

## **Addressing loneliness for older people: A framework to guide practice**

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### **Introduction**

For many older people, loneliness is a pressing social and health issue. As populations in many countries of the world age, greater numbers of people aged 65 years and over are likely to experience negative social, emotional, and physical health problems associated with loneliness. Yet little is known about loneliness and how it might be prevented or managed.

### **Objective**

The aim of this study was to gain a better understanding of what loneliness is which will assist service providers including occupational therapists to develop more targeted interventions and strategies designed to prevent and address loneliness in older people.

### **Methods**

This qualitative study involved 60 interviews with older people and eight focus groups with service providers. The analysis of data revealed five dimensions of loneliness which then informed the development of a framework designed to strengthen existing practice and develop new practices where appropriate, prior to implementation of four demonstration projects.

### **Findings / Results**

Strategies for managing and preventing loneliness include education, building and maintaining connections, maintaining meaning and purpose in life, strengthening community capacity, transport and the use of media. For the strategies to be successful they need to be in the context of a broad framework which emphasizes meeting individual needs, utilizing meaningful activities, sustainability and reflexive processes.

### **Conclusion**

Having an in-depth understanding of loneliness from the perspective of older people and service providers provides a conceptual basis for generating strategies to prevent loneliness or to enable older people to manage themselves. Interventions based on a better understanding of loneliness and utilising the guiding principles are likely to be more successful.

### **Contribution to the practice of occupational therapy**

One of the demonstration projects will be discussed to show how the findings can be translated into, and impact on, occupational therapy practice. Whilst the study is set in the Australian context it is likely that the findings will have relevance in other parts of the world.