



PSYCHOLOGICAL CHARACTERISTICS OF THE EXPERIENCE OF LONELINESS IN WOMEN OF MATURE AND ELDERLY AGE

Dyachok Olha, Vinnytska Olha

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Abstract

Relevance. The article is devoted to the study of the phenomenon of female loneliness, which is considered as a multifaceted socio-psychological and existential phenomenon that is becoming particularly acute in the context of modern social transformations. Special attention is paid to the gender-role specificity of the experience of loneliness by middle-aged and elderly women.

Methodology. Sample. The empirical study was conducted with the participation of 30 women aged 36–64 years (average age – 55 years).

Methods. For diagnostics, the methods “Loneliness Scale” (UCLA Loneliness Scale, version 3) and “Situational and Personality Anxiety Scale” by Ch. D. Spielberger – Yu. L. Khanin (STAI), as well as a biographical questionnaire for collecting personal data of female participants in the study, were used.

Results. In a study of the experience of loneliness by middle-aged and elderly women, it was empirically established that the majority of the subjects (56.7%) have an average level of loneliness. A statistically significant positive correlation was found between the level of loneliness and personal anxiety ($r = 0.63$, $p < 0.01$), which indicates the existence of a relationship between the feeling of loneliness and emotional tension, a tendency to worry, and the expectation of negative events. A positive relationship was also recorded between age and loneliness indicators ($r = 0.47$): an increase in the level of loneliness is observed in old age, which may be due to a decrease in the number of social contacts, experiencing losses.

Conclusions. The results of the study substantiate the need to develop targeted psychological support programs for middle-aged and elderly women as tools for overcoming their anxiety and forming resource loneliness.

Keywords: experiences of loneliness, personal and situational anxiety, middle-aged and elderly women, emotional discomfort.

Relevance

In the 21st century, interest in the problem of loneliness has increased due to urbanization, individualization of society, crises and transformations of social structures. The large number of social contacts of modern people does not change the fact that the experience of loneliness remains one of the most acute psychological problems. In the era of social networks and virtual communication, the number of people who feel isolated is increasing, even having many "friends" online. The experience of loneliness is especially

common among young people, the elderly, internally displaced persons, as well as those who have experienced the loss or breakup of relationships.

Modern society is confused in conditions of constant change and total uncertainty. People often feel lonely due to the inability to implement ideas and plans, to organize life activities in accordance with their own vision (Diachok, 2023).

The problem of loneliness has long attracted the attention of thinkers, philosophers, and psychologists. It appears not only as an emotional state, but as a complex socio-psychological and existential phenomenon that accompanies a person throughout his or her life.

Loneliness encompasses the sphere of feelings, cognition, behavior, values, and meanings, and therefore approaches to its understanding are multifaceted.

E. Fromm-Reichmann noted that loneliness is one of the deepest and most painful human needs, which, however, does not disappear even in the presence of loved ones (Fromm-Reichmann, 1959). This idea suggests that loneliness is not limited to physical isolation, but reflects deep personal and interpersonal processes.

In the psychoanalytic tradition (S. Freud, K. Horney, E. Fromm, E. Erikson,

K. Jung), loneliness is viewed as a consequence of conflicts between the need for love and the fear of losing autonomy. Z. Freud believed that a person is born with a desire for unity with others, but at the same time, their unconscious drives and contradictions create a sense of isolation (Freud, 1989).

According to Horney, the roots of loneliness go back to early childhood. A child who has not experienced warmth and acceptance grows up with the belief that true closeness cannot be found in the world (Horney, 2018).

In the works of E. Fromm, loneliness appears as an "existential alienation" that arose in the process of the development of civilization. The researcher noted that modern man is free from external limitations, but feels lonely and powerless before the world he has created (Fromm, 1941). E. Erikson linked the phenomenon of loneliness with identity crises. In his opinion, the inability to establish close relationships at the stage of intimacy leads to the formation of a sense of isolation (Erikson, 2001). K. Jung, in turn, saw loneliness as a path to individuation, that is, to the knowledge of one's own deep essence (Jung, 1953).

Within the framework of the humanistic approach, the constructive potential of human loneliness is considered. A. Maslow noted that a person's ability to be alone with himself is a sign of maturity. In his concept, loneliness is interpreted as a state in which a person is able to be himself, without needing constant approval from outside (Maslow, 1970).

According to K. Rogers a The feeling of loneliness arises when the gap between the "real self" and the "ideal self" grows: a person ceases to be authentic, trying to meet the expectations of others. At the same time , the very awareness of this loneliness can be the beginning of inner harmony (Rogers, 1995).



Within social-psychological concepts, loneliness is considered a consequence of the destruction of social ties, alienation, and lack of communication.

D. Riesman, in his famous work "The Lonely Crowd," expressed the opinion that modern society generates a type of personality oriented towards external approval, therefore an internal feeling of emptiness becomes a mass phenomenon (Riesman, 1958).

E. Golovakha and O. Granovska viewed loneliness as a result of "social deficit" – a gap between the expectation of emotional support and the actual quality of social relationships (Golovakha & Granovska, 1993).

S. Sullivan believed that loneliness is "a major source of interpersonal anxiety", which can only be overcome through sincere and honest relationships (Sullivan, 1953).

Within the framework of the cognitive-behavioural approach, the emergence of feelings of loneliness is explained by the peculiarities of the cognitive assessment of one's own social situation. R. Weiss considered emotional loneliness, which arises from the loss of a loved one, and social loneliness, which results from a lack of social contacts or group support (Weiss, 1973).

L. Ash and D. Perlman developed a cognitive-interactional model according to which loneliness is a consequence of a gap between desired and actual social relationships (Perlman & Peplau, 1981).

M. Micelles and B. Moras studied that low self-esteem and beliefs about their own social incompetence significantly increase the risk of chronic loneliness. According to scientists, anxiety is one of the determinants of the experience of loneliness (Miceli, Morasch, 1998).

In the existential approach, loneliness is seen as a fundamental condition of human existence. According to V. Frankl, a person is always lonely when the question of the meaning of life arises before him. The scientist considered destructive loneliness, which leads to despair, and constructive - which stimulates spiritual growth (Frankl, 2016). R. May believed that the feeling of loneliness is the price that a person pays for freedom (May, 1953).

An important aspect of research is the study of the gender-role specificity of loneliness. It has been found that women more often interpret loneliness through such emotional-relational aspects as a lack of support, love, trust, since their relationships are more oriented towards dyadic, intimate attachment (Maes et al., 2019).

N. Khamitov believes that women have the ability to transform loneliness into creativity and inner strength, while for men loneliness is more often associated with isolation and defeat (Khamitov, 1998).

M. Kandyba notes that social expectations regarding women's roles (mother, partner, caretaker) make the state of loneliness psychologically more difficult for women, as it contradicts traditional ideas about "women's purpose" (Kandyba, 2012).

As a result of the analysis of loneliness research, it can be concluded that the experience of loneliness is complex in nature and is also determined by a set of factors. It

should be noted that an important factor that influences the characteristics of the experience is a person's childhood and adolescent experience (Vlasova & Diachok, 2021).

A comprehensive study of the problem of loneliness and, in particular, the characteristics of women's experiences of loneliness contributes to the expansion of the scientific knowledge base. As a result, it becomes possible to improve existing and develop new effective practices of psychological assistance to people suffering from loneliness.

The purpose of the study: to investigate the psychological characteristics of the experience of loneliness among middle-aged and elderly women.

Methodology

The research methods were chosen in accordance with the objectives of the study and with the aim of finding out the level of feelings of loneliness and anxiety levels. Socio-demographic variables, such as age and information on marital status, were collected using a questionnaire.

To determine the level of loneliness experienced, women were asked to complete the "Loneliness Scale" (UCLA Loneliness Scale, version 3). This technique is one of the most famous and widely used in world psychological practice for measuring the subjective feeling of loneliness. Its creation is associated with the names of American researchers D. Russell, L. Peplo and K. Ferguson, who in 1978 first developed a questionnaire based on many years of research on social isolation and interpersonal relationships. The third version of the scale (UCLA-3) was published in 1996 and became the "gold standard" in diagnosing loneliness, demonstrating high reliability

($\alpha = 0,89-0,94$) and test- retest stability ($r = 0,73$ over 1 year).

UCLA Loneliness Research Scale used in over 100 countries around the world, adapted more than in 30 languages, including Ukrainian. It was actively used in their works by such scientists as J. Weiss, L. Peplo, D. Perlman, E. Fromm-Reichmann,

E. Fromm, K. Horney, who investigated the relationship between loneliness and anxiety, depression, self-esteem, and the quality of interpersonal relationships.

In domestic psychology, the UCLA scale was adapted by O. Mukhiarova, L. Floriko, and E. Golovakha and other researchers who confirmed its adequacy for studying socio-psychological processes in adult Ukrainian samples.

To measure the level of anxiety was used the method State-Trait Anxiety Inventory (STAI). This technique is widely used in clinical, pedagogical, organizational and social psychology and can be applied to study the emotional states of women, in particular in the context of experiencing loneliness, depressive states and interpersonal conflicts. It should be noted, that the State-Trait Anxiety Inventory (STAI) is recommended by the American Psychological Association (APA) for research on emotional states.



The methods used in the study meet the criteria of scientific validity, have a broad empirical basis for application, and allow for a deep and comprehensive investigation of the phenomenon of loneliness in middle-aged women.

The study was conducted during the 2024-2025 academic year. The study involved 30 women aged 36 to 64 living in Ukraine. The average age of the subjects was 55 years.

Results

Using the UCLA Loneliness Scale, the level of loneliness experienced by the subjects was determined (Table 1).

Table 1. Summary table of results of the UCLA Loneliness Scale survey of women (version 3)

Level of loneliness	Number of people	% of sample (%)	Characteristic
Low	6	20 %	There is no feeling of pronounced isolation, social contacts are maintained.
Average	17	56,7 %	Moderate symptoms of loneliness, occasional difficulties in interpersonal relationships
High	7	23,3 %	Pronounced feeling of social isolation, emotional discomfort

It was found that a significant part of the subjects had an average level of loneliness – 56,7%, which indicates a moderate level of feeling of isolation and lack of social contacts. A low level of loneliness was found in 20%, which indicates their sufficient social integration, emotional stability, and a high level of development of self-regulation and adaptability skills. This part of the subjects is characterized by internal maturity, the ability to accept both loneliness and social interaction without destructive consequences for emotional balance.

The State-Trait Anxiety Inventory (STAI) was used to determine the degree of manifestation of personal and situational anxiety in the subjects. The results are presented in Figure 1. It was found that most of the study participants are able to adequately respond to life difficulties, but under stressful conditions their anxiety may increase. Situational anxiety is also in most cases within the average range, but some women have a high level of anxiety, which may be due to current life problems or feelings of loneliness.

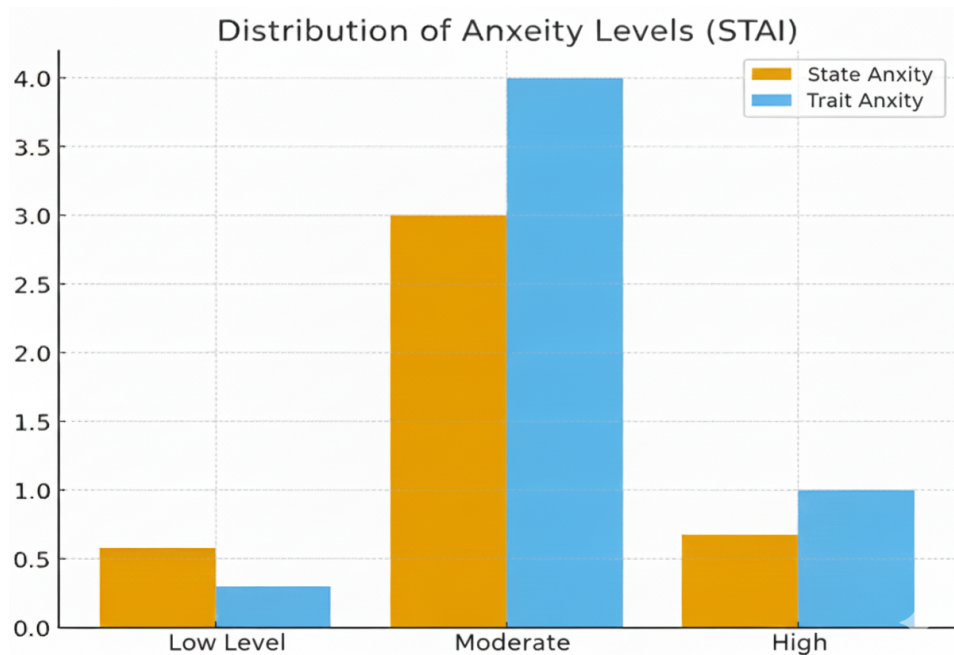


Figure. 1. Histogram of anxiety level indicators of the subjects

Analysis of the results using the State-Trait Anxiety Inventory (STAI) showed that the average level of personal anxiety in the sample was 42,3 points, which corresponds to the average indicator. However, 26.7% of respondents had high anxiety values (over 46 points), which may indicate a tendency to increased emotional tension, hypercontrol, and expectation of negative events.

In the course of the analysis of empirical data using Spearman's correlation analysis, it was found that there is a statistically significant ($p < 0,01$) positive relationship between the level of loneliness and personal anxiety ($r = 0,63$). This means that the higher the loneliness indicators, the greater the likelihood of anxiety reactions. The experience of loneliness is accompanied by emotional tension, a tendency to worry, and the expectation of negative events. Thus, the lonelier a woman feels, the higher the level of anxiety she has. Conversely, emotionally stable, self-confident women are less likely to experience high levels of loneliness.

As a result of correlation analysis using the Pearson method, a positive relationship was found between age and loneliness indicators ($r = 0,47$; $p = 0,05$): older women are characterized by higher levels of feelings of loneliness. It can be assumed that this is due to a decrease in the number of social contacts in older age, losses, or changes in life priorities.

Discussion



The results of the correlation analysis, namely the presence of a statistically significant positive relationship between the level of loneliness and personal anxiety ($r = 0,63$, $p < 0,01$), are consistent with the data of the studies by J. Russell and K. Ferguson. Scientists found that the feeling of social isolation correlates with emotional instability and a tendency to rumination (Russell & Ferguson, 1997).

A particularly important result of the study was the positive correlation ($r = 0,63$; $p < 0.01$) between the level of loneliness and indicators of anxiety. The results obtained can be justified, relying on the provisions of the theory of attachment of J. Bowlby, according to which the experience of early relationships forms a basic model of trust or distrust in the world. It can be assumed that women with a high level of anxiety are characterized by an anxious-ambivalent type of attachment, which in turn causes emotional dependence, fear of loss and difficulties in maintaining stable relationships (Bowlby, 1969).

The study also confirms the positive aspects of experiencing loneliness, which are based on the principles of existential psychology. (V. Frankl, R. May) according to which loneliness is considered an integral part of human existence, through which a person learns his own uniqueness and freedom (Frankl, 2016; May, 1953). Some of the subjects perceive loneliness as an opportunity for recovery, self-knowledge, and creative concentration. This aspect is especially pronounced in women with a low level of anxiety, for whom loneliness is not traumatic, but rather a resource. It was also found that some elderly women have the ability to transform feelings of loneliness into a certain form of self-absorption, reflection, and spiritual development, which corresponds to the concept of "positive loneliness" (Rokach, 2000).

Summarizing the results, it can be argued that feelings of loneliness and anxiety in women are related and form a certain psychological profile in which emotional vulnerability is combined with the need for reciprocity, warmth and understanding. The results obtained confirm the data of previous studies (Peplau & Perlman, 1982; Russell, 1996; Weiss, 1973), which emphasized that loneliness is most often associated with a deficit of emotional communication, a discrepancy between the desired and real level of interpersonal contacts, as well as with individual characteristics of emotional regulation. It should be noted that a high level of loneliness does not always indicate social isolation – sometimes it is an indicator of deep internal processes, a search for meaning, a reassessment of values, or a consequence of an unmet need for intimacy.

Conclusions

Theoretical analysis of the problem of loneliness confirms its complexity and relevance of research in the context of social transformations. In particular, it is important to continue research into the gender specificity of loneliness, as this is necessary to develop a scientific basis for this phenomenon, which, in turn, can contribute to the development of methods of effective psychological assistance to people suffering from feelings of loneliness.

As a result of the study, it was established that a significant part of the women studied (56.7%) has an average level of loneliness. This indicates the relevance of the problem and the presence of moderate emotional discomfort and periodic difficulties in interpersonal relationships in the studied women. At the same time, 23,3% of women have a high level of loneliness, which indicates the need to provide psychological assistance to this part of the studied women.

Empirically, a statistically significant positive correlation was found between the level of loneliness and indicators of personal anxiety ($r = 0.63$, $p < 0.01$). This result confirms that the feeling of loneliness is a factor that can increase emotional tension, a tendency to worry and the expectation of negative events. The lonelier a woman feels, the higher the level of anxiety she has.

There is a positive correlation between age and loneliness indicators ($r = 0,47$) : older women are more likely to experience higher levels of loneliness, which may be related to social losses and a decrease in active social contacts. The practical significance of the study lies in the possibility of using its results in the work of counseling psychologists, psychotherapists, social workers, as well as in psychological support programs for women aimed at developing emotional resilience, reducing anxiety, and forming a positive attitude towards one's own loneliness as a natural life experience.

Conflict of interests. The authors are not aware of any conflict of interest in the preparation of this publication.

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AUTHOR INFORMATION

Dyachok Olha

Candidate of Psychological Sciences

Assistant of the Department of Developmental Psychology

Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv

Kyiv, Ukraine

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8948-8548>

lowaolga@gmail.com

Vinnytska Olha

Master's student of the OPP "Family Psychology"

Institute of Postgraduate Education

Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv

Kyiv, Ukraine

ORCID ID: 0009-0007-6545-5291

olgamarkita@gmail.com

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