

FC7: Social Support, Relationship Satisfaction, and Meaning and Purpose in Life as Predictors of Loneliness among Older Adult Couples

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Background: Meaning and purpose in life has demonstrated positive effects on physical and mental health and loneliness. We wanted to understand whether, among older adult couples, the impact of meaning and purpose in life on loneliness was mitigated by their assessment of the quality of their relationship with their partner, and their social support from family and friends.

Method: Participants were 101 nondemented older adults living with a spouse or partner and participating in an ongoing longitudinal study of couples. As part of their baseline visit, they completed a series of questionnaires to measure demographic information, physical and psychological well-being, loneliness, meaning and purpose in life, quality of dyadic relationship (measured by the Dyadic Adjustment Scale), and various aspects of social support (instrumental, informational, and emotional).

Results: The average age of participants was 74.7 ($SD = 6.71$) and 49% were female. Bivariate correlations demonstrated statistically significant relationships between loneliness and meaning and purpose in life, relationship satisfaction, and emotional, informational and instrumental support but not age and gender. In a multiple regression analysis, meaning and purpose in life was the strongest predictor of loneliness ($\beta = -0.322, p < 0.001$); relationship quality ($\beta = -0.263, p = 0.005$), emotional ($\beta = -0.229, p = 0.048$) and instrumental support ($\beta = -0.203, p = 0.024$), also predicted loneliness, $F(5,95) = 12.19, p < 0.001$, adjusted $R^2 = 0.36$.

Discussion: In this study, all participants were older adults and members of a couple. Even when they rated their relationships with their partners as having high quality, they nevertheless expressed more loneliness when they had less meaning and purpose in life. While satisfaction with instrumental and emotional support had a positive impact on loneliness; perhaps surprisingly, relationship quality was less important than meaning and purpose in life. Apparently, having a sense of meaning and purpose in life is an ongoing need that extends to old age. This finding, if replicated in a larger longitudinal study has implications for social policy that facilitates inclusion of older adults in meaningful roles, rather than having them age out.

FC8: Revising Competencies in Geriatrics for Canadian Medical Students: Adding a Mental Health Perspective

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