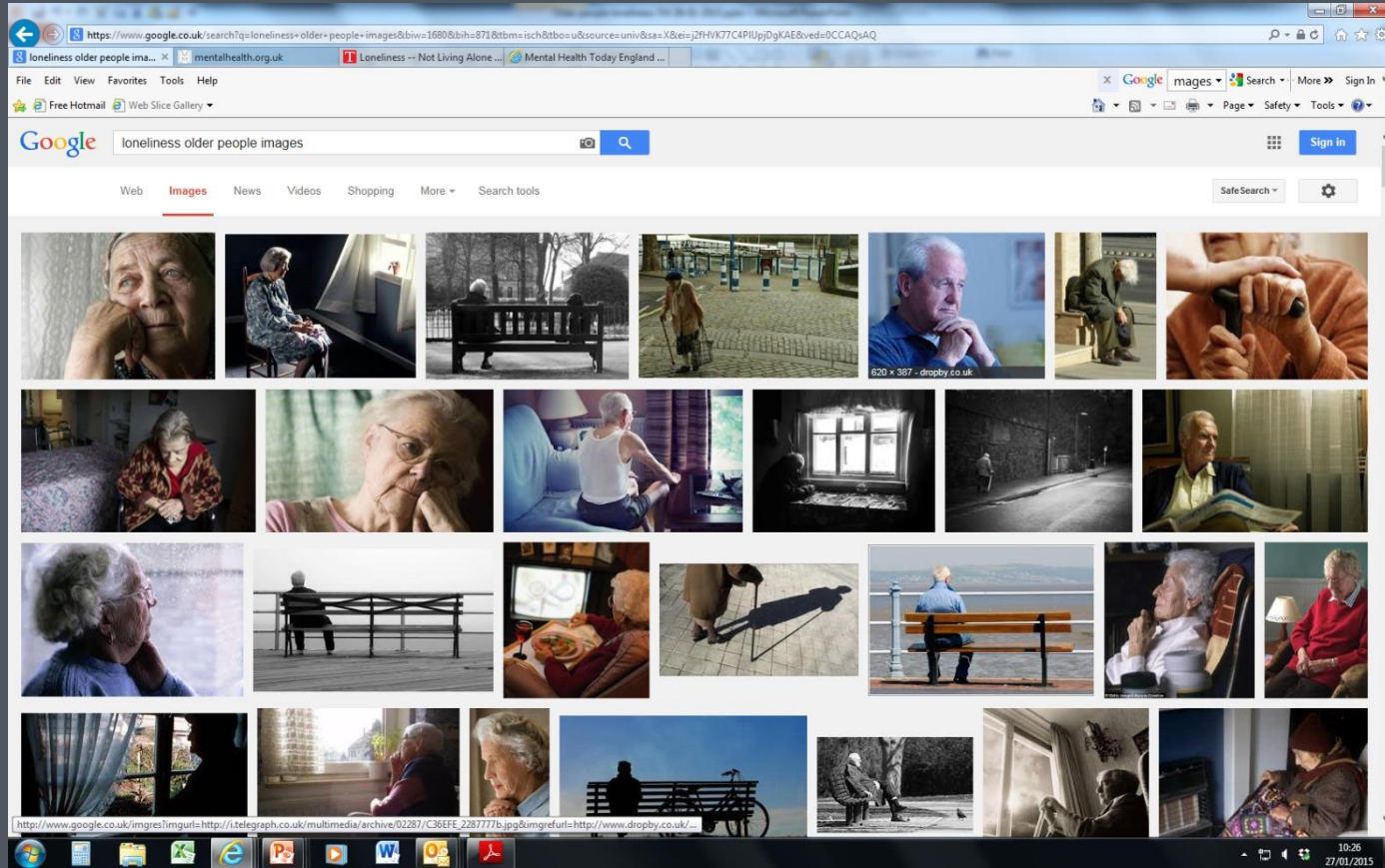


*Understanding the effects of loneliness
and isolation on the mental health of
older people*

Toby Williamson – Head of Development & Later
Life, Mental Health Foundation

Loneliness in later life – some images



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Loneliness in later life – the headlines

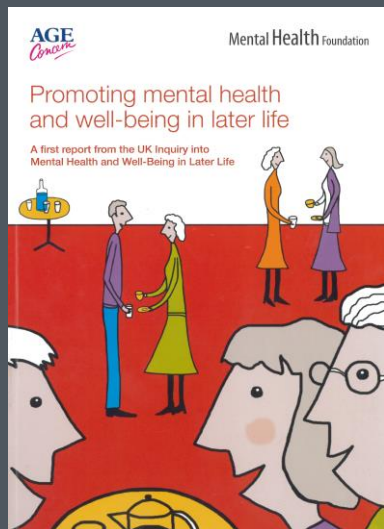
“A million elderly hit by ‘epidemic of poverty and loneliness’ – Daily Mail (2011)

“MPs highlight Plight of Millions of Lonely Older People” – Campaign to End Loneliness (2012)

“Loneliness of the ‘silver splitters’: Rise in OAP divorces leaves more elderly people facing an unhappy old age dependent on carers” – Daily Mail (2014)

Loneliness twice as unhealthy as obesity for older people, study finds” – The Guardian (2014)

Mental Health Foundation



- A UK-wide charity committed to enabling people to live mentally healthier lives
- Social research and development work, public information, policy and influencing work
- Life long mental health issues, problems and conditions, and issues affecting people with learning disabilities

Loneliness in later life – being careful with language

“Isolation”

“Being alone”

“Loneliness”

“Solitude”

“Living alone”

“Older people”/ “later life”



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Loneliness in later life – some statistics

- 1 million people aged 65 and over say they often or always feel lonely (9% of the population aged 65 and over)
- 17% of people aged 80+ report often feeling lonely compared to an average of 9% of all people aged 52+
- 49% of people aged 65+ say that television or pets are their main form of company
- Around two thirds of people with dementia report feeling lonely

Loneliness in later life – some risk factors

Community/society

- Lack of public transport/public amenities
- Fear of crime
- Population turnover
- Technological change

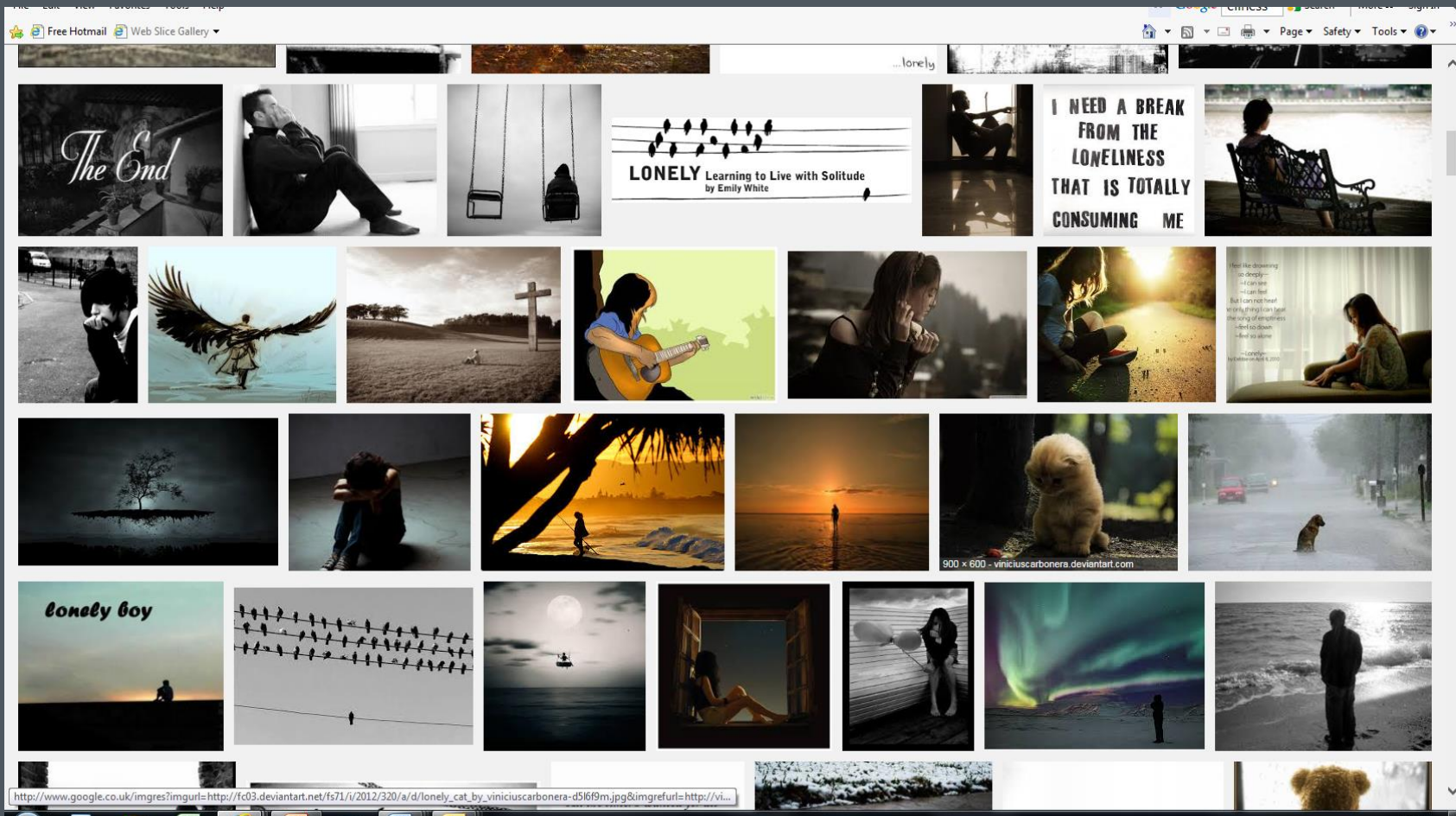
Individuals

- Bereavement and loss
- Increased time alone
- (Perceived) changes in health, mobility, etc.
- Changes in care dependencies
- Low income

Loneliness in later life – some effects

- Socially disengaged – therefore lack emotional support
 - Coping with stress becomes more difficult
 - Negative impact on the immune and cardiovascular systems
 - Greater difficulties sleeping
 - Makes regulating food and alcohol intake harder
-
- Loneliness associated with a greater risk of cognitive decline, developing depression and dementia, and a significant predictive factor for suicide

Loneliness – just a problem of old age?

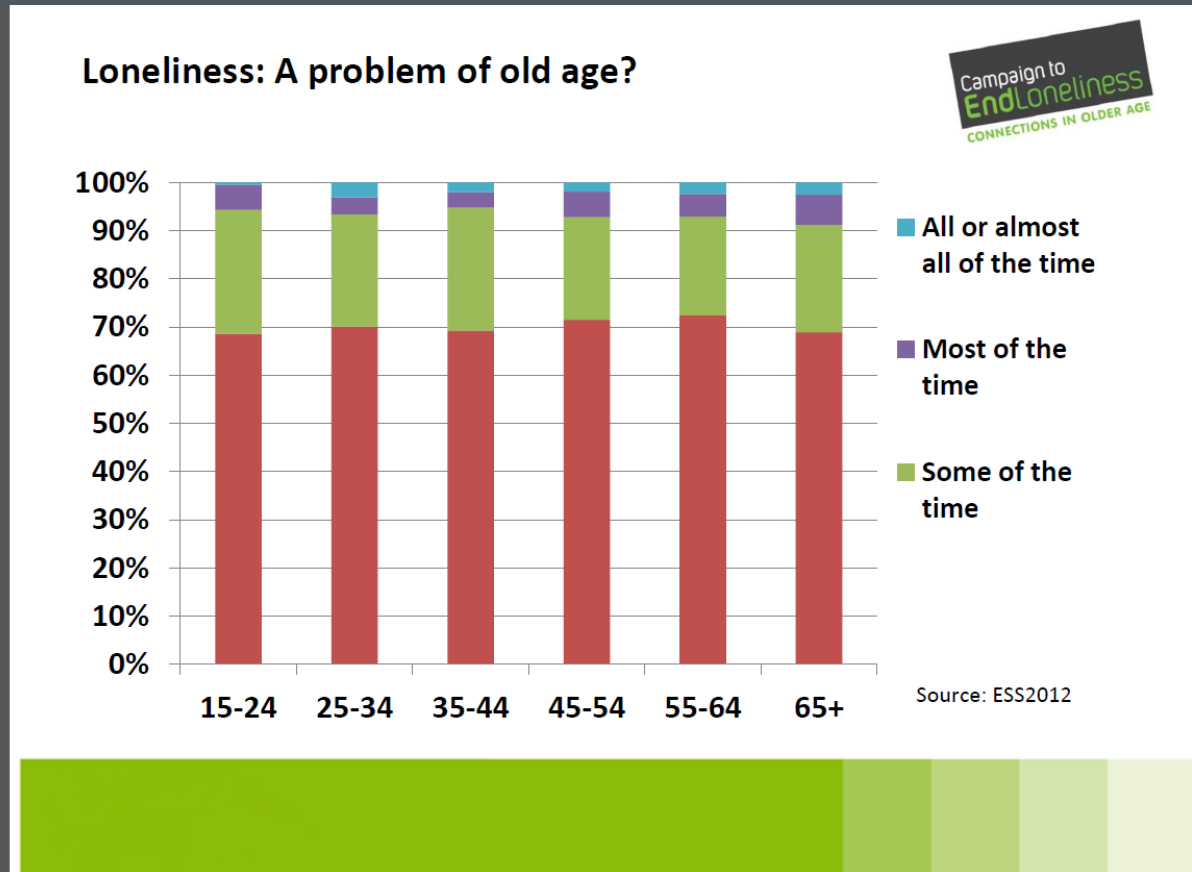


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Loneliness – just a problem of old age?

- 9% of people aged 55+ reported feeling lonely - compared to 12% of people aged 18-34
- 32% of people aged 55+ reported feeling depressed because of feeling alone - compared to 53% of people aged 18-34
- 73% of people aged 55+ said they would know what to do if they felt lonely - compared to 56% of people aged 18-34

Loneliness – just a problem of old age?



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Loneliness in later life – “project”-based solutions

“Befriending”

“Volunteering”

“Technology”

“Men in sheds”

“Silverline”

“Peer support”

“Hensioners”

“Hensioners”



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Hot chicks: A charity has hopes to combat loneliness among elderly people by giving them hens to look after. The HenPower project has seen dozens of elderly enthusiasts get involved in the day-to-day care of the poultry, feeding and cleaning them, and even treating them for lice.



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Loneliness in later life – community-based solutions

- World Health Organisation ‘Age friendly world’ – age friendly cities e.g. Manchester, Bristol
 - Creating the conditions – awareness raising, assets-based approach, etc.
 - Working with communities – intergenerational work, etc.
 - Identifying and informing – “case” finding, social prescribing, etc.
 - Supporting individuals – wellbeing services, interventions, peer support, empowerment, etc.



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Loneliness in later life – questions to consider

- What are the most effective ways of engaging with the loneliest, most isolated older people?
- What are the factors that result in some people experiencing loneliness and others not – despite objectively similar situations?
- Upstream (preventative) or downstream (palliative) solutions?
- Where's the line between personal and collective responsibility?
- How realistic is it to “end” loneliness?
- If we can't completely end it, how do we identify and agree societal and individual tolerance levels for loneliness?
- Should we be treating it just as a problem in later life?

References and acknowledgements

- *Grouchy Old Men* (2010) – Mental Health Foundation
- *The Lonely Society* (2010) - Mental Health Foundation
- *Self help peer support for people with dementia – a resource pack*
- *Self help peer support for people with dementia – evaluation report*
(both 2014) – Mental Health Foundation

- Age UK; Bristol Ageing Better Initiative; Campaign to End Loneliness; John Cacioppo – Chicago University; Professor Christina Victor – Brunel University; *Dementia 2013 - The hidden voice of loneliness* (2013) – Alzheimer’s Society; English Longitudinal Study of Ageing (ELSA); Men in Sheds; Silverline.

Loneliness in later life – any questions?

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