

## **Understanding the Relationship between Loneliness and Health Outcomes in Older Adults**

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### **Topics to be Covered**

- How do you measure loneliness?
- Loneliness vs. social isolation
- Age & sex differences in loneliness
- Loneliness & depression
- Loneliness & physical health
- Future research on loneliness



## Measuring loneliness



- “Direct” measures of loneliness
  - Example: “How often do you feel lonely?”
  - Issue: Stigma of loneliness
    - Will individuals be honest in their responses?
  - Social desirability concerns may undermine the validity of such measures
- “Indirect” measures of loneliness
  - Do not use the term “loneliness”

## Development of the UCLA Loneliness Scale



- Has become the most widely used measure of loneliness
- Initial set of items were based on statements by lonely people describing the experience
- Revision of the scale in 1980 involved the addition of positive or “non-lonely” items
- Version 3 involved simplifying the wording of the items to facilitate giving the scale to non-college educated samples

## **Sample Items from the UCLA Loneliness Scale**



- How often do you feel that you are “in tune” with the people around you?
- How often do you feel that you lack companionship?
- How often do you feel alone?
- How often do you feel part of a group of friends?

## **Loneliness & Social Isolation**



- Is loneliness the same as being alone?
- Individuals may feel lonely despite having a large number of friends or frequent social contact
- Other individuals may not feel lonely despite having few friends or infrequent social contact
- Theoretical model of loneliness argues that how your relationships with others compare with your expectations determine whether or not you feel lonely

## Loneliness & Social Relationships Among Older Adults



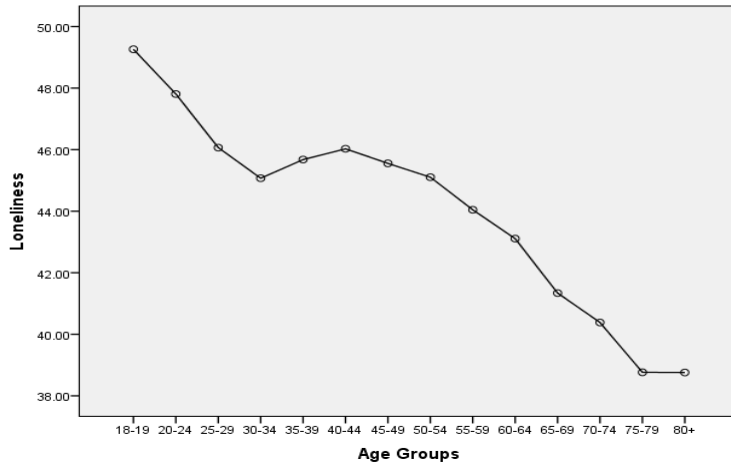
<i>Relationship Measure</i>	<i>Loneliness</i>
Social Support	-.74
Number of Relatives	-.17
Number of Friends	-.23
Frequency of Social Contact	-.16

## Age Differences in Loneliness

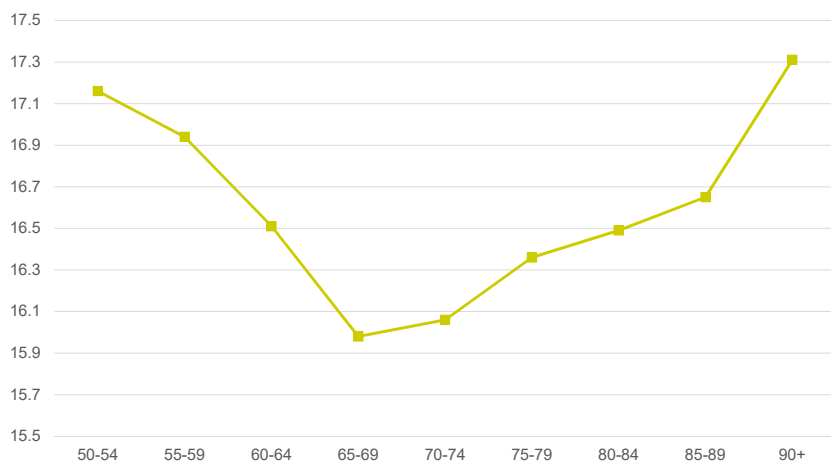


- It is commonly believed that older adults are the most lonely
- Increasing social isolation with age is believed to increase feelings of loneliness
  - Decreases in the size of the social network due to loss of your partner, family and friends
  - Less frequent contact with others due to physical limitations

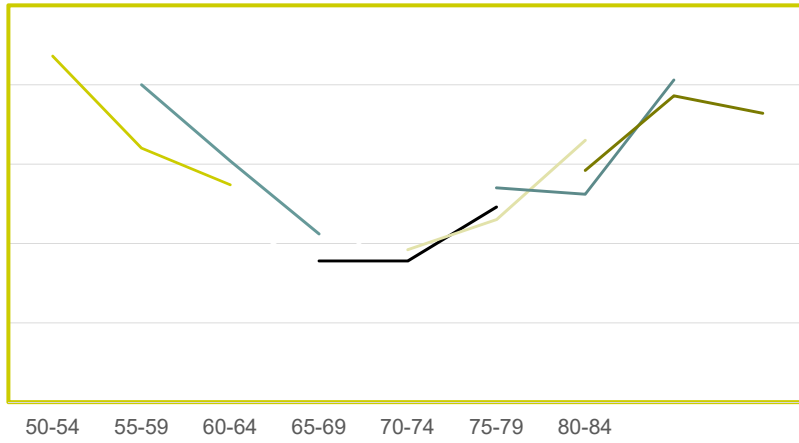
## Cigna Survey - 2018



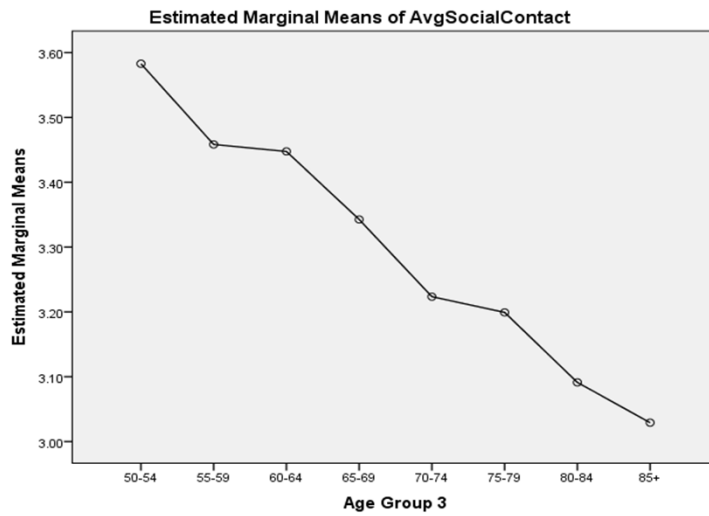
## HRS Loneliness By Age Group 2008-2016

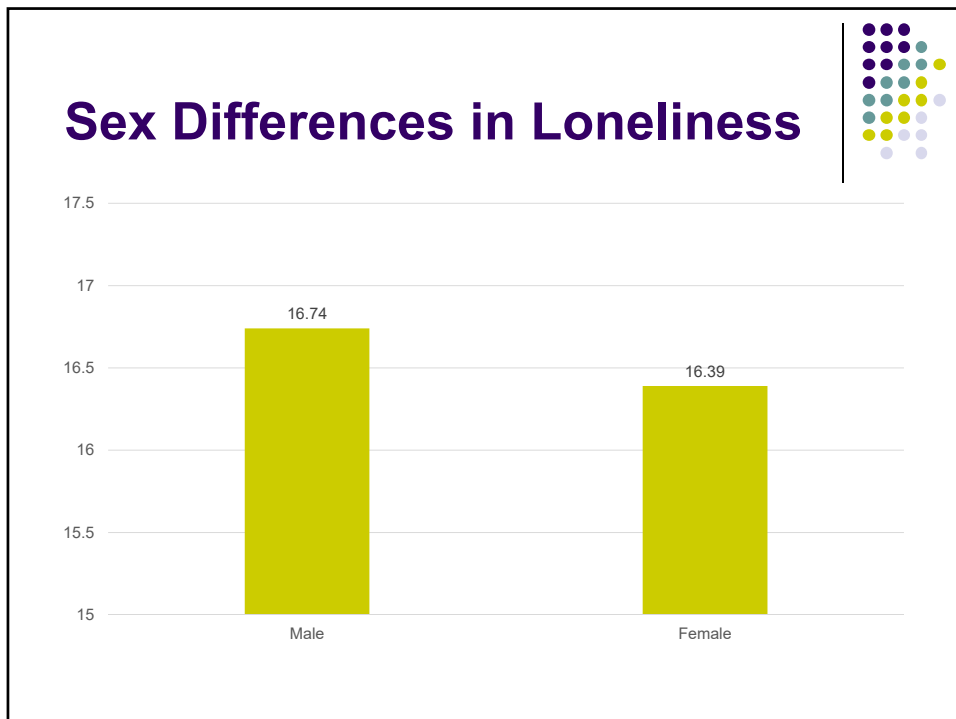
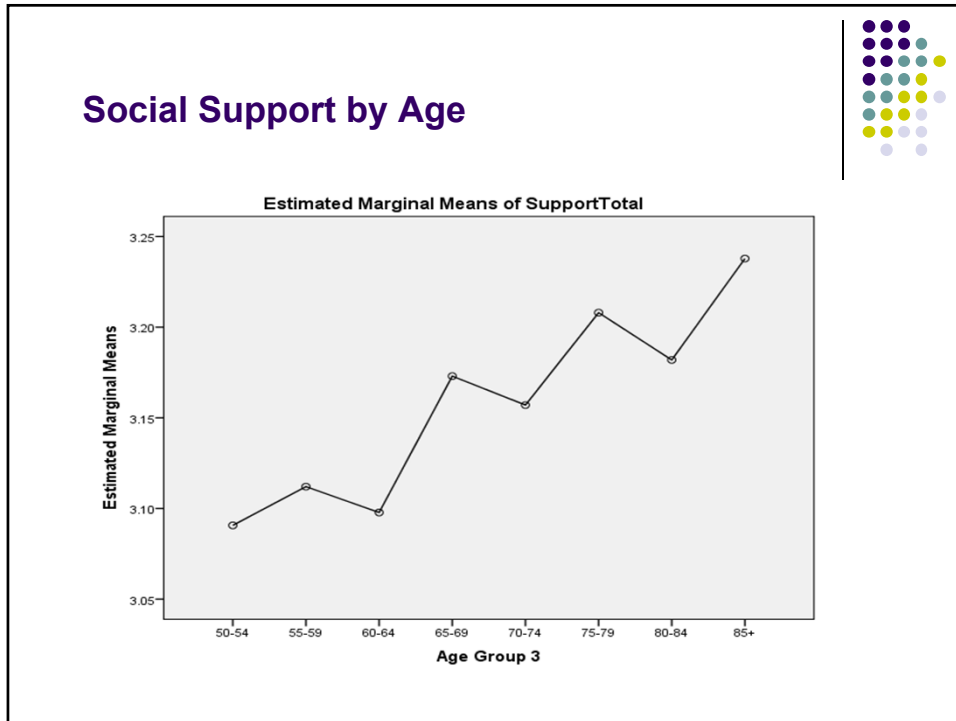


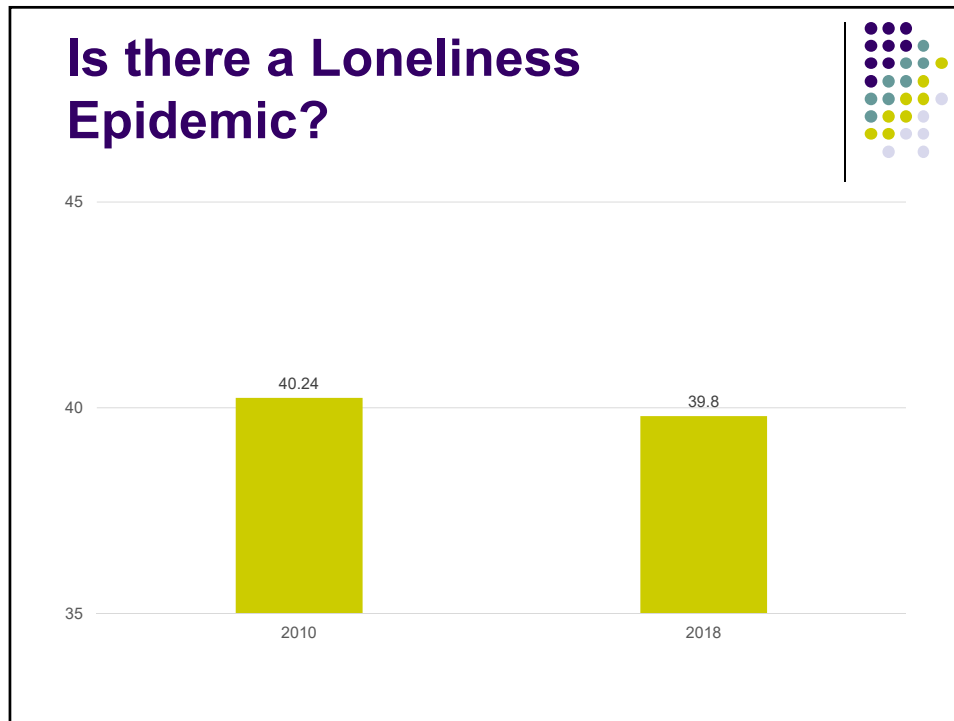
### HRS Study: Changes in Loneliness Over 8 Years



### Age by Social Contact







## Loneliness & Depression

- Loneliness is considered to be a symptom of depression
  - CES-D: One item assesses the frequency of feeling lonely (“I felt lonely during the previous week”)
- Measures of loneliness and depression typically correlate from .40 to .70
- Research indicates that there are reciprocal relationships between loneliness and depression
- Issue: Are relationships between loneliness and health due to depression?

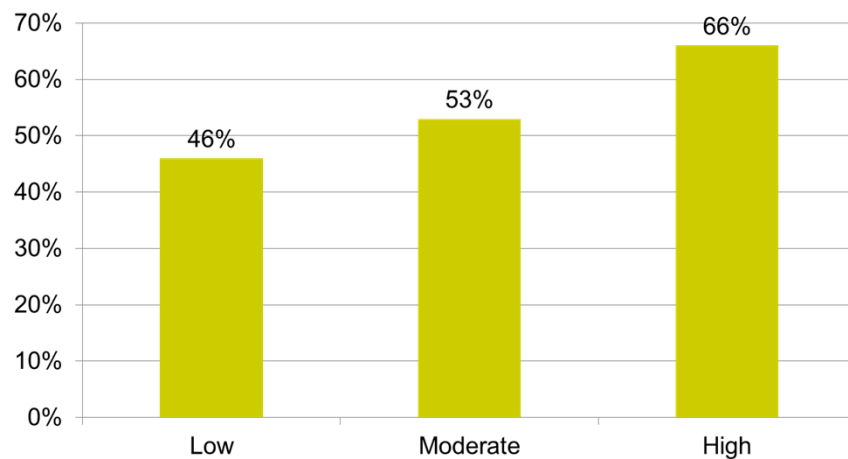


## Loneliness & Mortality



- A large number of studies in both the U.S. and other countries have examined the relationship between loneliness and other measures of social isolation with mortality
- A meta-analysis by Holt-Lunstad et al. (2015) found that loneliness was associated with a 26% increase in the likelihood of mortality
  - A number of studies have indicated that loneliness is related to mortality beyond the effects of social isolation
  - Results did not vary by gender, length of follow-up, or country
  - Effects appeared to be stronger for individuals under 65 years of age

## Iowa EPESE: Loneliness & Overall Mortality

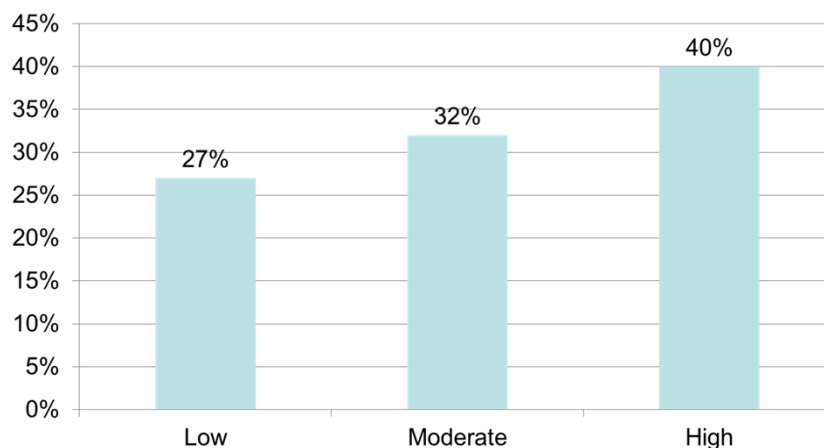


## Loneliness & Coronary Heart Disease (CHD)

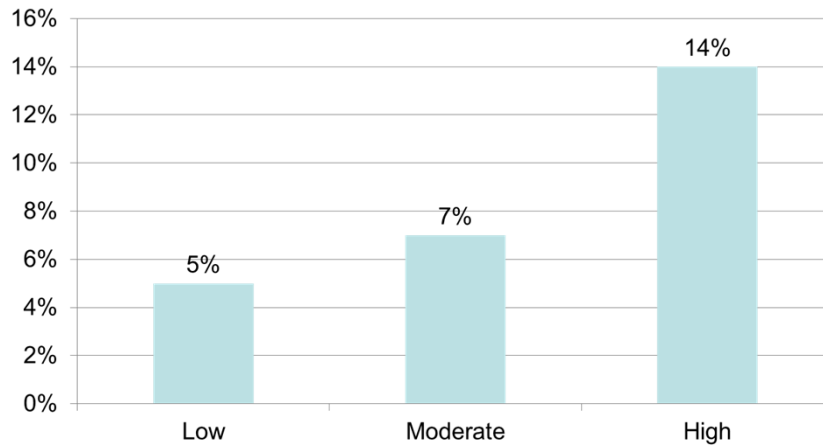


- Loneliness has been found to be related to blood pressure and other variables related to inflammation (e.g., CRP; poorer immune system functioning)
- Meta-analysis examined the relationship between loneliness and social isolation with CHD & stroke
- Results indicated poor social relationships were associated with a 29% increase in CHD & a 32% increase in risk of stroke
  - Results did not vary by sex

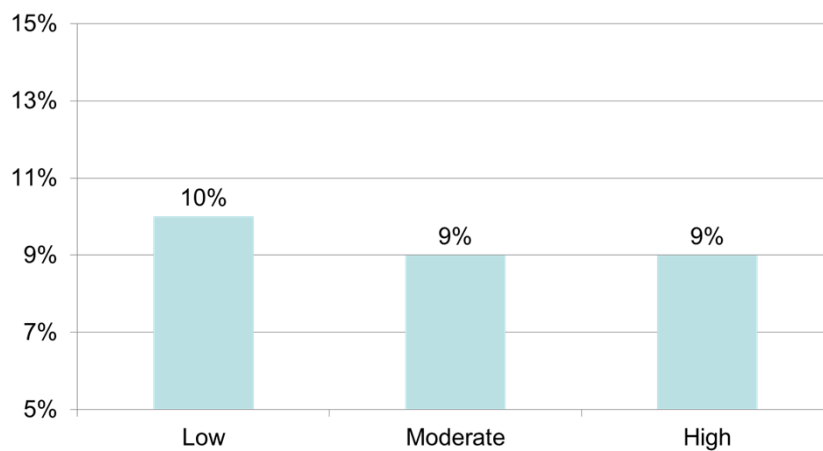
## Loneliness & Mortality due to Heart Disease



## Loneliness & Mortality due to Respiratory Illness



## Loneliness & Mortality due to Cancer



## Future Research Issues



- Interventions for loneliness
  - Existing interventions do not appear to be very effective
  - Few studies have attempted to intervene with very lonely individuals
- Role of the Internet
  - Impact on quality of relationships
  - Interventions that make use of new technology

## Developing a New Older Adult Loneliness Measure?



- UCLA Loneliness Scale was developed based on data from college students
  - Does the measure reflect the experience of loneliness among older adults?
- Is there a need for a “clinical” measure of loneliness?
  - What score reflects a high level of loneliness?
  - Should there be diagnostic criteria for loneliness?

