2018

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A National Survey of Adults 45 and Older

LONELINESS AND
SOCIAL CONNECTIONS

Acknowledgements

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Survey Executed by: GfK

2018 Report Outline

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Background

In 2010, AARP conducted a national survey of U.S. adults age 45 and older to better understand loneliness among midlife and older adults. Since the survey's release eight years ago, the field has evolved and AARP Foundation's focus has expanded to include social isolation.

Although social isolation and loneliness share similarities and frequently occur together, they are distinct and can occur independent of one another. Social isolation is objective, with measurable factors like the size of one's social network, the frequency of contact with that network, availability of transportation, and the ability to take advantage of support resources. Loneliness is more personal and subjective — that is, how people perceive their experience and whether they feel they lack the connections, companionship or sense of belonging that we need as humans.

Both social isolation and loneliness have emerged as public health issues. Studies have found that they are worse for health than obesity, and the health risks of prolonged isolation are equivalent to smoking 15 cigarettes a day.[1] Today it is also known that social isolation and loneliness have serious financial implications. Every month, Medicare spends approximately $134 more for each socially isolated older adult than it would if the person were connected; as an estimated 4 million older adults enrolled in traditional Medicare are socially isolated, this represents an estimated $6.7 billion in additional Medicare spending annually.[2]

Purpose

This new survey examines social connections in 2018, improving our understanding of loneliness and how it relates to social isolation factors. In addition, it provides updated data for related issues that were only emerging in 2010; for example, when the survey was first fielded, social media was still a nascent form of communication.

This study also measures the prevalence rates of loneliness across demographic groups and provides a descriptive profile of lonely adults, while also exploring the relationship between loneliness and life experiences, social connections, health, and technology.

Key Findings

Among adults age 45 and older, 1 in 3 are lonely. Overall, more than one-third (35 percent) of U.S. adults age 45 and older are lonely, based on the UCLA loneliness scale. While this number is unchanged from the previous loneliness study conducted in 2010, approximately 5 million more midlife and older adults are lonely due to growth in this age group among the population.

Older adults with lower incomes are at greater risk. The study finds that among midlife and older adults earning less than $25,000 per year, 1 in 2 are likely to be lonely. Today, more than 36 million older adults are struggling to make ends meet; of those, more than 10 million are already living in poverty.[3] This means a significant number of vulnerable older adults could be at risk for loneliness and social isolation.

The size of one's social network and being physically isolated are the top predictors of loneliness. As one's social network increases, loneliness decreases. Similarly, as one's physical isolation decreases, so does loneliness.

The ways in which older adults cope with loneliness vary depending on how frequently they feel lonely. Chronically lonely adults are more likely to turn to isolated activities to cope, such as eating, watching television or surfing the internet, while those who seldom feel lonely are more likely to talk with a friend or go out with family when feelings of loneliness do occur.

Loneliness is not usually caused by a single event and it affects everyone, thus presenting multiple opportunities to intervene. An individual's social network and physical isolation are top predictors, but depression, urbanicity, anxiety and overall health are also contributing factors. The study also finds that loneliness affects all of us: it has approximately the same incidence across race/ethnicity.

Few have discussed feelings of loneliness with their health care provider. While loneliness and social isolation are both known in professional communities to have adverse mental and physical health effects, the public may not be aware of these connections. In fact, other research has shown few adults age 45 and older say a health professional has ever asked them about social isolation.[4]

Getting to know one's neighbors can help reduce loneliness and increase social connections. A clear relationship exists between loneliness among midlife and older adults and their connections with their

neighbors — which is a new area of focus in 2018. Thirty-three percent of midlife and older adults who have ever spoken to their neighbors are lonely, compared with 61 percent who have never spoken to a neighbor.

Technology holds promise to help reduce loneliness and social isolation, but it is not a substitute for human interaction. Technology is a tool that can help bring people together when they cannot connect in person, but its use does not significantly reduce loneliness. Nevertheless, an opportunity exists to educate people about online activities, tools and applications that can facilitate staying in touch with others, with lonely people likely to have a greater incentive to learn how to use them.

Social media use has more than tripled since 2010, with 42 percent of midlife and older adults using it daily compared to just 13 percent in 2010. However, when other social isolation factors are controlled for in the model, use of technology for communication appears to have a small positive relationship to loneliness: that is, as use goes up, so does loneliness. Nevertheless, when respondents reflect on how the internet affects their relationships, differences illustrate how technology is acting as an amplifier for pre-existing difficulties. In this case, lonely adults are more likely to agree with the negative statements surveyed, while non-lonely adults are more inclined to see benefits stemming from the internet, such as greater closeness among friends and family.

Unpaid caregivers, low-income individuals, and those who identify as LGBTQ are at increased risk for chronic loneliness. For caregivers, the loneliness gap is 8 percentage points higher than for non-caregivers, and for individuals earning under $40,000 per year, the gap in loneliness is 13 percentage points higher than for those earning over $40,000. Likewise, those who identify as LGBTQ are 14 percentage points more likely to say they are lonely. Special attention should be given to providing help and resources to these groups.

[1]Julianne Holt-Lunstad, Timothy B. Smith, and J. Bradley Layton, "Social Relationships and Mortality Risk: A Meta-analytic Review," PLoS Med, vol. 7, no. 7 (2010). DOI: https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pmed.1000316.

[2]Lynda Flowers, et al., "Medicare Spends More on Socially Isolated Older Adults," AARP Public Policy Institute Insight on the Issues 125 (2017).

[3]The number of adults at least 50 years old who are low income (defined as annual household income less than $40,000, or 250 percent of the federal poverty level) is 36.3 million. (AARP Research Tabulation of the 2017 Annual Social and Economic Supplement (ASEC) of the Current Population Survey).

[4]G.O. Anderson, "Social Isolation: Myths vs. Realities Among Adults Age 40 and Older," AARP (2018). DOI: https://doi.org/10.26419/res.00234.001.

Incidence, Cause and
DURATION OF LONELINESS

The survey identified loneliness among midlife and older U.S. adults through two direct measures: the UCLA loneliness scale, which includes 20 items designed to assess subjective feelings of loneliness, and a single measure, which asked, "Overall, how often do you feel lonely or isolated from those around you?" Unless otherwise noted, the results in this report center on the UCLA loneliness scale. Respondents who scored 44 or higher in the 80-point scale were defined as "lonely" while those with a score of 43 or less were defined as "not lonely."

35%
of adults age 45+
in the united states
ARE LONELY

Among the demographic variables measured: age, income, marital status, education, and sexual orientation and gender identity are found to be significantly related to loneliness.

In 2018, 35 percent of U.S. adults age 45 and older are lonely. While this finding is unchanged from the previous survey conducted by AARP in 2010, it translates into an increase of approximately 5 million people who are lonely. In 2010, approximately 42.6 million adults age 45 and older were lonely compared with approximately 47.8 million projected in 2018.[5] Of those individuals who are classified as lonely, 4 in 10 (41 percent) claim that feelings of loneliness and isolation have persisted for six years or more, while nearly one-third (31 percent) indicate they have felt lonely for one to five years, and 26 percent report having these feelings for up to a year — also unchanged from 2010.

[5]According to U.S. Census figures, there were 121.8 million adults age 45 and older in 2010. Census projections for 2018 are 136.6 million adults age 45 and older. (Population by Sex and Selected Age Groups: 2000 and 2010, U.S. Census Bureau, Census 2000 Summary File 1 and 2010 Census Summary File 1.) (2017 National Population Projections. U.S. Census Bureau, Population Division, Released in September 2018.)

When respondents were asked how often they feel lonely or isolated on a scale from "Never" to "Always," nearly one-third (31 percent) report feeling always or sometimes lonely, closely aligning with the findings from the UCLA score. Of those who report *ever* feeling lonely, 7 in 10 say there was not a single incident that led to these feelings of loneliness. Across all respondents, when asked if they feel more, less, or equally lonely compared to five years ago, 18 percent say they feel more lonely, which is down significantly from 2010 (25 percent).

Of those who report *ever* feeling lonely,

7 IN 10

say there was not a **single incident** that led to these

FEELINGS OF LONELINESS

Predictors
OF LONELINESS

A multivariate regression model was created to identify the variables that characterize lonely midlife and older adults. A diverse set of variables was included in the model, ranging from sociodemographic measures to several factors developed from survey items that represent several components of social isolation. (See Appendix A-2 for the full factor analysis.) The goal was to understand the strength and direction of the relationship between the included measures and the UCLA loneliness score.

Among the top predictors of loneliness are the size and diversity of one's social network and being physicalyl isolated. The social network factor is made up of items such as the number of people who have been supportive, people with whom you can discuss matters of importance, and diversity of social relationships (friends, family, spouse, etc.). As expected, as one's social network increases, loneliness decreases. Also as expected, as physical isolation decreases (the factor which included items such as disability status, number of hours spent alone and household size), so does loneliness. (See Appendix A-3 for full regression model.)

Independent of social network quality, other social measures such as weekly or more contact with friends and frequency of contact with siblings were also found to have a significant relationship to loneliness, such that as contact increases, loneliness decreases. Sexual frequency was also found to be a significant predictor of loneliness: Those who engage more regularly in sexual activity are less likely to be lonely.

Several health measures were also found to have a significant relationship with loneliness. Self-reported health status was positively associated with loneliness: Those who report better heath are also less likely to be lonely. Mental health was found to be important as well. Diagnoses of depression and anxiety are associated with an increased likelihood of loneliness. Another predictive health measure was the amount of sleep the respondent gets per night. Those who get less sleep are more likely to be lonely than those who report more hours of sleep per night.

Multiple community engagement measures were found to be predictive of loneliness. Those who spend more time connecting to their community via volunteering or attending religious services are less likely to be lonely than those who do not. Similarly, increased participation in secular organizations, clubs and hobbies was found to be related to lower levels of loneliness. The structure of one's community also plays an important role in predicting loneliness. An urbanicity factor (which included items such as urban vs. rural community environment, frequency of contact with one's neighbors, and number of modes of transportation available) was significantly related to loneliness, such that those who live in more urban environments are more likely to be lonely than those who lived in more rural ones.

Use of technology to communicate with others is another predictor of loneliness. This factor primarily includes items such as frequency of communication activities online, frequency of communication activities on a mobile phone, and frequency of social media use. The model showed that those who rely on technology more often to communicate are also more likely to be lonely.

THOSE WHO REPORT BETTER HEALTH ARE ALSO LESS LIKELY TO BE LONELY.

Finally, controlling for all other variables in the model, age is a major predictor of loneliness. The model found that as one gets older, one is less likely to be lonely. This finding is similar to the 2010 study, which showed that those in their 40s and 50s were more likely to be lonely than those over age 60.

Several hypotheses exist to explain this finding. It is consistent with similar research on age and happiness that shows a "midlife" dip in happiness and life satisfaction that reverses in one's late 50s or early 60s. Alternatively, given the known impact that loneliness can have on one's physical health,[6] the decrease in loneliness could be due to a survivor effect of lonely adults dying at a younger age than those who are not lonely.
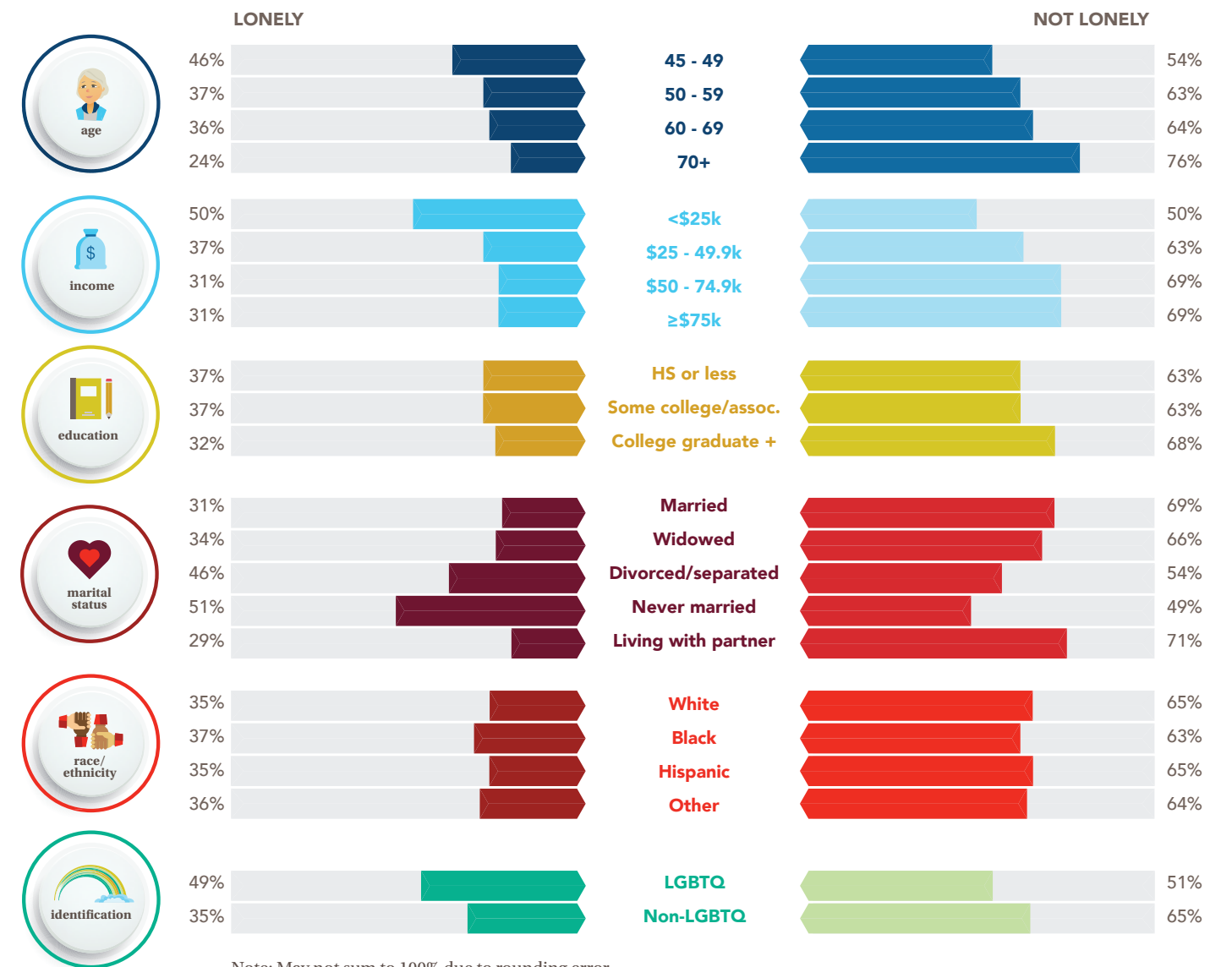

● Increases loneliness
● Decreases loneliness

Robust social network

Being physically isolated

Increasing age

Weekly or more contact with friends

Depression diagnosis

Weekly or more contact with siblings

Urban community environment

Anxiety diagnosis

More hours sleep per night

Increased use of technology to communicate

Good health

More frequent sexual activity

More frequent volunteering and religious involvement

More frequent participation in secular hobbies and clubs

[6]A. Shankar, et al., "Loneliness, Social Isolation, and Behavioral and Biological Health Indicators in Older Adults," Health Psychology, July; 30(4):377-85 (2011).

Loneliness and Social Connections: *A National Survey of Adults 45 and Older*

Demographics of
LONELY ADULTS AGE 45+

Thirty-four percent of men and 36 percent of women identify as lonely based on the UCLA loneliness scale, scoring a 44 or higher. Core demographic profile tracks with 2010 survey.

PERCENTAGE OF MIDLIFE AND OLDER ADULTS WHO ARE LONELY AND NOT LONELY

By age, income, education, marital status, race/ethnicity, and LGBTQ identification.

	LONELY		NOT LONELY
age	46%	45 - 49	54%
	37%	50 - 59	63%
	36%	60 - 69	64%
	24%	70+	76%
income	50%	<$25k	50%
	37%	$25 - 49.9k	63%
	31%	$50 - 74.9k	69%
	31%	≥$75k	69%
education	37%	HS or less	63%
	37%	Some college/assoc.	63%
	32%	College graduate +	68%
status	31%	Married	69%
	34%	Widowed	66%
	46%	Divorced/separated	54%
	51%	Never married	49%
	29%	Living with partner	71%
race	35%	White	65%
	37%	Black	63%
	35%	Hispanic	65%
	36%	Other	64%
identification	49%	LGBTQ	51%
	35%	Non-LGBTQ	65%

Note: May not sum to 100% due to rounding error

Loneliness and Social Connections: *A National Survey of Adults 45 and Older*

Similar to 2010, loneliness decreases significantly with age. Among the four age categories (45-49, 50-59, 60-69, 70+), nearly one-quarter (24%) of those in the oldest group (age 70+) are lonely compared to 46 percent of adults in the youngest group (age 45-49).

As in 2010, midlife and older adults in the lowest income bracket are more likely to be lonely compared to those with a higher income. Half of midlife and older adults earning less than $25,000 a year in annual household income report being lonely, contrasted with 31 percent who earn more than $75,000 a year. Consistent with this, those who earn under $40,000 per year are more likely to be lonely than those who earn at least $40,000 per year (44% vs. 31%).

48% OF ADULTS who are **very or somewhat unsatisfied WITH THEIR PARTNER ARE LONELY COMPARED TO 26%** who are **very or somewhat satisfied**.
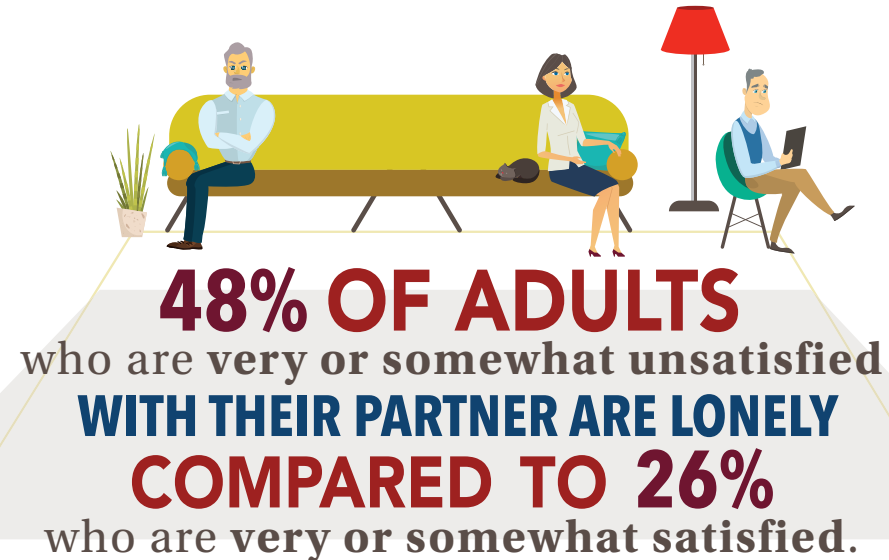
Across education levels, midlife and older adults with a college degree or higher are less likely to be lonely compared to those with less education — a change from 2010, when loneliness scores did not differ by education levels. Thirty-two percent of college graduates are considered lonely, versus 37 percent of those with some college or less.

When comparing midlife and older adults across marital status, separated/divorced and never-married adults are most likely to be lonely (46% and 51%, respectively). Consistent with the 2010 reading, married adults are among the least likely to be lonely (31%). Perhaps unsurprisingly, among those in relationships, partner satisfaction is strongly linked with loneliness. Just 26 percent of adults who are very or somewhat satisfied with their partner are lonely, compared to 48 percent who are very or somewhat unsatisfied.

As in 2010, the rate of loneliness does not differ significantly across racial/ethnic groups.

This year, an oversample of LGBTQ respondents was included in order to explore the extent to which sexual orientation and gender identity might impact prevalence of loneliness in adults age 45 and older. Loneliness proves more prevalent in the LGBTQ community. Half (49%) of midlife and older adults who self-identify as LGBTQ are classified as lonely, versus 35 percent of non-LGBTQ individuals (and on par with adults ages 45 and older overall).

HEALTH

In order to explore the relationship between health and loneliness, respondents were asked about their overall health as well as specific diagnosed medical conditions. Unless otherwise noted, findings are in line with what was observed in 2010.

There appears to be a clear connection between health and the rate of loneliness.

AS HEALTH DECLINES, THE RATE OF LONELINESS AMONG MIDLIFE AND OLDER ADULTS INCREASES.

Specifically, half (51%) of midlife and older adults who consider their health to be fair or poor are lonely in contrast to 27 percent who believe their health to be excellent or very good.

HEALTH CONTINUES TO FACTOR INTO LONELINESS – MENTAL HEALTH IN PARTICULAR

PERCENTAGE OF MIDLIFE AND OLDER ADULTS WHO ARE LONELY

By overall health.

Excellent	26%
Very Good	27%
Good	39%
Fair	48%
Poor	67%
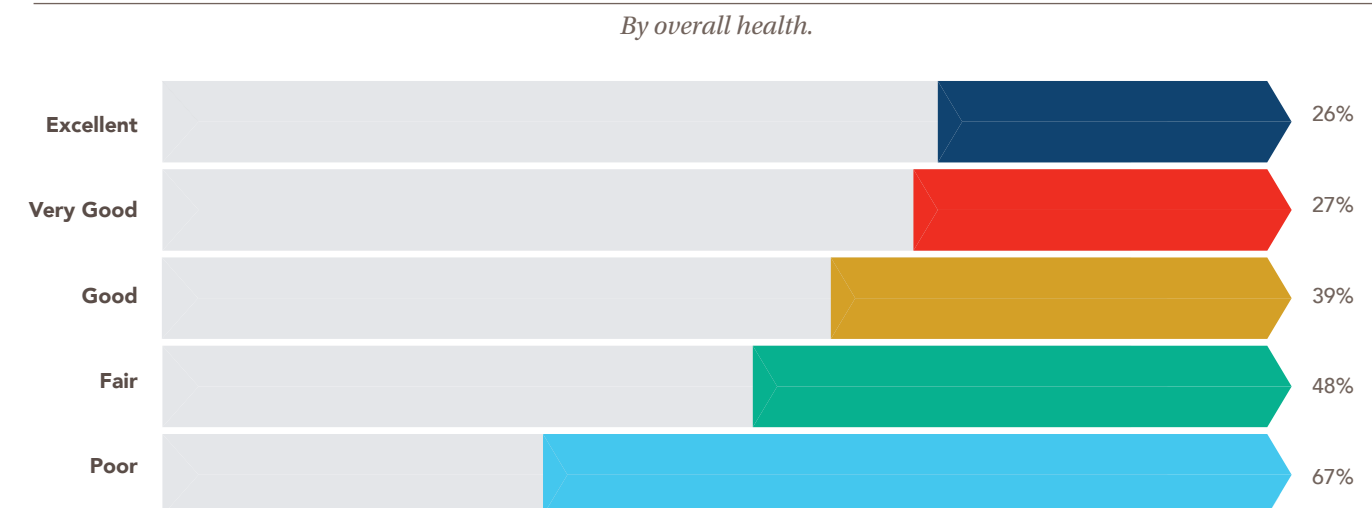
Medical
CONDITIONS

PERCENTAGE OF MIDLIFE AND OLDER ADULTS WHO ARE LONELY

By medical condition.

DIAGNOSED WITH:	LONELY	NOT LONELY
High cholesterol	37%	63%
Diabetes	40%	59%
Sexually transmitted diseases	41%	59%
Obesity	42%	58%
Sleep disorder	42%	57%
Other chronic pain condition	44%	56%
Anxiety	54%	45%
Depression	55%	44%
Other mood disorder	58%	40%

Note: Rows may not sum to 100 percent due to refusals.

HIV/AIDS and drug/alcohol abuse were excluded due to low sample size (n= <100)

Across the measured medical conditions, midlife and older adults who had been diagnosed with high cholesterol had the lowest rate of loneliness among conditions that were probed in the survey. At the other end of the spectrum, midlife and older adults diagnosed with mental health issues, such as anxiety, depression or another mood disorder, had the highest rates of loneliness.[7, 8]

[7]No tests were performed to determine whether differences in loneliness across various medical conditions were statistically significant.

[8]The following conditions were removed from the 2010 survey in 2018 due to low incidence among those who were lonely: hypertension/blood pressure, arthritis or rheumatism, gastrointestinal diseases, cancer, cardiovascular/heart disease.

Health
BEHAVIORS

An interesting dynamic emerges when exploring the connection between tobacco and alcohol use and the rate of loneliness. While those who smoke or use tobacco are more likely to be lonely than those who abstain from any tobacco use (40% vs. 34%), midlife and older adults who consume alcohol are less likely to be lonely than those who do not (33% vs. 38%).

Sleep is also connected to the rate of loneliness in midlife and older adults. Among adults diagnosed with a sleep disorder, 42 percent are lonely. Additionally, midlife and older adults who report getting only four hours of sleep or less per night are more likely to be lonely than those who receive five to eight hours each night (59% vs. 34%).
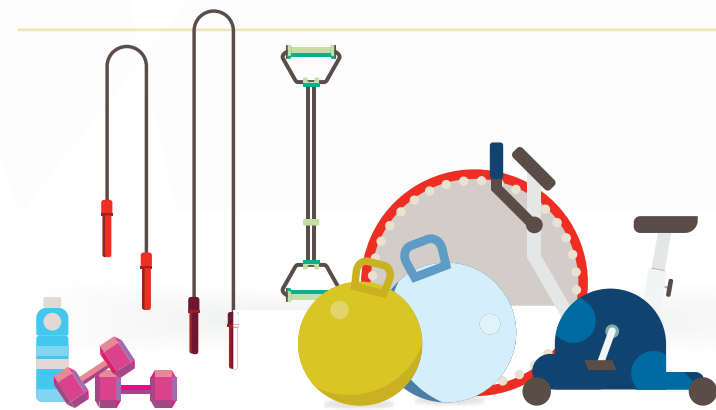
Moderate exercise is also related to the rate of loneliness among midlife and older adults. While 41 percent of those who do not exercise at all are lonely, 35 percent of adults that engage in one to three days of moderate exercise per week are lonely, and 32 percent of those who moderately exercise four or more days per week feel the same.

When focusing on different frequencies of sexual activity, midlife and older adults who engage in sex once a week or more are less likely to be lonely compared to those who have sex a once month or less often (25% vs. 37%). Forty-three percent of adults age 45 and older who are not engaging in any sexual activity are considered lonely.
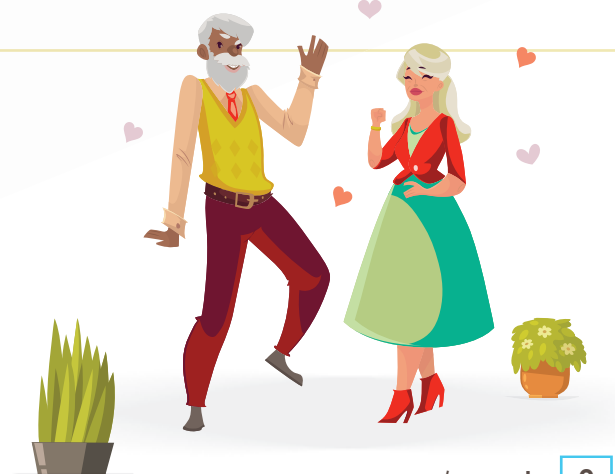
Social CONNECTIONS
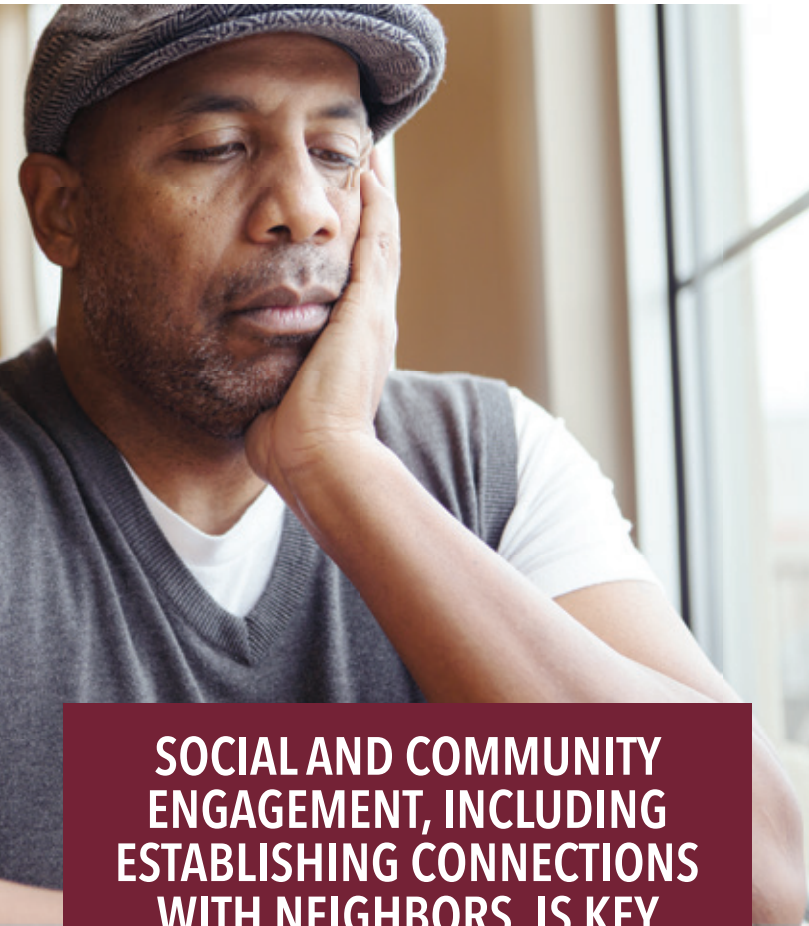
Another goal of this study was to explore how loneliness among midlife and older adults may be related to their social connections and level of engagement with the outside world, such as hobbies and activities in their community. Questions around social support, marriage, social contact, community connections and lifestyle provide insight into how the size of one's real-life social network contributes to feelings of loneliness. Unless noted, findings mirror those seen in 2010.

Social Support

Social isolation is defined, in part, by the size and quality of one's social network. To assess these elements and their connection to loneliness, respondents were asked for both the number of people in their lives who have been supportive in the past year and the number with whom they can discuss matters of personal importance.
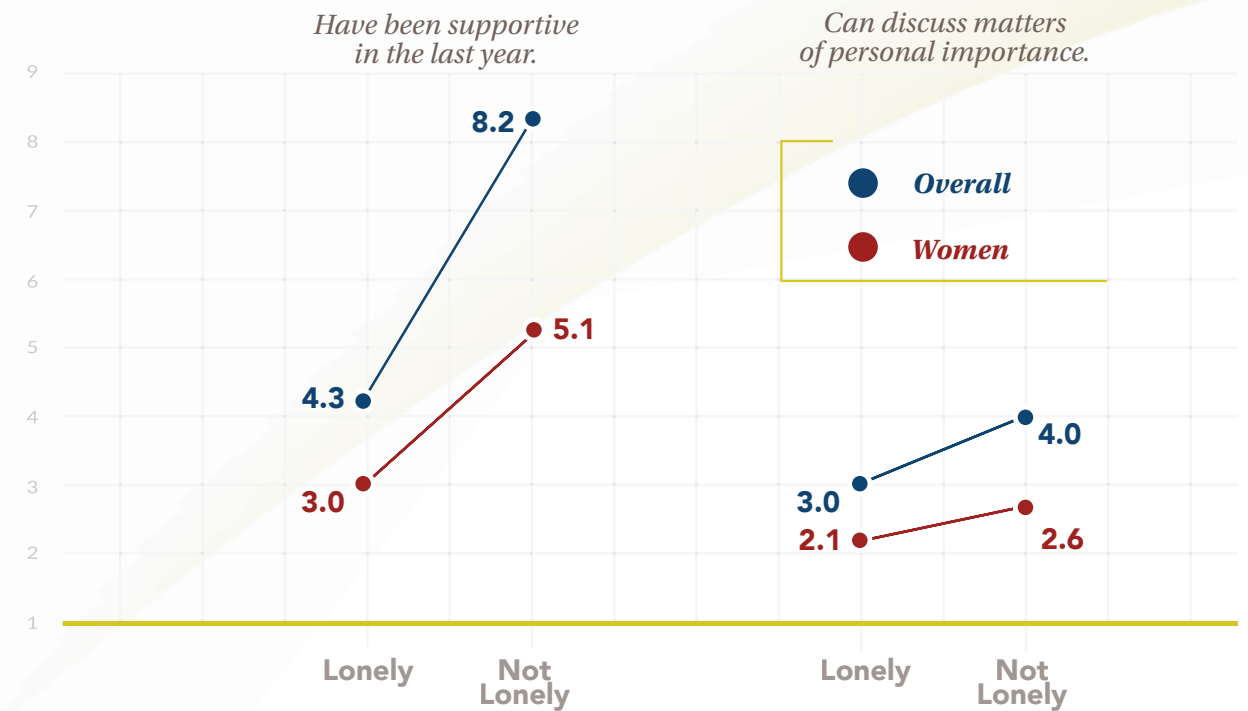
On average, midlife and older adults have more than six people in their lives who have been supportive in the past year and more than three people with whom they can discuss matters of personal importance. Those who are lonely have fewer people in their lives who have been supportive in the last year (mean of 4.3 vs. 8.2) and fewer people with whom they can discuss matters of personal importance (mean of 3.0 vs. 4.0). Respondents were also asked how many of each are women. In general, women comprise a larger share of social networks (for both men and women). Just over 6 in 10 are women among those who have been supportive during the past year (64%) as well as those with whom matters of importance were discussed (63%). Nevertheless, the size of one's network has a greater impact than its gender composition. There was no relationship between loneliness and gender ratio.

> **SOCIAL AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT, INCLUDING ESTABLISHING CONNECTIONS WITH NEIGHBORS, IS KEY TO FIGHTING LONELINESS**

> **LENGTH OF TIME SINCE ONE'S DIVORCE – BUT NOT ONE'S MARRIAGE – RELATES TO LONELINESS AMONG THE 45-PLUS COMMUNITY**

NUMBER OF PEOPLE, OVERALL, AND WOMEN WHO...

Have been supportive in the last year.

Can discuss matters of personal importance.

- ● **Overall**
- ● **Women**

A shrinking network of friends also continues to be associated with loneliness. More than half (56%) of midlife and older adults who have fewer friends compared to five years ago are lonely, in contrast to 21 percent of those who have more friends now and 31 percent who report having the same number.

Length of Marriage vs. Duration of Time Since Divorce

No clear relationship is seen between the length of one's marriage and loneliness among midlife and older adults who are currently married. Thirty-four percent of individuals who have been married for nine years or less are lonely — a figure that is roughly on par with the 30 percent of those who have been married for 10 years or longer. A larger gap is seen when it comes to the length of time that has passed since divorce. Over half (53%) of midlife and older adults who have been divorced for nine years or less are lonely, compared to 44 percent of those who have been divorced for 10 years or more.

PERCENTAGE OF MIDLIFE AND OLDER ADULTS WHO ARE LONELY

By number of years since divorce.

- 1-9 years — 53%
- 10-19 years — 46%
- 20+ or more — 42%
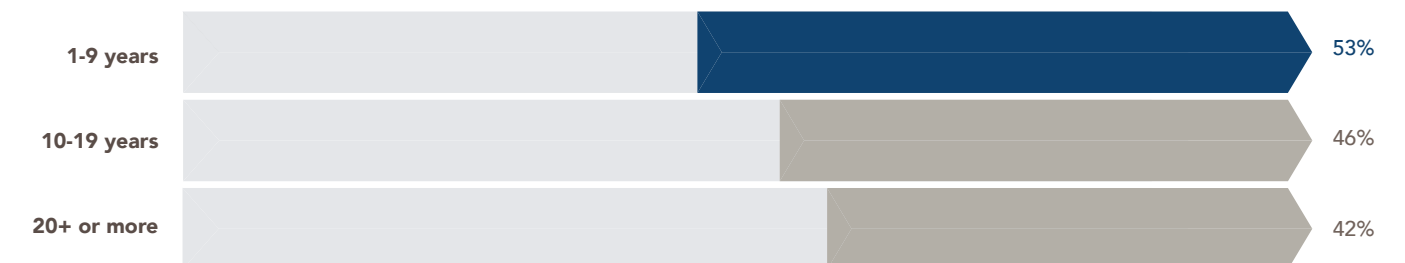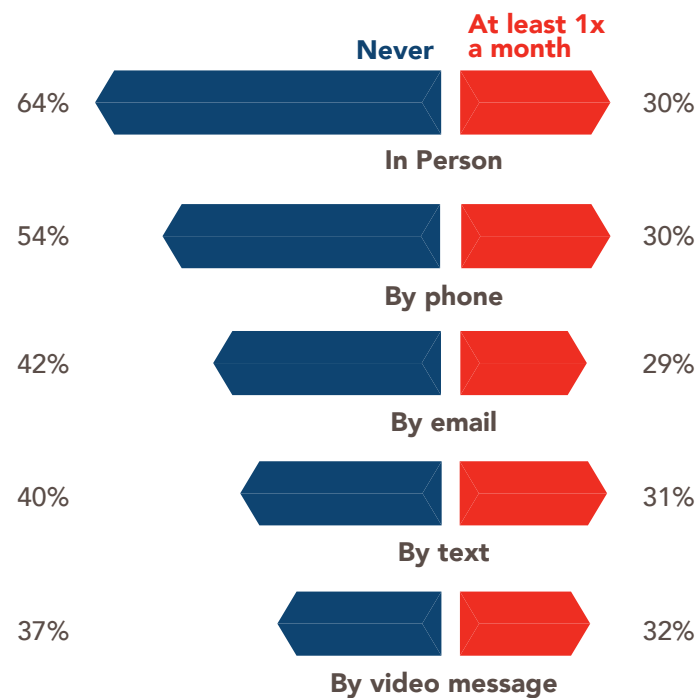
Frequency of Contact With Friends

Beyond size and quality of one's social network, social isolation is also defined by frequency of contact with others. Therefore, respondents were asked about the frequency of contact with friends via email, phone, letters, text, social media sites, online messaging and in person. Midlife and older adults who never speak to friends by phone or see them in person are more likely to be lonely. A little over half (54%) of those who never talk with their friends by phone are lonely, though this is somewhat less than in 2010 (63%). Meeting with friends in person seems to have an even larger — yet stable — effect, as 64 percent of adults who report never doing so are lonely, a similar figure to 2010 (68%). Among those who interact with friends in person at least once a month, 30 percent identify as lonely.

Adults who infrequently or never communicate with friends via email are much more likely to be lonely than those who email with friends once a month or more. Specifically, 41 percent who exchange email with friends a couple of times a year or less are lonely, as are 42 percent of those who never use email to communicate — higher than those who reach out to friends through email at least once a month (29%).

Abstaining from texting or online video messaging with friends is also associated with increased loneliness. Among midlife and older adults who never text with friends, 40 percent are lonely, while 31 percent who text with friends once a month or more are lonely. Similarly, 37 percent who never online or video message are lonely compared to 32 percent who have communicated via those technologies.
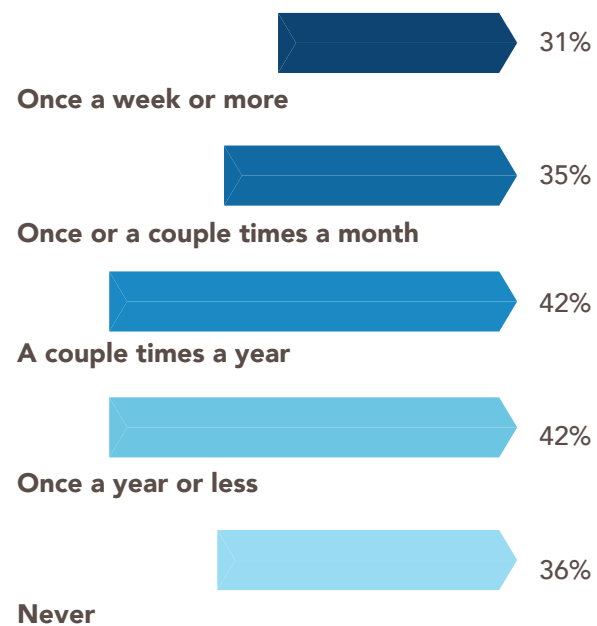
PERCENTAGE OF MIDLIFE AND OLDER ADULTS WHO ARE LONELY

By frequency of contact with friends.

Never / **At least 1x a month**

In Person	64%	30%
By phone	54%	30%
By email	42%	29%
By text	40%	31%
By video message	37%	32%

PERCENTAGE OF MIDLIFE AND OLDER ADULTS WHO ARE LONELY

By frequency of contact with friends through social media.

Once a week or more	31%
Once or a couple times a month	35%
A couple times a year	42%
Once a year or less	42%
Never	36%

Neighbors

On average, just over half of midlife and older adults speak with their neighbors at least weekly (54%). However, a quarter (25%) speak with them less than once per month or never. Most describe their neighbors as acquaintances (61%) while the remainder describe them either as friends (19%) or strangers (18%). Just 1 percent describe their neighbors as close friends.

Two-fifths of midlife and older adults (40%) know most or all of their neighbors, 13% know about half of them, and nearly half (46%) report knowing a few or none of them. A clear relationship exists between loneliness among midlife and older adults


TWENTY-FIVE PERCENT OF ADULTS WHO KNOW MOST OR ALL OF THEIR NEIGHBORS ARE LONELY IN CONTRAST TO 64 PERCENT OF THOSE WHO KNOW NONE OF THEM.

and their connections with their neighbors — a new area of focus in 2018. Twenty-five percent of adults who know most or all of their neighbors are lonely in contrast to 64 percent of those who know none of them. Similarly, 33 percent of midlife and older adults who have ever spoken to their neighbors are lonely as opposed to 61 percent who have never spoken to a neighbor. Relatedly, lonely adults are twice as likely to consider their neighbors "strangers" than those who are not lonely (26% vs. 13%).

PERCENTAGE OF MIDLIFE AND OLDER ADULTS WHO ARE LONELY

By how many neighbors they know.

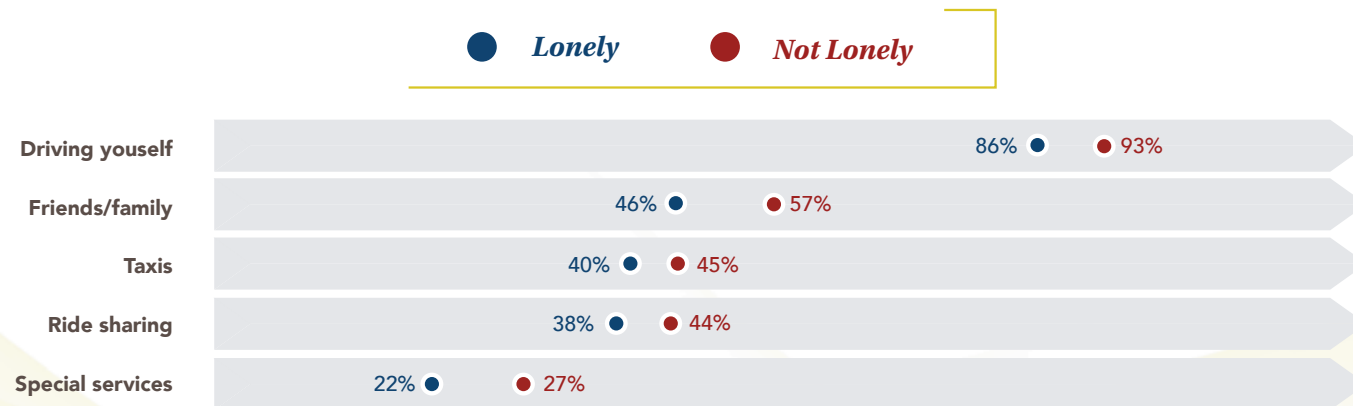| All of them | 25% |
Most	25%
About half	31%
A few	44%
None of them	64%
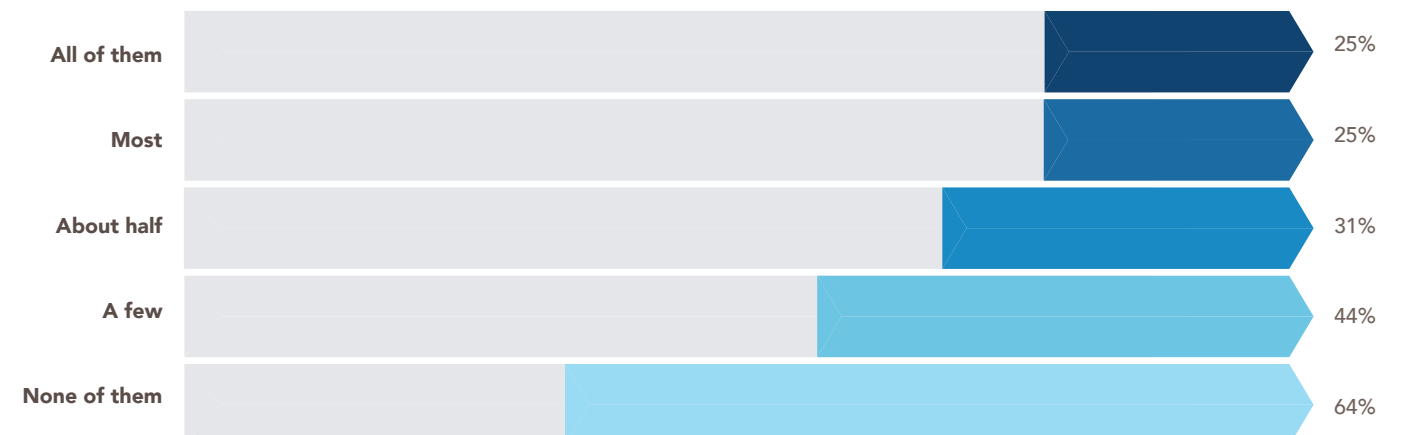
Transportation

Since the accessibility of a neighborhood or community is a risk factor when it comes to social isolation, access to transportation was included in this study.

The most common mode of transportation available to midlife and older adults is driving themselves (90%). This is followed by having friends or family drive them (53%), taxis (43%), ride-sharing services such as Uber or Lyft (42%), and public transportation (41%). Less common transportation options include special transportation services, such as those for seniors or persons with disabilities (25%) and carsharing rental companies such as ZipCar or Car2Go (6%).

There are differences between lonely midlife and older adults and those who are not lonely when it comes to access to transportation. Specifically, those who are lonely are less likely to have driving as an option to get around — either themselves or through rides from friends or family. Additionally, lonely adults have more limited access to taxis, ride-sharing, or special transportation services.

PERCENTAGE OF MIDLIFE AND OLDER ADULTS WHO ARE LONELY

By transportation options available.

● **Lonely**   ● **Not Lonely**

Driving youself	86% ● ● 93%
Friends/family	46% ● ● 57%
Taxis	40% ● ● 45%
Ride sharing	38% ● ● 44%
Special services	22% ● ● 27%

Loneliness and Social Connections: *A National Survey of Adults 45 and Older*

Lifestyle Factors: Spirituality, Worship Attendance, Volunteering, and Engagement in Hobbies

Social engagement is important to the discussion of social isolation. Therefore, several lifestyle factors that contribute to social engagement were contained in this study to assess their relationship to loneliness. These factors included spirituality, worship attendance, volunteering, participation in secular community organizations, unpaid caregiving status, and engagement in hobbies.
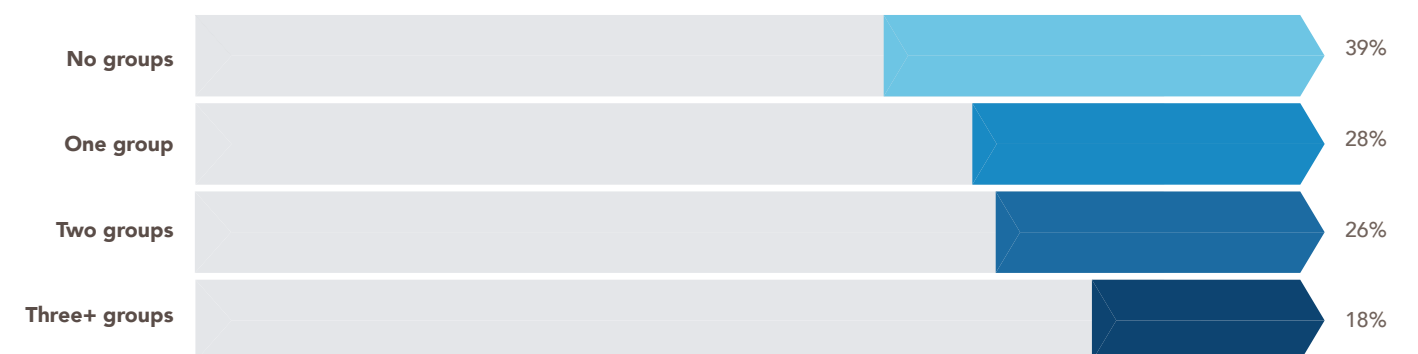

PEOPLE WHO PARTICIPATE IN THEIR COMMUNITY THROUGH VOLUNTEERING OR LOCAL CIVIC GROUPS ARE LESS LIKELY TO BE LONELY.

Adults age 45 and older who do not consider themselves spiritual or religious and never attend religious services are more likely to be lonely compared to those who identify as very religious or spiritual and attend services regularly. Specifically, 39 percent of those who say they are not at all religious or spiritual are lonely, while one-quarter (25%) of adults who are very religious or spiritual fall into the lonely category. In the same vein, 45 percent of midlife and older adults who never attend religious services are lonely compared to 29 percent of those who join religious services at least once a month.

When it comes to volunteering, midlife and older adults who do not donate their time or skills are more likely to be lonely than those who volunteer for some type of organization (e.g., school, charity, community group). Forty percent of those who had not volunteered in the past 12 months are lonely — significantly higher than the 28 percent who had volunteered. Likewise, there is a distinct difference between adults who belong to a local community group and feel lonely (26%) and those who do not (39%), with loneliness decreasing as the number of groups increase.

PERCENTAGE OF MIDLIFE AND OLDER ADULTS WHO ARE LONELY

By participation in community organizations.

No groups	39%
One group	28%
Two groups	26%
Three+ groups	18%

Loneliness and Social Connections: *A National Survey of Adults 45 and Older*

However, the opposite pattern is seen with caregiving. Those who are providing unpaid care for an adult friend or family member who needs assistance due to aging, a disability or a health-related issue are more inclined to fall into the loneliness category than midlife or older adults who do not provide this support (42% vs. 34%).

Unpaid caregivers are
MORE LIKELY
to be
LONELY

Lonely adults are also less likely to spend time on hobbies, as half (49%) of adults who spend no time on a hobby report feeling lonely compared to 33 percent who spend at least an hour a week on a hobby. Notably, 28 percent of adults who spent 11 hours or more a week on hobbies identify as lonely.

PERCENTAGE OF MIDLIFE AND OLDER ADULTS WHO ARE LONELY

By time spent on hobbies per week.

|	
None	49%
1-10 hours	34%
11 hours +	28%
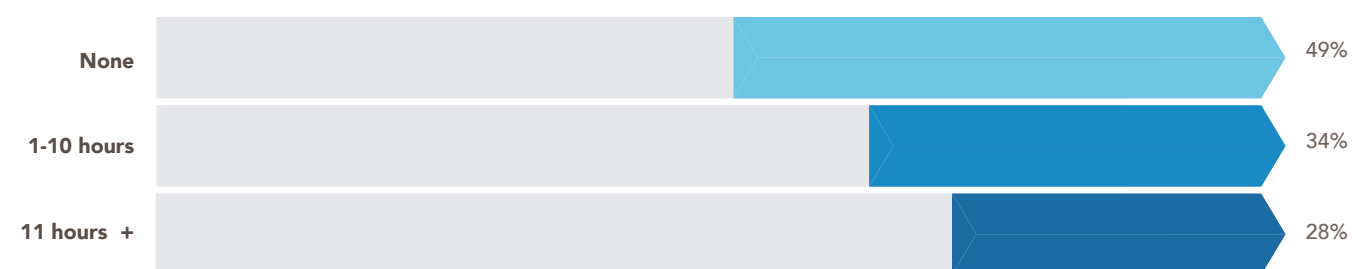
Life
EXPERIENCES

A key objective of this study was to explore how changes in the lives of midlife and older adults are related to loneliness. In order to investigate this question, respondents were asked to reflect on recent experiences of loss, retirement and changes in their residency. Unless noted, findings are on par with those seen in 2010.

Experience of Loss

Respondents were asked whether a spouse, good friend, or close relative had died in the last five years. Forty-seven percent of those who had lost a spouse or partner in the past five years are lonely — significantly higher than among those who had lost a close relative (34%), a good friend (32%) or no one at all (34%). Respondents were also asked whether a good friend or close relative had moved away in the last five years. Here, the rate of loneliness is highest among those who have dealt with a close relative moving away (38%), compared to a good friend (33%) or neither (35%).
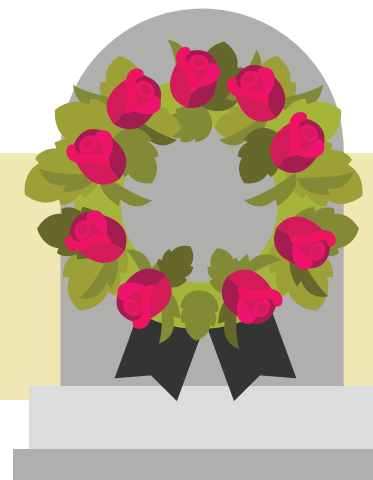
47%
of those who had lost a spouse or partner in the past five years
ARE LONELY

PERCENTAGE OF MIDLIFE AND OLDER ADULTS WHO ARE LONELY

By death of spouse/partner, close relative, or good friend.

Death of spouse/partner	47%
Death of close relative	34%
Death of good friend	32%
No loss	34%
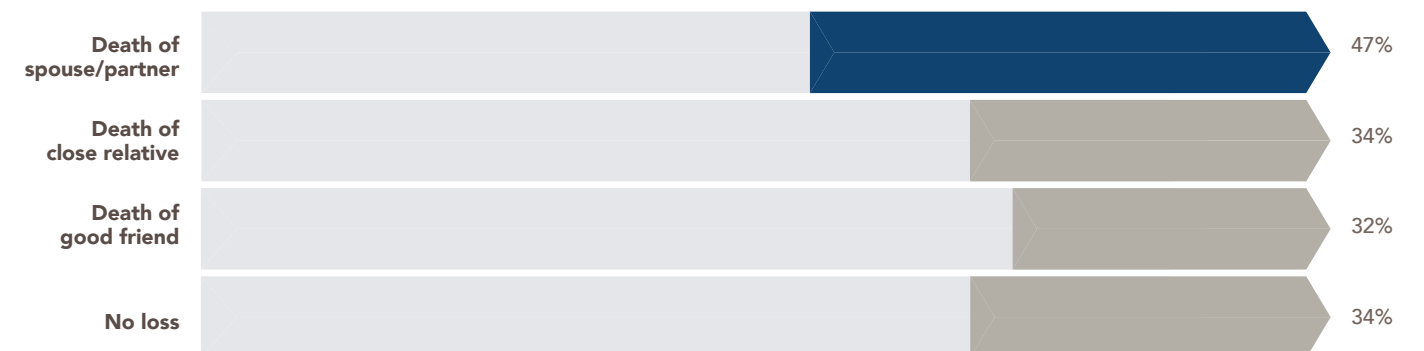
Length of Time at Current Address

Adults age 45 and older who have lived at their current address for 20 years or more have the lowest rates of loneliness (32%). By contrast, 4 in 10 adults (40%) who have relocated in the past 10 years are considered lonely, while those living in the same place for 10 to 20 years fall in the middle (35%).

PERCENTAGE OF MIDLIFE AND OLDER ADULTS WHO ARE LONELY

By length of time at current residence.

- Less than 10 years — 40%
- 10 to less than 20 years — 35%
- 20 years or more — 32%

Retirement

Unlike loss or relocation, retirement is not a driver of loneliness among adults age 45 and older. In fact, retired midlife and older adults are less likely to be lonely than those who are working full or part time (29% vs. 36%). However, when examined by age, differences emerge. Among ages 45-49, those who are retired are more likely to be lonely than those who are working. The opposite is true among those age 60 and older.

When exploring the correlation between length of retirement and loneliness, no obvious pattern emerges. However, midlife and older adults who are in regular contact with former coworkers after retirement are much less likely to be lonely than those who report no such contact post-retirement (15% vs. 40%).

TECHNOLOGY

Though seeing record growth since 2010, social media use does not necessarily translate into less loneliness among the 45+ community; lonely adults are more inclined to have a negative view of the internet for keeping in touch.
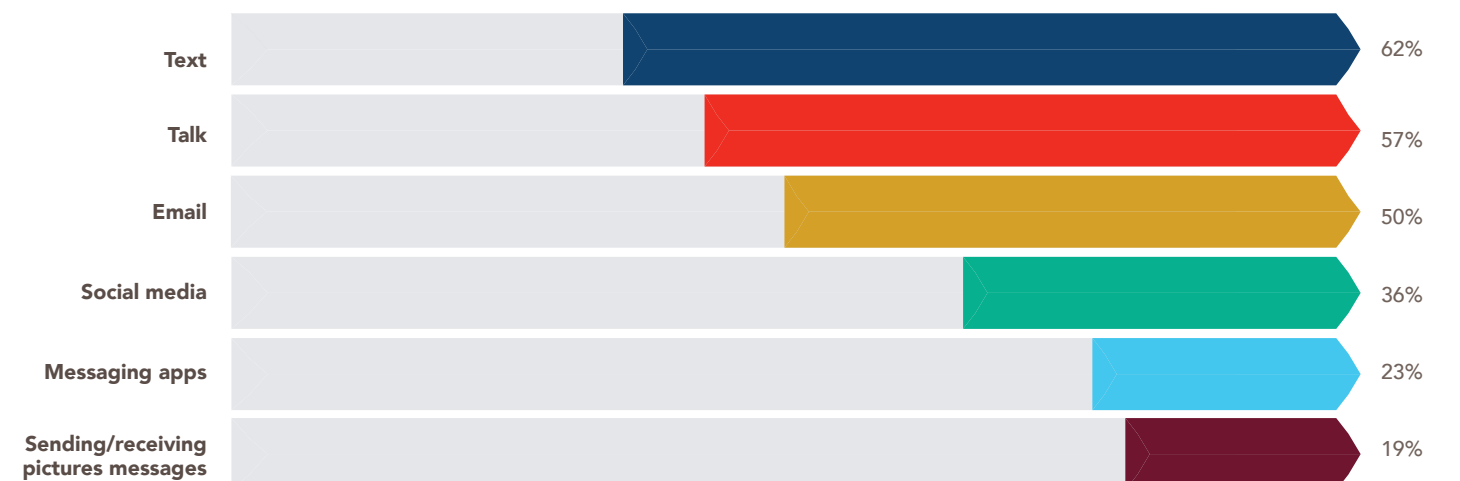
Use of Communication Technology

Access to the internet and communication technology has shifted dramatically over the past decade. In 2018, most midlife and older adults are connected to the internet via their cell phone (85%), followed by a desktop or laptop computer (67%). This year, the survey took a closer look at how midlife and older adults are using their cell phones for communication. A majority of adults use their cell phones beyond just chatting and texting. They send emails (79%), exchange photos (80%), use messaging apps (57%), video chat (37%), and connect through social media (62%) — and sizable shares are doing each of these daily (see chart below).

1 IN 5 COULD USE HELP IN LEVERAGING ONLINE TOOLS TO STAY CONNECTED

PERCENTAGE OF MIDLIFE AND OLDER ADULTS USING CELL PHONES DAILY

By purpose of use.

- Text — 62%
- Talk — 57%
- Email — 50%
- Social media — 36%
- Messaging apps — 23%
- Sending/receiving pictures messages — 19%

Greater access to the internet and new communication platforms also influence the way many build and maintain social connections. Some midlife and older adults are making new friends online. Nearly one-quarter (24%) have made at least one friend or acquaintance through an online site or forum — and about half (49%) of these adults have met their online friends in person. Individuals who have met their online friends in person are less likely to identify as lonely than those who are keeping the relationship strictly online (37% vs. 46%). Still, 42 percent of adults who have made at least one friend through an online forum are lonely, compared to 33 percent who have not made friends online.

INDIVIDUALS WHO HAVE MET THEIR ONLINE FRIENDS IN PERSON ARE LESS LIKELY TO IDENTIFY AS LONELY THAN THOSE WHO ARE KEEPING THE RELATIONSHIP STRICTLY ONLINE (37% VS. 46%)

Social Media

The popularity of social media sites has also grown dramatically among midlife and older adults since 2010. While just 13 percent of adults age 45 and older were using social media daily in 2010, this figure has more than tripled, registering at 42 percent in 2018. However, social media usage does not differ by loneliness status.
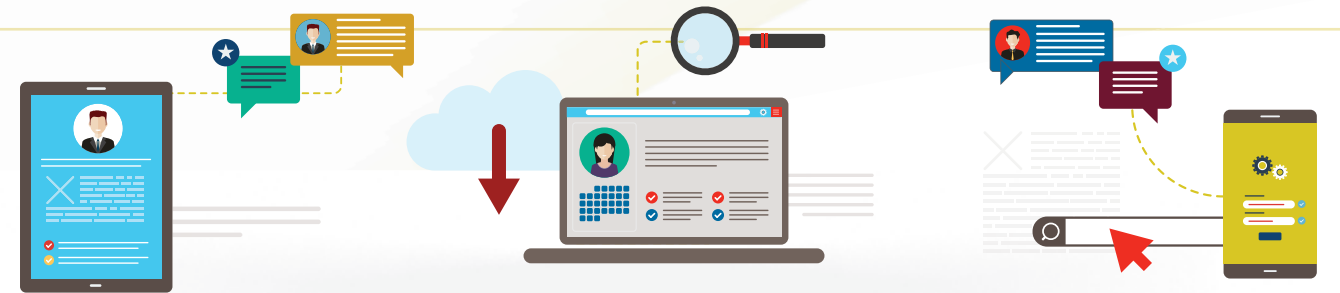
PERCENTAGE OF MIDLIFE AND OLDER ADULTS WHO ARE LONELY

By social media use with a comparison of 2010 and 2018.

	2010	2018
At least daily	13%	42%
At least weekly	11%	15%
Monthly or less	13%	12%
Never	62%	30%
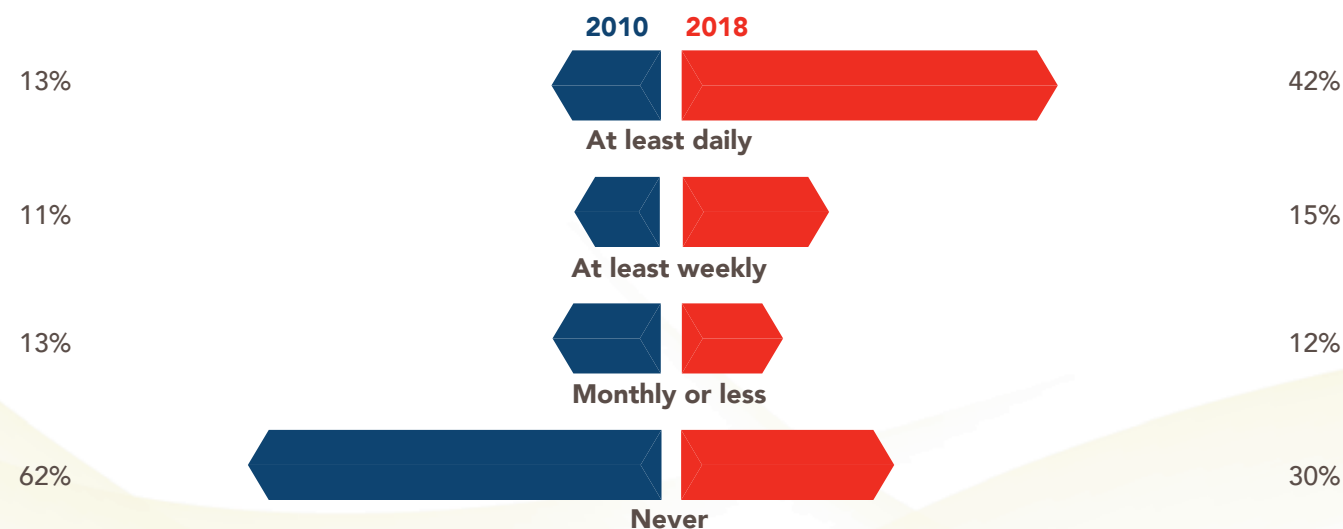
Perceived Impact of Using Communication Technology

Respondents were asked about the impact of both internet use and social communication technology on their relationships with others, as well as their sense of social connectedness. Overall, midlife and older adults feel more strongly about the benefits of technology compared to 2010. Statements around using social media to stay connected experienced double-digit increases in agreement.

GENERALLY, MIDLIFE AND OLDER ADULTS FEEL MORE STRONGLY ABOUT THE BENEFITS OF COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGY COMPARED TO 2010.

ATTITUDES TOWARD TECHNOLOGY

Percentage who Strongly/Somewhat Agree

POSITIVE STATEMENTS	2010 TOTAL	2018 TOTAL
Social media has helped me keep in touch with friends and family I would have otherwise drifted away from	31%	52%*
I find it easy to balance my time on the internet with in-person activities and obligations	46%	50%*
The internet has brought me closer together with my friends and family	29%	43%*
Social media sites like Facebook and Twitter make me feel connected with my friends and family	20%	42%*
I would recommend using the internet to others in order to help with loneliness	27%	30%
The internet makes it easier for me to share personal or uncomfortable information	14%	23%*
NEGATIVE STATEMENTS		
Communicating online is less satisfying than communicating on the phone or with letters	50%	51%
Technology has made it harder to spend time with my friends and family in person	11%	20%*
I have fewer "deep" friendship connections now that I keep in touch with people using the internet	10%	14%*
The more I use the internet as a replacement for other forms of communication, the lonelier I feel	8%	11%*

Note: * indicates significantly higher at the 95% confidence level.

The results suggest that lonely adults are more likely to perceive harsh effects of the internet and social media communication compared to those who are not lonely. Adults who are not lonely are more likely to see the internet as a way to bring people closer together rather than creating a divide.

In addition, differences between people who are lonely and those who are not lonely suggest some opportunities. For example, while all consider social media relatively good for maintaining relationships (with both friends and family), those who are lonely are less likely to see it as a way to develop relationships. Greater education around how to use technology to develop and maintain relationships could help those who find it challenging and who would benefit from the additional connections.

LONELY MIDLIFE AND OLDER ADULTS ARE MORE LIKELY TO PERCEIVE HARSH EFFECTS OF THE INTERNET AND SOCIAL MEDIA COMMUNICATION COMPARED TO THOSE WHO ARE NOT LONELY

### ATTITUDES TOWARD TECHNOLOGY BY LONELINESS STATUS AND YEAR OF SURVEY

Percentage who Strongly/Somewhat Agree

POSITIVE STATEMENTS	2010 LONELY	2010 NOT LONELY	2018 LONELY	2018 NOT LONELY
Social media has helped me keep in touch with friends and family I would have otherwise drifted away from	28%	29%	51%	54%
I find it easy to balance my time on the internet with in-person activities and obligations	39%	43%	41%	54%*
The internet has brought me closer together with my friends and family	24%	29%	38%	45%*
Social media sites like Facebook and Twitter make me feel connected with my friends and family	19%	17%	41%	43%
I would recommend using the internet to others in order to help with loneliness	29%	23%	30%	30%
The internet makes it easier for me to share personal or uncomfortable information	17%*	10%*	25%	22%
NEGATIVE STATEMENTS				
Communicating online is less satisfying than communicating on the phone or with letters	42%	48%	47%	54%*
Technology has made it harder to spend time with my friends and family in person	12%*	9%*	25%*	17%
I have fewer "deep" friendship connections now that I keep in touch with people using the internet	13%*	6%	21%*	10%
The more I use the internet as a replacement for other forms of communication, the lonelier I feel	11%*	5%	18%*	8%

Note * indicates statistical difference between lonely and not lonely within year at the 95% confidence level

Strategies for Coping
WITH LONELINESS

Individuals often have different coping strategies for dealing with times of loneliness. In order to better understand these strategies, respondents were asked how often (*always*, *sometimes*, *rarely* or *never*) they engage in various behaviors when they feel lonely, such as sleeping, talking to a friend, eating food or surfing the internet.
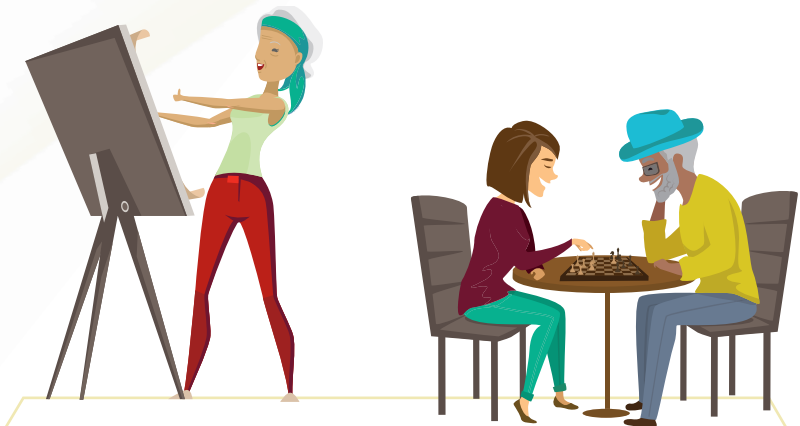
CHRONICALLY LONELY ADULTS
use **solo activites** for coping,
WHILE ADULTS WHO ARE NOT CHRONICALLY LONELY
REACH OUT
WHEN FEELING ISOLATED

When looking at the top three behaviors among the two groups — lonely and not lonely — watching television is the only common activity. As in 2010, those who are lonely remain more likely to watch television, sleep, go out alone to a restaurant or to run an errand, eat food, or surf the internet as a coping mechanism. They are also more likely to turn to alcohol or tobacco products, though less than 1 in 5 report such behaviors.

In turn, lonely respondents prove less likely to connect socially as a coping mechanism for loneliness — things like talking to a friend or relative in person, on the phone or via the internet, or going out with friends or family. They are also less likely to attend religious services, do something creative or work on a hobby when feeling lonely. Only a handful of respondents overall (5%) reported using drugs when feeling lonely.

	LONELY	NOT LONELY
Watch television	**82%**	**73%***
Surf the internet	**72%**	60%
Eat food	**66%***	48%
Work on a hobby or personal interest	64%	**69%***
Sleep	59%	39%
Talk to a friend or relative on the phone	59%*	38%
Talk to a friend or relative in person	58%	**69%***
Go out alone, such as to a restaurant or to run an errand	53%	42%
Take a walk	53%*	56%
Text or message a friend or relative	51%	52%
Go out with friends or family	51%	**73%***
Go shopping	46%	44%
Use social media	43%*	38%
Talk to a friend or relative over the internet or via email	35%	42%*
Do something artistic or creative	34%	39%*
Attend religious services	31%	37%*
Go to the park	29%	32%
Drink alcohol	19%*	14%
Smoke cigarettes or use other tobacco products	14%*	9%
Write in a diary or journal	13%*	10%
Go to bars or clubs	7%	5%
Use drugs	6%*	1%

Note: * indicates statistical difference between lonely and not lonely within year at the 95% confidence level.

Bolding indicates a top-three activity among group.

Lonely midlife and older adults are more likely to have spoken about feeling lonely to a variety of types of people. Both groups are twice as likely to talk with relatives and friends than with other types of people.

	LONELY	NOT LONELY
Family member	39%*	24%
Friend	33%*	21%
Psychologist, psychiatrist or other mental health care professional	16%*	6%
Doctor	13%	6%
Co-worker	11%	7%
Clergy member	6%	4%*

* indicates significantly higher at the 95% confidence level.

METHODOLOGY

Data for this study were collected by GfK through the KnowledgePanel®, an online research panel that is representative of the entire U.S. population. KnowledgePanel® panelists are randomly recruited by probability-based sampling, and households are provided access to the internet and hardware if needed.

The survey was fielded between June 5, 2018, and June 15, 2018. Surveys were completed in both English and Spanish, according to panelists' language preference. The sample for the study consisted of 6,343 U.S. residents age 45 and older, as well as an oversample of the LGBTQ community. Of those sampled, 3,020 completed the survey, resulting in a 50.8 percent completion rate. The confidence interval width for estimates on loneliness items is approximately plus or minus 1.9 percent (at the 95 percent confidence interval). All differences noted throughout the report are at the 95 percent confidence level unless stated otherwise.

This study was also conducted in 2010 using many of the same questions. Where appropriate, comparisons to the 2010 data are noted throughout the report.

APPENDIX

APPENDIX A-1: UCLA LONELINESS SCALE

The following statements describe how people sometimes feel. For each statement, please indicate how often you feel the way described.

NOTE: ITEMS 1, 5, 6, 9, 10, 15, 16, 19, 20 are all reverse scored.

Statements per row:

1. How often do you feel that you are "in tune" with the people around you?
2. How often do you feel that you lack companionship?
3. How often do you feel that there is no one you can turn to?
4. How often do you feel alone?
5. How often do you feel part of a group of friends?
6. How often do you feel that you have a lot in common with the people around you?
7. How often do you feel that you are no longer close to anyone?
8. How often do you feel that your interests and ideas are not shared by those around you?
9. How often do you feel outgoing and friendly?
10. How often do you feel close to people?
11. How often do you feel left out?
12. How often do you feel that your relationships with others are not meaningful?
13. How often do you feel that no one really knows you well?
14. How often do you feel isolated from others?
15. How often do you feel you can find companionship when you want it?
16. How often do you feel that there are people who really understand you?
17. How often do you feel shy?
18. How often do you feel that people are around you but not with you?
19. How often do you feel that there are people you can talk to?
20. How often do you feel that there are people you can turn to?

Statements per column:

1. Never   3. Sometimes
2. Rarely   4. Always

APPENDIX A-2: FACTOR ANALYSIS

Note: All items below are recoded as Zscores

	USE OF TECH FOR COMMUNICATION	SOCIAL NETWORK	VOLUNTEERING & RELIGIOUS INVOLVEMENT	PHYSICAL ISOLATION	HOBBIES & SECULAR CLUBS	URBANICITY
Q8. Does any disability or chronic disease keep you from participating fully in work, school, household, or other activities? Q8a. How much does your disability or chronic disease affect your ability to fully participate in work, school, household or other activities?		0.103	-0.105	0.510	-0.348	
Q28. How many people do you have in your life with whom you most often discuss matters of personal importance?	0.101	0.716			0.134	
Q30. How many people do you have in your life who have been very supportive of you during the past year?		0.767				
Sum of Q31. What is your relationship to these individuals? (Measure of diversity of social network)		0.752		-0.167		
Q46 reverse coded. How often do you attend religious services or other events at a place of worship?			0.801		-0.207	
Q48. In the past 12 months, have you volunteered, that is given your time or skills, for a non-profit organization, a charity, school, hospital, religious organization, neighborhood association, civic or any other group?		0.129	0.753		0.319	
Q50. Do you belong to any local community organizations, clubs, or groups such as Kiwanis, book clubs, gardening groups, or other social groups? If so, how many?			0.416		0.615	
Q53. How many hours per week do you spend on hobbies?		0.188	-0.157	0.109	0.729	
Sum of Q68A. Which of the following modes of transportation are available to you in your neighborhood?		0.249			0.296	0.661
Q77. On average, how many hours per day are you physically alone?		-0.117		0.783		0.105

Note: All items below are recoded as Zscores

	USE OF TECH FOR COMMUNICATION	SOCIAL NETWORK	VOLUNTEERING & RELIGIOUS INVOLVEMENT	PHYSICAL ISOLATION	HOBBIES & SECULAR CLUBS	URBANICITY
Sum of Q81 (except social media) reverse coded. How frequently do you do the following activities on a mobile cell phone?	0.861			-0.180		
Q81 for social media reverse coded. How frequently do you use social media on a mobile cell phone?	0.850					
Sum of Q83. How frequently do you do the following activities online?	0.740				0.146	
Q92 reverse coded. On average, how often do you speak with your neighbors?		0.108	0.125			-0.501
Q93 reverse coded. Which best describes the community where you live? 1=rural, 6=urban near mix of offices, apartments, and shops.	0.130				-0.147	0.786
PPHHSIZE panel variable. Household Size				-0.658	-0.219	

Note: Step-wise multiple regression analysis; model fit: adjusted r2 = .267

	STANDARDIZED COEFFICIENT	t VALUE	SIG. (P VALUE)
Social Network Robustness (factor) Including items such as number of people who have been supportive, people with whom you can discuss matters of importance, and diversity of social relationships (friends, family, spouse, etc.)	-0.236	-14.886	0.000
Physical Isolation (factor) Including items such as disability status and effect of disability on one's ability to participate in activities, number of hours a day spent alone, number of people living in respondent's household	0.201	11.517	0.000
Age	-0.203	-11.156	0.000
Weekly or More Contact with Friends	-0.139	-7.941	0.000
Health Status (Self-Reported)	-0.081	-4.533	0.000
Depression Diagnosis	0.080	4.345	0.000
Sleep	-0.083	-5.168	0.000
Sexual Activity	-0.073	-4.143	0.000
Weekly or More Contact with Siblings	-0.088	-5.257	0.000
Participation in Hobbies & Secular Clubs (factor) Including items such as volunteering in the past 12 months, hours per week spent on hobbies, number of community clubs, organizations or groups, disability status	-0.072	-4.325	0.000
Urbanicity of Local Community (factor) Including items such as urbanicity of community (rural vs urban), how often one speaks to neighbors, number of modes of transportation available	0.063	4.012	0.000
Anxiety Diagnosis	0.062	3.365	0.001
Frequency of Volunteering & Religious Involvement (factor) Includes items such as frequency of attendance at religious services, frequency of volunteering in the past 12 months, number of community clubs, organizations, or groups	-0.048	-3.004	0.003
Use of Technology for Communication (factor) Frequency of communication activities online, frequency of communication activities on mobile phone, frequency of social media use	0.049	2.784	0.005