

## Assessment Of The Elderly Loneliness: A Qualitative Study

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### Abstrak

Prevalensi lansia dan berbagai dampaknya banyak dialami negara-negara berkembang, termasuk Asia dan juga Indonesia, sedang berada pada prevalensi lansia yang mendominasi dan memiliki dampak yang serius. Indonesia memiliki prevalensi lansia mencapai 11,75% dari total populasi, dan kesepian sebagai salah satu dampak yang dialami lansia sebanyak 50% menimbulkan risiko demensia yang dapat mengancam nyawanya. Kenyataannya, tidak mudah bagi seseorang untuk mengakui kesepian yang dialaminya sehingga perlu dikaji lebih dalam. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengidentifikasi kesepian pada lansia, apakah berdampak pada kehidupannya, dan bagaimana lansia dapat mengatasinya. Penelitian kualitatif ini mewawancarai 10 orang lansia mengenai pengalaman kesepian, dan respon lansia terhadap kesepian yang dialaminya. Hasil wawancara terhadap partisipan dianalisis oleh peneliti dengan menggunakan analisis tematik yang dideskripsikan. Dua tema dapat disimpulkan dari data wawancara sepuluh partisipan lansia, dan masing-masing tema mempunyai subtema yaitu: 1). Makna kesepian pada lansia, dan 2). Respon lansia terhadap kesepian yang dialami. Makna kesepian pada lansia terdapat 3 subtema sedangkan respon lansia terhadap kesepian terdapat 2 subtema. Kesepian lansia terjadi karena mereka tidak memiliki teman dan dukungan emosional yang berasal dari orang terdekat, seperti pasangan atau anak, akibat perasaan ditinggalkan dan tidak diperhatikan oleh orang lain terutama anggota keluarga, dan karena perasaan tidak berharga dan rendah diri. Sedangkan respon lansia terhadap kesepian yang dialami sangatlah variatif, bagi lansia yang lebih tua memilih mendekatkan diri dan berpasrah kepada Tuhan, mayoritas lansia mencari kesibukan melalui berbagai kegiatan untuk mengalihkan perhatian dari rasa kesepian, dan respon terburuk yang dilakukan lansia saat kesepian adalah minum minuman keras. Kesepian pada lansia yang ditemukan dalam penelitian ini masih perlu dilanjutkan dengan cakupan yang lebih luas dan partisipan yang lebih banyak, menggunakan mix method atau penelitian kuantitatif menggunakan tools deteksi kesepian lansia dan intervensi sedini mungkin dapat mencegah kesepian situasional menjadi kronis.

Kata Kunci : kesepian, lansia, kesepian lansia.

### Abstract

The prevalence of the elderly and its various impacts are experienced by many developing countries, including Asia and Indonesia, where the prevalence of the elderly dominates and has serious consequences. Indonesia has a prevalence of elderly people reaching 11.75% of the total population, and loneliness as one of the impacts experienced by 50% of elderly people creates a risk of dementia which can threaten their lives. In reality, it is not easy for someone to admit the loneliness they are experiencing, so it needs to be studied more deeply. This research aims to identify loneliness in the elderly, whether it impacts their lives, and how the elderly can overcome it. This qualitative research interviewed 10 elderly people about their experiences of loneliness and the elderly's responses to the loneliness they experienced. The results of interviews with participants were analyzed by researchers using the thematic analysis described. Two themes can be concluded from the interview data of ten

elderly participants, and each theme has subthemes: 1). The meaning of loneliness in the elderly, and 2). Elderly responses to loneliness experienced. The meaning of loneliness in the elderly has 3 subthemes, while the elderly's response to loneliness has 2 subthemes. Elderly loneliness occurs because they do not have friends and emotional support from those closest to them, such as partners or children, due to feelings of being abandoned and not cared for by other people, especially family members, and because of feelings of worthlessness and low self-esteem. Meanwhile, the response of the elderly to the loneliness they experience is very varied, for the older elderly choose to draw closer and surrender to God, and most of the elderly seek to be busy through various activities to divert their attention from feelings of loneliness, and the worst response that the elderly make when they are lonely is drinking alcohol. Loneliness in the elderly found in this research still needs to be continued with wider coverage and more participants, using mixed methods or quantitative research using elderly loneliness detection tools and intervention as early as possible to prevent situational loneliness from becoming chronic.

Keywords: loneliness, elderly, elderly loneliness.

## Introduction

Indonesia, Japan, China, India, and the United States have the highest elderly populations in the world (Rospita et al., 2022). The percentage of elderly people in Indonesia has doubled over fifty years (1971–2019), according to data from the Central Statistics Agency (BPS). By 2023, the percentage of the Indonesian population that falls into old age will reach 11.75%. By gender, 52.28% of the elderly are female and 47.2% of the elderly are male. 59% of them are young elderly, meaning they are 60 to 69 years old; 26.76% are middle elderly, meaning they are 70 to 79 years old; and 8.65% are old elderly, meaning they are more than 80 years old (Statistik, 2023). Old age also referred to as elderly is a condition that occurs in a life. The aging process is a lifelong process that begins at the beginning of life. According to Rahmalia Ningsih, and Arneliwati (2014), growing old is a natural process that means a life has gone through stages of life, such as neonate, baby, preschool, school, teenager, adult, and old. Aging causes many changes, including physical, psychological, cognitive, and social changes. Psychological changes experienced by the elderly include short-term memory, frustration, loneliness, fear of losing freedom, fear of facing death, and depression (Joshi et al., 2024).

World Health Organization (WHO) data in 2023 said that loneliness is one of the risk factors for health problems, including 50% causing the risk of dementia, 25% causing the risk of early death, and 30% increasing the risk of stroke and cardiovascular disease, especially in the elderly (World Health Organization, 2023b). Mental Health America (2023), states that there is a strong relationship between feelings of loneliness and depression. If the elderly feel socially isolated or lonely, negative self-esteem and suicidal thoughts may increase, while life satisfaction often decreases (Akhter-Khan, Prina, et al., 2023).

Rokach, A., Orzeck, T., Moya, M. C., & Expósito, (2002), defines loneliness as a condition of emotional disturbance that arises when a person feels alienated, misunderstood, or rejected by others, as well as not having appropriate social partners for desired activities, especially activities that provide a sense of social integration and opportunities for social closeness. Researcher Tilmann von Soest from Oslo University defines loneliness as a self-response to the difference we perceive between the quantity and quality of desired social life in actual social relationships (von Soest, T., Luhmann, M., & Gerstorf, 2020). A report from the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (NASEM) shows that more than a third of

adults aged 45 and older feel lonely, and nearly a quarter of adults aged 65 and older are considered so lonely that they feel socially isolated (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, 2020). A 2022 survey conducted in 16 countries found that nearly 60 percent of young adults between the ages of 18 and 24 reported negative effects on well-being due to feelings of loneliness, while about 22 percent of respondents aged 65 and older reported experiencing feelings of loneliness (Vankar, 2023). The prevalence of loneliness in Indonesia among people over the age of 50 is 15.1%. Caring for parents is associated with a reduced risk of loneliness in old age (Akhter-Khan, Chua, et al., 2023).

In fact, the problem of loneliness among the elderly has not been a special concern for families and health workers in Indonesia. The government has not specifically paid attention to the problem of loneliness in the elderly and there has been no detailed program implemented by the government to overcome the problem of loneliness in the elderly in Indonesia. This fact is evidenced by the increasing cases of death among the elderly that cannot be recognized immediately. Based on BBC News Indonesia news, on July 19, 2024, an elderly couple was found dead in their home without any signs of violence and was only discovered after one week when the body began to decompose and cause an unpleasant odor. From the information of the closest people, this elderly couple lived only alone at home and had recently isolated themselves. Based on information from their neighbors, the elderly had told them about their feelings of loneliness because they were far from their children and grandchildren (BBC Indonesia, 2024). Several alternatives to prevent loneliness in the elderly have been carried out, but these interventions have rarely or never been carried out in elderly settings in Indonesia (Shekelle et al., 2024). H. Lim et al. (2018), literature review clarified why

there was variation in how loneliness was measured and conflicting results about the connection between psychotic symptoms and loneliness. Psychological and social issues, including elevated levels of depression, psychosis, and anxiety, inadequate social support, low life quality, heightened internalized stigma and perceived discrimination, and low self-esteem, can all have an impact on loneliness in people with psychosis. The findings of this research clarify the experience of loneliness in the elderly and its impact on life in the form of symptoms that lead to mental illness. Detection of loneliness among the elderly can be a basic ingredient for preventing the risk of chronic loneliness during the transition period of the elderly's life. The shocking news in mid-2024 that an elderly couple was found dead in their own home without their family knowing, also reflects the lack of family attention towards the elderly and the condition of the elderly who are lonely, far from their relatives, and end up dying horribly because they were discovered after several days and the smell of their bodies (BBC, Indonesian News). Following the current condition of Indonesia's elderly population, it is important to research the existence of loneliness in the elderly, how the elderly respond to the loneliness they experience, and how to overcome the impact of this loneliness. Elderly people who live in communities have never been studied, so this research is the beginning of an assessment of loneliness in elderly people who live together in communities, both community and family. Based on the data and phenomena above, it is necessary to conduct research on loneliness among the elderly in Indonesia to improve the quality of mental health among the elderly specifically to prevent chronic loneliness in the elderly.

## Method

This qualitative research collected data by conducting direct interviews with 10

elderly people aged 60 years and over, selected elderly who were in good health, and elderly who were cooperative. Face-to-face interviews with elderly people were conducted for 1 month. Elderly participants who live together in the community or live with their family/relatives are randomly selected

according to the criteria and conducted in-depth interviews. The results of interviews with participants were analyzed by researchers using narrated thematic analysis, according to the stages of data collection, coding, theme identification, reflection, and interpretation followed by making a thematic report.

## Findings and Discussion

Below is a list of participants who have contributed to this research.

Table 1. Characteristics of Participants

No	Participant Initial	Age	Gender
1	Ms. E	62	Female
2	Mr. W	65	Male
3	Mrs. M	74	Female
4	Mr. R	80	Male
5	Mrs. D	82	Female
6	Mrs. W	81	Female
7	Mr. A	75	Male
8	Ms. M	84	Female
9	Mrs. Ac	74	Female
10	Mr. Wd	74	Male

Table 1 details the characteristics of the interviewees, with the majority (60%) being female and ranging in age from 62 to 84 years old.

The results of interviews with participants were analyzed by researchers using thematic analysis. Two themes may be inferred from the interview data from 10 elderly participants, and each theme has subthemes that are corroborated by the participant interviews, specifically:

### 1. Meaning of loneliness in the elderly

a. Because they lack the companionship and emotional support that comes from a significant other, such as a spouse or kid, elderly individuals experience loneliness. Additionally, some participants experienced loneliness as a result of living

alone with their partner or alone without a partner since their children had moved out of town.

“....since my husband died, almost every night I feel alone, I have no one to sleep with, because all this time there was someone beside me, and now there is no” (participant 1).

“.....when my wife died, I also felt lonely ...” (participant 4)

“..... because I live alone, there is no one, yes I feel lonely, everything must be done alone, no one else helps me....” (participant 3)

“..... away from children and grandchildren, even though there is a wife, yes, but it feels lonely if there are no children, many thoughts are on children

and grandchildren who are far from us..." (participant 2).

b. Participants also experienced loneliness as a result of feeling abandoned and uncared for by others, especially family members. Despite being financially and economically sufficient, some participants disclosed that they felt quite alone because they hardly ever heard from their relatives.

"...you could say I lack money, I just lack attention from my children..." (participant 4)

"..... now this condition is lonely, alone, often I also cry why do I feel this heart is empty, no one comes, or my children and grandchildren rarely call or video call..." (participant 5)

"..... Lonely yes.... lonely yes.... the name is abandoned all...all left, have a lot of money, no use..." (participant 7)

"..... yes it was lonely, it used to be .... before...before I was in this orphanage I was lonely at home, no one said hello to me, my siblings were all busy working ...." (participant 9)

c. Due to their sense of worthlessness and undervaluation, participants indicated emotions of loneliness. They experienced intense loneliness as a result of believing they no longer made a meaningful contribution to the family or society.

"..... I can only sing to entertain myself, because I'm old and can't do anythingelse..." (participant 6)

"..... to my own garden, the harvest failed due to flooding, it rained and I went home sad..." (participant 10)

2. Elderly responses to loneliness experienced

a. The older participants reacted differently to the loneliness they encountered. Most react by submitting to God in some way.

".....getting closer to God is also very calming to my heart and soul..." (participant 1)

"..... always pray to the power that all is well and always healthy..." (participant 2)

"Well...I can only pray, asking for strength to survive this loneliness" (participant 5)

b. According to the participants, seeking busyness through a variety of pursuits was a constructive way to distract oneself from feelings of loneliness. In an effort to address their feelings of loneliness, elderly individuals also attempt to ask for assistance from others.

"...Yes, if you continue to chat with your neighbors, you are happy, pleasant..." (participant 3)

"...because every day there are scheduled activities, so I don't feel too lonely" (participant 4)

"....so as not to be lonely I just sings..." (participant 6)

".... I call and then I ring the bell, sometimes until the bell is loud and long..." (participant 8)

".....helping the nurses to distribute food, helping to wipe tables and taking care of guests..." (participant 9)

"..... with a lot of friends so that they can talk, tell stories..." (participant 10)

The elderly as participants in this study took their own way to respond to the loneliness they experienced.

"..... I usually drink, drink songhi, beer whatever is available. Sometimes I drink until drunk and then I sleep..." (participant 7)

### **The meaning of loneliness experienced by the elderly.**

Every person's tragic experience is very memorable and can affect their future life. Ten elderly participants expressed their real experiences of feeling lonely for several reasons that are very close to the humanity of the elderly. Elderly people experience loneliness when a life partner or close friend passes away, they are left alone and without a sexual partner, they are separated from their family, they are not involved in caring for their grown

children who are in high school and do not require complicated care, they have fewer friends and relationships because they are not active outside the home, their children leave home to pursue higher education, their children leave home to work, or their children have grown up and started their own families. The elderly feel lonely after their life partner dies, there are no friends to fight together to continue life, “....since my husband died, almost every night I feel alone, I have no one to sleep with, because all this time there was someone beside me, and now there is no” This loneliness affects his personality to the point that he becomes a gloomy person, prefers to be silent, alone because of a sense of loss and limit interactions with other people. This behavior of the elderly is in accordance with the theory expressed by Vankar, 2023 which says that: ‘The elderly will feel isolated, alienated, and cut off from others as a result of these emotions’ The physical and mental health of the elderly would suffer as a result of these sentiments. The elderly will not have psychological well-being if this condition is not treated right away. This condition of the elderly needs to be watched out for and treated immediately so as not to make the elderly fall into a worse condition, according to research conducted by Taylor et al (2023), that: ‘Loneliness is a significant phenomenon since it can result in several issues, from everyday living activities to mental health conditions like depression, sleep disorders, stress, and suicidal thoughts’.

For everyone, losing a family member is a huge loss. The elderly are not an exception; they, too, suffer from intense longing that never ends. Sadness will undoubtedly be exacerbated if the departing individual is the one closest to you, such as a spouse, child, or grandchild. According to systems theory, a family is a unit with a structure that continuously evolves and adjusts to all shifting circumstances to preserve continuity. There will be turmoil in the family when

one of the members departs. The loss of a spouse, child, or grandchild will cause the family to undergo many changes. The people in their immediate vicinity must adjust to these changes. The elderly must learn to cope with their sense of loss; even if they have achieved success, grief may still strike. Even material wealth cannot make up for the subjects; intense melancholy will result in feelings of emotional isolation. Loneliness is an anxious emotion that arises when a social relationship loses its key elements.

### **Responses to loneliness in the elderly.**

Ten elderly participants told how they faced loneliness after losing the closest person in their life, or losing their self-esteem. The majority of elderly people prefer to fill their time with various activities according to their hobbies or talents and according to the condition and physical abilities of the elderly person. However, the oldest choose to get closer to God, praying a lot and doing spiritual activities’ same with the previous research that: elderly people draw closer to God when they feel lonely as they said; “.....getting closer to God is also very calming to my heart and soul...”; “..... always pray to the power that all is well and always healthy....”; “Well...I can only pray, asking for strength to survive this loneliness”. Not all elderly people who experience loneliness frequently feel depressed, hopeless, and uninterested in life. They tend to isolate themselves from their social surroundings. living the day as it comes and going with the flow, which includes spending time in the room and taking part in events hosted by the orphanage. Additionally, they engage in their everyday activities and work to enhance their spirituality to give their life purpose (Welch, V et al, 2023). There are several approaches to addressing the loneliness experienced by the older study participants. Increasing one’s relationship with God is one of them. They constantly express gratitude, give up, pray, and make

an effort to worship in the right way. Regularly engaging in religious events is an attempt to raise one's level of spirituality and preserve one's sense of self-worth, which is crucial for older people to accept all of their flaws. By growing closer to God, they can also find a way to deal with their pain and longing for the family that has departed.

Elderly people who pray and grow closer to God are more at ease and truthful about the past. According to Rizka; Akhter; Devaraj et al (2024) demonstrate that religious behavior contributes to self-regulation by lowering anxiety and fostering sentiments of serenity and positivity. Without the burden of their worries, they can live their lives more peacefully. It is also possible to grow less worried about life and more tolerant of any circumstances encountered. The elderly can live more positively by engaging in worship and prayer. Even though they still experience sadness when they think back on their past lives, they are constantly thankful for their opportunities, health, and physical capabilities, which allow them to redirect their attention from loneliness. The worst response from elderly participants was drinking when they felt lonely. The smallest result of this research was 0.1% of elderly participants who had a negative response and it was dangerous for the health of the elderly. This needs to be paid attention to because if proper treatment is not given it will have a bad impact and can even cause chronic loneliness for the elderly which can also threaten their lives.

### **Conclusions and Suggestions**

Two themes can be concluded from the interviews with ten elderly participants, and each theme has subthemes: 1). The meaning of loneliness in the elderly, and 2). Responses to loneliness in the elderly. The meaning of elderly loneliness occurs because they do not have friends and emotional support from those closest to them, such as a partner or children; as a

result of feeling abandoned and not cared for by other people, especially family members; and because of feelings of worthlessness and inferiority. Meanwhile, the response of the elderly to the loneliness they experience is very varied, for the older elderly choose to draw closer and surrender to God, and the majority of the elderly seek to be busy through various activities to divert their attention from feelings of loneliness, and the worst response that the elderly make when they are lonely is drinking alcohol. Loneliness in the elderly found in this research still needs to be continued with wider coverage and more participants, using mixed methods or quantitative research using elderly loneliness detection tools and intervention as early as possible to prevent situational loneliness from becoming chronic.

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