

# Older Adults, Loneliness, Happiness and Family Relationships

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## Abstract

The experiences individuals go through, throughout their lifetime has effects on how they age. Many different factors go into improving the aging process for older adults. This study investigated the relationship between having close and positive family relationships and loneliness among older adults. It also investigated the relationship between having close and positive family relationships and perceptions of happiness among older adults. This study was a secondary analysis of data from the National Social Life, Health and Aging Project in the United States. The sample was composed of 4,777 respondents, aged 57 to 85. Data collection was done through self-reported questionnaires and interviews. Feelings of loneliness were measured using the University of California, Los Angeles Loneliness Scale and the Center for Epidemiologic Studies Depression Scale. Levels of depression were measured using the Hospital Anxiety and Depression Scale.

## Introduction

### Significant of the Study

- In 2010, there was an estimate of 40.3 million older adults, aged 65 years and older (Roberts et al., 2018). This number will grow to 54.1 million in 2021 (United Health Foundation, 2021).
- By 2050, the total number of older adults in the U.S. will rise to 85.7 million (America's Health Rankings, 2021).
- There was an increase of 11% between 2016 to 2019 of older adults having some type of mental distress (United Health Foundation, 2021).
- One-fourth of older adults, aged 65 and older are socially isolated (The National Academies Press, 2020).

### Purpose

- The present study's purpose is to identify the relationships between close family relationships and the development of loneliness, as well as the relationship between close and positive family relationships and the perception of happiness.

### Hypotheses

- Adults who have close and positive family relationships are less likely to develop loneliness
- There is a positive relationship between the perception of happiness and having close and positive family relationships

## Literature Review

- Positive family relationships provide resources that can help an individual cope more with their stress and enhance self-esteem, which can help lead to a higher well-being, lowering the chances of depression and loneliness (Wu, 2020; Thomas et al., 2017).
- Positive family relationships also ease the transitioning process of older adults as they become less able to participate in the activities they used to (Wu, 2020; Branson et al., 2018).
- Loneliness directly has a negative impact on both physical and emotional health (Czaja et al., 2021).
- The absence of close family relationships, such as affection, has a negative effect on the individual, which may lead to loneliness and depression (Long & Martin, 2000).

## Method

### Research Design and Data Collection Procedure

- This study used secondary analysis of the data from the national Social Life, Health and Aging Project in the United States (NSHAP).
- Between 2005 and 2006, NSHAP conducted over 3,000 interviews with a sample of older adults aged 57 to 85, using a longitudinal study that has three waves of data collection.

### Sample and Sample Design

- This study included the spouses and partners of the sample respondents as well (N = 4,777)
- The data included 45.8% male respondents and 54.2% female respondents

### Measures

- Independent Variables: UCLA scale: Lack of Companionship and Self-rated general happiness
  - Respondents were asked on their lack of companionship. Responses were: Never, Hardly ever, Some of the time and often
  - Respondents were asked to self-rate their general happiness. Responses were: unhappy usually, unhappy sometimes, pretty happy, very happy and extremely happy

- Dependent Variables: Relationship between close and positive family relationship

### Statistical Analysis

- This study utilized the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) Version 28.
- To examine the relationship between close and positive family relationships with loneliness and perception of happiness in older adults who are experiencing isolation, a Chi Square test was used.

## Discussion

### Implication and Future Direction

- Findings were inconsistent with literatures that were already done, further research is needed to address the relationship
- Findings of the study are important in addressing successful aging
- More variables should be compared to successful aging
- More than two variables should be compared at a time
- Understanding the variables that go into successful aging can help Social Workers better understand this population and therefore be able to provide the services and resources necessary to help this population

### Strengths

- The study used a longitudinal study design, which included having a large sample size that was studied over a period of time (N = 4,777)
- The study included a fair percentage of males and females who were part of the study
- With this study being a longitudinal study, they are effective when trying to determine the variable patterns over a period of time
- Able to provide a higher accuracy when observing changes
- Longitudinal study provides flexibility in the study

### Limitation

- Lack of diversity, with 73% of the respondents identifying as White and leaving on 27%
- Longitudinal study = not 100% reliable – respondents could have unknowingly changed their responses over time
- Respondents may not offer authentic information or have bias in their answers

## Results

Table 1

Relationship between close and positive family relationship and loneliness

How often does family really understand the way you feel?	Never		Hardly Ever		Some of the time		Often	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Never	39	28.9	17	12.6	48	35.6	31	23.0
Hardly ever or rarely	114	28.1	102	25.1	121	29.8	69	17
Some of the time	448	30.7	467	29.4	501	31.5	133	8.4
Often	682	47.4	383	26.6	294	20.4	81	5.6

\* $p < 0.001$

Table 2

Relationship between close and positive family relationship and happiness

How often does family really understand the way you feel?	Unhappy usually		Unhappy sometimes		Pretty happy		Very happy		Extremely happy	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Never	15	10.6	22	15.5	51	35.9	34	23.9	20	14.1
Hardly ever or rarely	21	5.0	70	16.7	172	41.1	126	30.1	29	6.9
Some of the time	25	1.5	177	10.7	652	39.5	637	38.6	161	9.7
Often	15	1.0	99	6.7	423	28.8	658	44.9	272	18.5

\* $p < 0.001$

- A Chi-Square test was used to examine the relationship between close and positive family relationships with loneliness and perception of happiness
- Using the University of California, Los Angeles scale on lack of companionship and a self-reported question of how often does family really understand the way you feel, it showed that there was not a significant relationship between the two variables ( $\chi^2(df) = 202.69, p < 0.001$ ).
- Using the self-rated general happiness question and question of how often does family really understand the way you feel, it showed that there was not a significant relationship between the two variables ( $\chi^2(df) = 235.24, p < 0.001$ ).

## Acknowledgements

I am beyond grateful and thankful for the immense love and support from all friends and family through this journey. A special thank you to all the professor and advisors who have supported me through their guidance and patience.