

Minna Pietilä (researcher, PhD) & Marja Saarenheimo (researcher, PhD) @vtkl.fi

The **Active Age Programme** (2012–17), funded by the Funding Centre for Social Welfare and Health Organisations (STEA) and coordinated by the Finnish Association for the Welfare of Older People (VTKL), combined the power of 31 NGOs with their practice development projects to promote good everyday life among older people. Projects of various themes were carried out across Finland and participants comprised all kinds of older people in a wide range of life situations. The Programme's research **studied the impact that participation in the projects had on older people's everyday lives, sense of participation and experience of human agency, and on their psychosocial well-being. The primary data of the study were a quantitative survey (N=529, respondents' median age 72 yrs.) and qualitative interviews (N=92, interviewees' age 60–92yrs.).**

The Active Age research:

What happened to
loneliness among
older people?

MAIN RESULT: Participation in the NGO projects within the Active Age Programme **promoted in particular the psychosocial well-being of older people in difficult situations and reduced their loneliness.** For other older people, participation maintained well-being.

Statistically *significant* ($p < 0.05$) results of the survey indicated that lonely older people's psychosocial well-being increased in many areas when they participated in project activities of social welfare and health organisations. Positive changes occurred in key factors relating to well-being, i.e., respondents' views of themselves, their mood, the amount of time they spent with other people, and the quality of their relationships.

The survey's statistically *non-significant* results further indicated that the number of lonely people's social relationships, as well as the frequency of contacts, increased during participation in project activities. People who had experienced loneliness also seemed to be more satisfied with the advice and guidance services they received, and with the overall opportunities for various activities.

There was understandably both more need and possibility for positive change amongst people who had experienced loneliness. Yet, positive changes were not a given: without participation in the project activities they probably would not have occurred.

What can we do about loneliness among older people?

Older people who experienced loneliness either applied, or were selected as participants, for particularly those projects of the Active Age Programme which carried out outreach work or otherwise supported people in challenging situations (e.g., organising group activities for lonely

older people or people battling substance abuse, or organising 'gig volunteers' to provide one-off help in homes).

Third sector organisations have a wide range of methods to prevent, alleviate and reduce loneliness among older people, such as group, befriending, and support person activities. Different methods suit different situations and people, but they can all also be further developed.

In outreach work, it is possible to find and strengthen people's own resources, support the flow and meaningfulness of their everyday lives, and guide them to other services. The outreach work in the Active Age Programme to prevent loneliness and promote mental health was very productive, since the majority of participants benefitted from it with regard to both the increased possibilities for everyday activities and their emotional well-being.

Key points in developing activities to reduce loneliness among older people:

- It is well worth finding older people in difficult situations through outreach work: they benefit in many ways from the psychosocial support and practical help they receive. The most important thing is to meet people in an unhurried way to assess their situation in depth. This creates trust and hope. The best way to find people is through networking with other relevant bodies.
- Loneliness is often widely connected with other factors which weaken one's quality and management of life, extending from poor health and access to services to a lack of social relationships, problems in managing daily life, and psychological symptoms. Yet not all people who experience loneliness are the same, and encountering loneliness in psychosocial activities requires understanding and skills.
- People who experience loneliness and have previously participated only minimally (if at all) in activities of third sector organisations can benefit from them since involvement may increase their psychosocial well-being. For those who are already active and social, participation allows continuation of the lifestyle.

The study and participants with regard to the results presented here

The study survey was carried out in 2013–17. Instead of being a random and representative sample, the respondents (N=529) formed a selected sample whose representativeness we do not know. The same 39-item survey was carried out at the beginning and end of the project participation, and the responses were compared among those participants who filled the survey out both times. Experiencing loneliness prior to the project participation proved to be the factor that best distinguished the respondents in terms of their psychosocial well-being. On this basis, the respondents were divided into two sub-groups, one that had experienced loneliness (n=191, 37%) and the other that had not (n=331, 63%). In the statistical comparison of the subgroups, two nonparametric tests for related samples were used, the Wilcoxon test for ordinal variables and the McNemar test for dichotomous variables.

Further information: Pietilä M & Saarenheimo M. *Ilmeikäs arki. Tutkimus ikääntyneistä ihmisistä järjestöjen kehittämistoiminnassa. (The expressive everyday life. A study of older people in NGOs' development activities.)* The Finnish Association for the Welfare of Older People 2017. (eloisaika.fi)