviate loneliness throughout their life?**

The analysis revealed that older adults utilized a range of coping strategies to manage loneliness and many of those could be linked to coping theory by Lazarus & Folkman (1980) and the six dimensions of coping by Rokach (2018). See appendix B for an overview of coping strategies used per participant.

### **Reflection and acceptance and self-development and understanding**

The dimensions of reflection and acceptance followed by a phase of self-development and understanding (Rokach, 2018) were present in the accounts of two participants. Eric eventually overcame his loneliness and Erica still feels lonely, but her feelings improved. Their life courses are different, but they both went through a period of acceptance and reflection in which they had to face their loneliness head on. After his divorce, Eric went through a period of despair and restlessness. Similarly, Erica experienced a dark period following the diagnosis of her rare medical condition. However, after confronting their loneliness directly, there was a turning point in their stories where they could enter a phase of self-development. For Eric, the help of a professional and applied philosophy courses stimulated personal growth to overcome the loneliness he felt as he “found himself again”. Erica learned to find meaning within herself: *“people search the meaning of their existence outside of themselves. Meaning something to another, of course that feels great like putting an ointment on a sore spot but maybe the meaning of your existence can be found within, what do you learn, what makes you grow.. so your focus changes. And I think that is the benefit of being alone.”*

### **Emotion-focused coping**

Emotion-focused coping styles were mostly present in the accounts of participants that currently feel lonely. It appears to provide temporary relief, but it does not address the underlying cause of the participants’ loneliness. Participants frequently mention seeking distraction in the form of individual activities such as gardening, watching television and walking. In Cathy’s case, her emotion-focused coping habits became salient during the corona crisis when many of her usual activities disappeared. She relied heavily on distraction to avoid

feelings of loneliness.

Some participants try to lower their expectations because they have been disappointed in the past when they expected more from people or social events. Ellen describes this difficulty as follows: *“well then I expect something and.. then you go somewhere and you think no it was not.. I expected more or something. Or you expect something from someone that you think oh what a nice person and then you think he or she will say this or that or ask me or.. and that does not happen and then.. well then you are disappointed. I need to learn to not do that anymore.”*

### **Problem-focused coping**

Problem-focused coping styles were most prominent in the stories of participants that overcame loneliness. The coping dimensions of re-establishing a social network and increased (social) activity by Rokach (2018) were linked to this theme as specific problem-focused strategies. Eric for example, took part in new activities after his divorce that enabled him to discover new friendships and interests: *“singles and widowers can join that club, well after some mailing we had a gathering and we had an amazing weekend.. we walked, we cycled.. we were sitting in a large circle on a camp site and told each other stories”*. Like Eric, Amy also managed to overcome loneliness after her divorce. Her pro-active attitude becomes evident in the way that she re-established and mended her social network. Some of her friends were leaving her as their husbands were not interested in visiting her because there was no man to talk to and she started to look for solutions to keep in touch with them: *“so then I started to design a different concept of social interaction with them, we visit each other but their husband isn’t really around or they show themselves occasionally, I developed new ways to keep seeing these people.”* She also attended workshops and dancing classes to get in touch with new people.

Some participants that currently feel lonely cope with loneliness in a way that resonates with the dimension of increased (social) activity by Rokach (2018). An example is doing or considering voluntary work. This offers the opportunity to meet others, keeps participants occupied and provides meaning in their life. Another example comes from Margaret, a recently widowed participant who pursues activities that create the opportunity for social contact such as an online coffee hour. She also intends to join eating clubs when they are allowed to re-open. Erica also joins the online coffee hour to interact with other people and it suits her because she can join without being afraid that chemicals in someone’s perfume cause an allergic response.



### **Other coping strategies**

The dimension of religion and faith by Rokach (2018) is present in Erica's story. To find new meaning in her life after her diagnosis, she dived into topics such as philosophy and religion. She takes something from every religion that has her interest: *"I look for wisdom in religions and then I think Buddhism says things short and beautiful, to the point. In my opinion that does not clash with Christianity, I do not need to choose one. I just think, I like that, and I think it offers me a sense of meaning."* Other factors that helped older adults cope with loneliness are the availability of a social support network, doing something new every day and learning to appreciate adversity as a phase that stimulates personal growth and self-understanding.

### **Needs**

Lonely participants were eager to express what they want and need to cope with loneliness (see appendix D). The most striking finding is that participants need someone with whom to share their life story. All participants stated that discussing their life and loneliness provided them with new insights and a better understanding of themselves.

## **Discussion**

### **Main findings**

#### **How do life events affect feelings of loneliness?**

The findings show that older people describe a variety of life events as being related to loneliness at various life stages. Participants, as expected, report feelings of loneliness as a result of family-related life events such as widowhood and, in particular, divorce. These findings corroborate findings by Buecker and colleagues (2019). They also discovered a greater reduction of loneliness among those who divorced later in life, leading them to speculate that older persons may be better able to deal with adversity. This was not corroborated by participants in this study, as the emotional impact of divorce was large regardless of the age at which they divorced. Emotional loneliness can occur following divorce and widowhood because an intimate partner relationship ends, resulting in feelings of abandonment and forlornness, according to the attachment perspective (Weis, 1973). Participants who had lost their partner and some divorcees expressed these feelings, but divorcees also emphasized the loss of friends and family following divorce as contributing to their loneliness, which is consistent with other research (Lampraki et. al., 2019). The findings also revealed, as expected, that childhood adversities had long-lasting effects on loneliness in late adulthood, as found in other studies (Nicolaisen & Thorsen, 2014; Kamiya et. al., 2013). ADHD and moving at a young age, in particular, contributed to feelings of loneliness in late adulthood. This study also highlighted some unique life events. An example is a participant suffering from a rare chemical sensitivity disorder that severely limits her ability to interact socially.

#### **How do older adults perceive loneliness?**

Several shared themes related to participant's perceptions of loneliness were identified: 'alone and loneliness', 'Timing of loneliness', 'rejection and disappointment', 'loneliness as reminiscence', 'loneliness as not belonging' and 'existential loneliness'. However, distinct perceptions and feelings of loneliness were also discovered, highlighting the heterogeneity of loneliness. Loneliness was, as expected, primarily a negative experience, as found in other studies (e.g. Kitzmuller et. al., 2017). However, the findings also reveal that loneliness can have a positive side, stimulating personal growth and development. This was also found in other studies (Graheneheim & Lundman, 2010; Dahlberg, 2007), but only if loneliness was voluntarily. This was not the case for some participants in this study, as

loneliness had been a distressing involuntary experience for them, but they perceived it as a phase of personal growth in their life. The study also shed light on a type of loneliness that has received less attention in the literature: 'existential loneliness.' Existential loneliness is the outcome of a deeper separation from the nature of existence, specifically an absence of meaning in life (Larsson et. al., 2019). One participant underlined the necessity of meaning in life because a lack of it caused him to feel lonely and useless. Other participants described a fundamental separation from others and the sense of being always alone in a way. This was not necessarily a bad thing for the participants; they accepted it as a normal part of life.

### **How have older adults utilized coping strategies to manage or alleviate loneliness throughout their life?**

The findings reveal that older persons used multiple coping strategies to manage or alleviate loneliness, as expected, and described in other studies (Kharicha et al., 2018; Morgan & Burholt, 2020). Strategies could be linked to coping theory by Lazarus & Folkman (1980) and the six dimensions of coping by Rokach (2018). As expected, emotion-focused coping was prominent in the accounts of people who are currently lonely. It offered temporal relief for participants, but it did not address the underlying cause of their loneliness. Problem-focused coping styles were most prevalent in the accounts of participants who overcame loneliness, as expected by this study. The coping dimensions of re-establishing a social network and increased (social) activity by Rokach (2018) could be linked to this theme as specific problem-focused coping strategies. A systematic review also discovered that problem-focused coping strategies were more effective than emotion-focused coping styles (Deckx et. al., 2018). However, another study found neither emotional- or problem focused coping to be effective (Schoenmakers et. al., 2015). In this study, problem-focused strategies appeared to target the root of participants' loneliness, effectively alleviating feelings of loneliness. Furthermore, Rokach's framework (2018) aided in the discovery of reflection and acceptance, as well as self-development and understanding, as two relatively novel effective coping strategies. Another finding was that participants have a shared need to tell their life stories, which could help them cope.

### **How do older adults make sense of loneliness?**

This study discovered that there is not one way in which older adults make sense of their loneliness because participants' life stories are very different, resulting in different experiences of loneliness. What participants in the study agreed on was that loneliness is not

limited to old age. Most participants experienced multiple lonely moments in their life at different life stages. Participants mentioned the interplay between life events, their perception of loneliness, and how they coped when discussing loneliness, emphasizing the importance of addressing these three topics to gain a comprehensive understanding of a person's experience of loneliness.

### **Strengths and limitations**

One of the study's strengths is its high ecological validity, as the findings are directly derived from participants' real-life experiences. However, one potential limitation is that this study includes retrospective data, which could lead to recall bias. This is not a major disadvantage for this study because it aims to capture older people's sense-making processes, and their recollection of experiences represents their way of assigning meaning to an experience.

The validity of the findings in qualitative research is related to carefully documenting, recording and continual verification of the data (Cypress, 2017). This study provided a thorough description of the research process, and the theme boxes and coding tree can be accessed to allow for intersubjectivity (Cypress, 2017). A potential threat to the validity is researcher bias (Cypress, 2017; Boeije & Beijenbergh, 2019). Therefore, the researcher actively engaged in critical self-reflection throughout research process to identify potential biases and predispositions. In addition, the researcher checked her interpretations with the on-site supervisor. The interpretations turned out to be similar, increasing the validity and credibility of the findings (Noble & Heal, 2019).

The generalizability of the results can be considered limited due to the small sample size from a rural municipality in the Netherlands. However, the aim was to perform a detailed case-by-case analysis of the perceptions and understandings of this group of participants rather than general claims. The descriptions of participants' experiences would most likely be less rich and detailed in a larger sample size.

This study was conducted during the corona pandemic with socially restricting measures which could have influenced the results and the recollection of the intensity of feelings of loneliness. However, this seems unlikely as participants that were feeling lonelier during the corona pandemic expressed this during the interview (only two) and made a clear distinction between the situation before corona and during.

## **Implications and recommendations**

First, the findings of this study have implications for theory. While it is confirmed that loneliness is related to desired or actual levels of social contact (Peplau & Perlman, 1982), this study has shown that theories on loneliness should also consider one's life course and events that contribute to the onset of loneliness. A recommendation for future research is to study protective- and risk factors for loneliness from the perspective of older people and/or personality characteristics of individuals that experience loneliness in (later) life. These insights can further enrich the theoretical knowledge on loneliness.

Second, the study's findings have implications for policy and intervention. In the Netherlands, the Dutch government developed the program 'one against loneliness' (VWS, 2018). The main aim of the program is to reduce loneliness among older adults. While this is an important initiative, programs like these should also consider loneliness prevention. The findings revealed that for some participants, the onset of loneliness began in childhood and continued into (late) adulthood. It is recommended to include interventions aimed at tackling loneliness earlier in the life course. This may prevent (severe) loneliness in later life.

Third, this study has implications for practice and emphasizes the need for a tailored approach to tackle loneliness. A promising avenue is life story telling as participants in the study expressed a need to talk about loneliness and their life stories. In addition, the insight into how different life events affect loneliness can further enhance the development of interventions to support people during or after a life event to prevent the onset of (severe) loneliness. It is also recommended to conduct more qualitative research on the association between life events and loneliness to increase our understanding of how these events affect loneliness.

This study demonstrated that loneliness is not confined to later life and that experiences throughout one's life have an impact on loneliness. Furthermore, this study shed light on how life events influence loneliness, how loneliness is perceived by older adults and what coping strategies may help (older) adults cope with loneliness. These insights emphasize the heterogeneity of loneliness in later life and the need to adopt a broader life course perspective to increase our understanding of the roots of loneliness. These insights can contribute to the development of effective interventions to alleviate loneliness.

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## Appendix A: Outline of final structured code tree

Theme	Description	Sub-themes
<b>Life events related to loneliness</b>	This theme includes all life events in participants life stories that caused feelings of loneliness. This main theme is based on the principle of critical periods of the life course perspective (Elder, Johnson & Crosnoe). Critical periods were analyzed by looking at life events.	
<i>Divorce (family related life event)</i>	Divorce was the most frequently mentioned life event in participants stories (occurred in the stories of 6 participants).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Emotional impact large regardless of age</li> <li>• Feeling of despair and restlessness after divorce</li> <li>• Losing piece of self and identity</li> <li>• Losing place you were once familiar with</li> <li>• Loss of friends and family</li> </ul>
<i>Widowhood (family related life event)</i>	Two participants identified the loss of their partner as related to loneliness. One participant lost her partner but does not identify the event as related to loneliness.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Loss of intimate attachment figure</li> <li>• Accepting partner loss as part of life</li> </ul>

*Childhood adversities*

Two participants talked about childhood adversities that continued to influence loneliness in later life: ADHD & moving at a young age.

- Loss of partner as a result of changed character after cerebral infarction
- Missing attention of husband
- Missing someone to talk to
- Irene is an exception (never felt lonely)
- Support network as buffer against loneliness

ADHD

- Mistreated and misunderstood in parental home.
- Feeling of continuous rejection and disappointment
- Lack of receiving love and appreciation
- Late diagnosis in later life
- Rejection and disappointment
- Focusing on the negative aspects of social interactions
- Stuck in a negative spiral of self-doubt and negativity
- Lack of belonging

*Unique life events*

This theme encompassed life events that were unique in participants stories.

*Moving at a young age*

- Life could have turned out differently, realization adds to loneliness
- Moving as a catalyst for other negative events
- Lack of parental support

- Living with ADHD
- Left alone at birth (may have determined course of life and onset of independency)

*Personal illness*

- Sensitivity to various chemicals
- Imposed 'isolation cell'
- Period of intense loneliness
- Whole life changed, marriage and work collapsed after diagnosis
- Difficulty finding possibilities to socially interact (allergic response risk)

## Experiences and perceptions of loneliness

This theme encompassed perceptions and feelings of loneliness as expressed by participants. This theme is closely related to the concept of sense making in the theoretical framework. Shared themes are displayed under sub-themes and see table 2 in the results section for an overview of unique perceptions and feelings of loneliness. After the coding process, that table was created.

### Loss of first child

- Not receiving support from partner when needed.

### Alone and loneliness

- Being alone and loneliness are related
- Alone but not lonely
- Alone as a situation or sense of being

### Timing of loneliness

- Weekends/evenings
- Not a static experience

### Rejection and disappointment

- Fear of rejection as a barrier to reach out to others
- Expectations not being met

### Loneliness as reminiscence

- Comparing youth to current life causes loneliness

- Past life

Loneliness as not belonging

- Feeling that no one cares about her (Cathy)
- People not belonging to you after divorce
- Not included in activities

Existential loneliness

- Fundamental separation from others
- No one truly knows you
- Feeling useless and meaningless

**Coping with loneliness**

This theme relates to coping theory by Folkman and Lazarus (1980) and the six dimensions of coping by Rokach (2018). The codes were created deductively and participants coping strategies were grouped according to the categories.

*Reflection and acceptance and development and understanding*

These two dimensions by Rokach (2018) Reflection and self-understanding were linked to each other as they were related in participants stories of coping.

The dimension of reflection and acceptance is focused on the opportunity of being with oneself and becoming aware of fears and needs. This dimension also indicates the need for an encounter with oneself and direct confrontation with one's loneliness.

Self-development and understanding refers to the increased self-awareness and growth that often occurs as a result of personal guidance.

- Different life courses but shared theme of having to face loneliness head on
- After facing of loneliness, phase of self-development and understanding could be entered.
- Professional help and applied philosophy courses
- Finding himself again
- Finding meaning within

*Emotion focused coping*

Emotion focused coping refers to attempts to control one's emotional responses to a stressful situation by lowering expectations or seeking distraction (Folkman & Lazarus, 1980). Emotion focused coping styles were most common among currently lonely older adults.

- Temporal relief, but does not target underlying cause of loneliness
- Seeking distraction: gardening, watching tv, puzzeling and walking
- Less distraction during corona
- Lowering expectations because of disappointment



### *Problem-focused coping*

Problem focused coping involves attempts to deal with stress by actively targeting the issue at hand. These strategies were mostly utilized by participants who overcame loneliness in their life. An example is improving one's social relationships (Folkman & Lazarus, 1980). The coping dimensions by Rokach (2018) of re-establishing a social network and increasing social activity were linked to this theme as specific problem focused coping styles.

Increased activity includes strategies in which a person pursues activities that create opportunities for social contact.

A social support network needs to be reestablished or altered if it is not satisfactory. Individuals who are satisfied with their social support network are more likely to be optimistic and resilient.

- Taking part in new activities after divorce
- Being pro-active
- Mending existing social network after divorce
- Doing voluntary work
- Pursuing activities to increase social interactions (coffee hour, eating clubs)

### *Other coping strategies*

This theme encompassed coping strategies that were present in individual accounts or that could not be linked to the coping frameworks. The dimension of religion and faith by Rokach (2018) is also included under this theme, as there was only one participant that coped with loneliness in this way. The dimension of religion and faith

- Finding meaning by diving into topics such as religion and philosophy
- Taking something from every religion which offers wisdom
- Availability of a social support network

*Needs*

allows individuals to gain strength, inner peace and a sense of belonging when connected to an entity or God.

- Doing something new every day
- Learning from adversity as a phase that stimulates personal growth

This theme encompassed needs expressed by older adults to cope with loneliness or activities they would like.

- Someone that really listens and to who they can tell their life story.
- Social activities (get together, eating together, going out for a day with a group)
- Advice and guidance on how to handle adversities in life
- Need to feel meaningful again
- More friends and acquaintances

## Appendix B

**Table 4.** Participants' coping styles

Participant	Coping strategies	Loneliness trajectory
1. Eric	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reflection and acceptance</li> <li>• Self-development and understanding</li> <li>• Problem focused/increased activity</li> <li>• Received social support</li> <li>• Willpower</li> <li>• Learning from adversity</li> </ul>	Overcame loneliness
2. Amy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Problem-focused/pro-active</li> <li>• Reestablishing/mending social network</li> </ul>	Overcame loneliness
3. Cathy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Emotion focused/seeking distraction</li> </ul>	Currently experiencing loneliness
4. Lisa	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Emotion focused/seeking distraction</li> <li>• Learning as you get older</li> <li>• Doing something new every day (artist way)</li> <li>• Problem-focused</li> </ul>	Overcame loneliness but not satisfied with current network (not labeling it as loneliness)
5. Erica	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reflecting on the “golden moments” at the end of the day</li> <li>• Reflection and acceptance</li> <li>• Self-development and understanding</li> <li>• Religion/spirituality</li> </ul>	Currently experiencing loneliness

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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Problem focused/increased activity</li> </ul>	
6. Ria	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Emotion-focused/seeking distraction</li> <li>• Problem-focused/ actively seeking someone to talk to</li> </ul>	Currently experiencing loneliness
7. Tom	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Emotion focused/altering his thought process</li> </ul>	Currently experiencing loneliness
8. Ellen	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Emotion focused/seeking distraction</li> <li>• Emotion focused/lowering expectations</li> <li>• Problem focused/increased activity</li> </ul>	Currently experiencing loneliness
9. Irene	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ability to push through when times are difficult</li> <li>• Availability of support from social network</li> </ul>	Never experienced loneliness
10. Emma	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Problem-focused/taking action</li> </ul>	Overcame loneliness
11. Margaret	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Emotion-focused/seeking distraction</li> <li>• Problem-focused/increased activity</li> </ul>	Currently experiencing loneliness

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## Appendix C: Topic list and sub-questions

Note: the topic list developed for his study encompassed three broad themes: the experience of loneliness, life events related to feelings of loneliness and coping strategies to manage or alleviate feelings of loneliness. Often, interviews diverged from this order or topics merged. The researcher remained flexible and because life stories were very different, adjusted the questions based on what was being said in the interview.

Interview fases	Topic list en wat voorbeeld vragen die gesteld zijn	Link met theoretisch kader
<i>A. Kennismaking</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ De participant op zijn of haar gemak stellen</li> <li>▪ Participant leren kennen</li> </ul> <p><i>Voorbeelden van vragen die gesteld zijn:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Hoe ziet uw leven er op dit moment uit?</li> <li>▪ Wat houdt u bezig wat heeft uw interesse?</li> <li>▪ Hoe zou u uzelf beschrijven als persoon?</li> </ul>	
<i>B. Ervaring van eenzaamheid</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Betekenis van eenzaamheid voor participanten.</li> <li>▪ Hoe eenzaamheid voelt voor participanten.</li> </ul>	Participant's sense making processes in terms of loneliness.

C. *Momenten in de levensloop  
gerelateerd aan eenzaamheid (life  
events)*

- Onderzoeken hoe ze de ervaring van eenzaamheid omschrijven

*Voorbeelden van vragen die gesteld zijn:*

- Kunt u mij vertellen welke rol eenzaamheid op dit moment in uw leven heeft?
- Voelt u zich wel eens eenzaam?
- Hoe zou u het gevoel van eenzaamheid omschrijven?

- Identificeren van life events die gevoelens van eenzaamheid veroorzaken.
- Onderzoeken hoe deze life events gevoelens van eenzaamheid beïnvloeden.
- Ervaringen ontdekken in eerdere levensfasen (zoals de kindertijd) die een invloed hebben op eenzaamheid op oudere leeftijd.

*Voorbeelden van vragen die gesteld zijn:*

- Kunt u mij iets vertellen over een moment (of meerdere momenten) in uw leven dat u gevoelens van eenzaamheid heeft ervaren?

Life course perspective (Elder, Johnson & Crosnoe, 2003). Specifically, the principle of timing and critical periods. Critical periods are analyzed by examining life events in the life course of participants. Sense making is also incorporated, in terms of how older adults make sense of loneliness in their life course.

- Wat maakte dat u zich eenzaam voelde in die periode?
- Kunt u vertellen wat u zich herinnert van die situatie, hoelang is het geleden?
- Hoe zag uw leven eruit voor die levensgebeurtenis?
- Hoe voelde u zich op dat moment?
- Hoe zou u uzelf als persoon beschrijven in die situatie, wat was uw zelfbeeld?

#### *D. Omgaan met eenzaamheid*

- Coping strategieën van participanten in hun levensloop.
  - Effectieve coping strategieën
  - Minder effectieve strategieën
  - Behoeftes ontdekken, hebben participanten ondersteuning gemist of hebben ze ondersteuning nodig.
- Coping frameworks by Lazarus and Folkman (1980), six dimensions of coping by Rokach (2018).

*Voorbeelden van vragen die gesteld zijn:*

- Hoe bent u in die periode of periodes omgegaan met gevoelens van eenzaamheid?
- Waar had u op dat moment behoefte aan, heeft u misschien een bepaalde ondersteuning gemist. Of, wat voor ondersteuning zou u nodig hebben?



## **Appendix D: what older adults want and need to cope with loneliness**

1. Social get togethers with a group of single older adults or divorced older adults. A group that comes together to talk and who understand each other because they are divorced or living on their own. This group can get together just to chat but also to undertake activities together such as a group holiday, taking small trips together in the Netherlands or going out for drinks in the city.
2. Most lonely older adults expressed a need for acquaintances and new friendships. One person mentioned that it should be a reciprocal relationship because she does not only want to take things from others, she wants to mean something and do something for another as well.
3. Some mentioned that they would like to be invited more by others to certain activities such as going to a museum. A feeling that you are included by other people.
4. Some would like social activities such as going bowling together for an evening with some drinks and eating together a few times.
5. A group that gets together to talk about how they handle being alone rather than lonely. Being alone sounds less stigmatizing.
6. Some expressed that they would like guidance from the local welfare organization to handle setbacks and adversity in life.
7. Tom mentioned a need to feel meaningful again, as he feels useless sitting at home the whole day. He would like to pursue some voluntary work for instance or anything that will give him a sense of purpose while simultaneously benefiting others.
8. All lonely participants expressed that they would like someone that truly listens to them and telling their life story had a healing effect during the interviews. It gave them more insight about themselves and for some, offered relief.