

Survey on loneliness uses scale developed by ISU professors

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Some people feel loneliness most acutely during the holidays, and a new *AARP The Magazine* survey, published in the current issue, found that millions of older Americans suffer from chronic loneliness.

Among the sample of 3,012 people ages 45 and above, 35 percent were found to be "chronically lonely" according to the UCLA [Loneliness Scale](#) -- a scale that was developed by a pair of researchers who are now at Iowa State University.

Daniel Russell, an Iowa State professor of human development and family studies; and Carolyn Cutrona, professor and chair of [psychology](#) at ISU, have been studying loneliness since the early 1980s when they were researchers at UCLA. During that time, the husband and wife researchers developed the scale, which continues to be cited by researchers and journalists as the approved measurement tool on loneliness. In addition to *AARP The Magazine*, Russell reports he was contacted by a reporter from the journal *Science* this fall about using the scale.

UCLA Loneliness Scale asks 20 questions

The scale determines a subject's loneliness by scoring his or her responses -- made on a four-point scale -- to a series of 20 questions. Russell has been reluctant to permit the complete scale to be published -- and for good reason.

"They [researchers and journalists] always want to publish the scale, but I've tried to keep it out of the magazines out of a concern that it may affect its validity," Russell said. "My thinking is that if it's already been out there and everyone's seen it, then they're going to know immediately what you're trying to measure and so forth.

"There's also another interesting problem," he said. "And that's if you go putting this measure out there in a magazine and you tell people, 'If you get a score of 60, then you're really lonely,' I don't know how that may go over with somebody filling it out who is sitting there in their house all alone and socially isolated."

According to Russell, a 2005 phone survey of Iowans used a short, 10-item version of the UCLA Loneliness Scale. That Iowa Family Survey found Iowans to be less lonely than the recent national AARP sample -- with the percentage of chronically lonely individuals over 45 years of age among the Iowa sample being 32.9 percent.

"Is this due to living in Iowa?" Russell asked. "Another explanation may simply be that loneliness is increasing over time."

Russell provided evidence of his second theory, reporting that in the Iowa Family Survey, the average level of loneliness among those over 65 years of age was 37.22, whereas the average level of loneliness in the 1986 study he and Cutrona conducted in Iowa's Linn County was 31.51.

"I have always felt that the low level of loneliness we found in the Linn County study may have reflected a generational effect, with individuals who grew up during the Depression being less likely to admit to feelings of loneliness," Russell said. "By contrast, the Baby Boom generation would be more willing to admit to such feelings. That may indeed be the case, and at least partly responsible for the increasing levels of loneliness that we have seen."

Understanding loneliness

He also says there is a great misunderstanding about loneliness.

"Part of what I try to do is prove that loneliness is not simply depression," Russell said. "It can lead to depression -- and many measures on depression have a question about loneliness -- but it's clearly distinct from depression. Way back when I was in graduate school, a fellow graduate student did his dissertation on this issue and he described it this way: 'Lonely people are dissatisfied with their social relationships. Depressed people are dissatisfied with everything in their lives.'"

Russell points out that loneliness is not affected by the quantity of relationships, but rather the expectation an individual has for those relationships. For that reason, fond memories of friends and relatives in holidays past can lead to people feeling lonelier during this time of year than they do at other times.

He recommends that people approach the holidays as an opportunity to build relationships, rather than to assess or dwell on a lack of close ties to others. He says they should reconnect with friends and relatives, and possibly try and make new friends in the process.

Provided by Iowa State University

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