

# [Phenomenon of isolation in old age](https://assignbuster.com/phenomenon-of-isolation-in-old-age/)

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## Abstract

This paper discusses the phenomenon of isolation in old age, as well as the mental and physical impact(s) of this isolation. In this paper, the author also addresses best-­? practice interventions to alleviate the impact(s) of isolation among older people.

## Introduction

Isolation is a universal phenomenon, which has been intellectualized mainly by sociologists, and psychologists. Although approaches to the condition of isolation have been diverse, academics have mainly focused on ‘ social isolation’ and ‘ psychological isolation’. The experience of isolation changes and varies throughout one’s lifetime; it can be experienced differently among youth in comparison to seniors. Given that isolation is experienced differently through time, culture, and that it is dependant on one’s background and age, even gender, it becomes clear that isolation is a highly personal and politically charged occurrence. As one scholar notes, “(…) isolation is hardly a neutral scientific category (…)”. 1

This essay discusses the phenomenon of isolation in old age. I begin with a sociological and psychological description of the phenomenon, and a brief intellectual history of the significance of isolation. I continue with a discussion about the most recognizable impact(s) of isolation, here, both mental and physical impacts will be addressed. And, I will end with a presentation of a series of interventions that have proven to be particularly fruitful when it comes to alleviating the impacts of isolation in old age.

## Body

In the context of isolation in old age, two definitions of the phenomenon: namely the sociological and the psychological are particularly relevant. This is partly due to the fact that sociological and psychological isolation may overlap more in old age. In this case, sociological isolation can be defined as a social lack of contact between persons, or groups. Sociological isolation might increase with age, due to an increase in remaining mobile and active. Psychological isolation can be defined asfailureto communicate with another individual, regardless of the presence or proximity of other people.

The combination of the effects of the “ generation gap”, the decline in mobility, and the loss of friends andfamilymembers, put older people at higher risk of becoming isolated, and potentially lonely. In some cases, loss of income, or economic isolation might also be an issue. Consequently, this fringe of the population requires specific attention. According to a study published in The Journal of the Royal Society for the Promotion ofHealth, in the next 20 years, the number of people aged more than eighty is expected to treble, and the those aged over ninety will double. 2 In light of the fact that in the UK for example, people aged over eighty-­? five are represent the fastest growing sector of the population, isolation must be considered as an increasingly alarming societal concern. 3 .

The concept of isolation was present in the writings of the founders ofsociology. Emile Durkheim’s study ofsuicideepitomizes the idea of the isolated individual’s potentially radical fate. Similarly, the study of isolation was central to the Chicago sociologists in their analysis of the interactions between various social groups. Thanks to the fluctuating nature of isolation as a category of analysis, today, the concept remains widely debated among sociologists and psychologists, “ The intellectual history of social isolation shows that it has been a productive, durable, and mutable category of analysis, a term with enough metaphorical power to attract authors from different eras (…).” 4

Although suicide need not be the final destination of isolation, Durkheim’s work was pivotal in highlighting the potential negative effects of isolation. Today, studies continue to show the linkages between isolation and poor physical and mental health. Professor John Cacioppo, a leading social psychologist based at the University of Chicago has found that the hardening of the arteries and inflammation in the body, for example, constitute physical symptoms related to isolation. In addition to physical symptoms, poor mental health often accompanies individuals suffering from isolation; depression, among other symptoms, is widely mentioned in studies of the consequences of isolation. 5 Ultimately, negative feelings or depression can lead to increased consumption of alcohol or drugs, which might further contribute to poor health and isolation.

Chiefly, because isolation has the potential of touching so many individuals in society, it can be conceived as a threat to public health. Furthermore, as discussed before, due to global demographic changes under, isolation in old age is becoming an increasingly widespread phenomenon. As most public health interventions, countering isolation in old age requires targeted and adapted policies. The latter should be adapted to urban vs. rural older populations and special attention needs to come with countering isolation among older individuals who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender. In May 2012, Social Care Institute for Excellence in partnership with Contact the Elderly co-­? published a document referring to a series of “ Successful interventions” at reducing social isolation in old age. Among these successful interventions discussed were, befriending, group services, and community navigators, all of which offer both emotional support and physical presence for older people. 6 Where possible, these interventions should be preventative, which means that they should include among other factors, the promotion of independence, the delay of the deterioration of wellbeing, and the delay of the need for more costly intensive services. 7

## Conclusion

The objective of this essay was to discuss isolation and its effects, both physical and mental in old age, as well as to offer some insight about relevant successful interventions to counter this public health issue. Due to some restrictions, it has been difficult to touch upon every relevant issues pertaining to this public health dilemma. However, in terms of interventions implemented to alleviate this problem, further in-­? depth and targeted is required in order to offer the most efficient responses to particular groups among the older population. Because the population as a whole is aging rapidly, the problem of isolation in old age must be urgently tackled, and should concern both private and public sectors.