

Dutch organisation to fight loneliness

The biggest voluntary movement in the Netherlands has joined forces with a university in Amsterdam to combat the growing problem of loneliness.

Around 30 percent of Dutch nationals are lonely, and 10 percent suffer from severe loneliness.

The voluntary group, De Zonnebloem (The Sunflower), made loneliness the main theme of its Zonnebloem week (Sep 3-9) in a bid to raise public awareness of the needs of the sick and elderly.

The Zonnebloem was founded in 1945 to fight social isolation among sick, elderly or handicapped people. Today, it has 600,000 members who enjoy the attention and friendship of 40,000 volunteers.

The volunteers take the Zonnebloem members to the theatre, play chess with them or drop by for a cup of coffee.

'Our organisation is undergoing dramatic changes,' R. Rijkers told DPA. 'We have long been regarded as an organisation of elderly volunteers for elderly clients. This is no longer true. Loneliness and the need for social interaction are (valid for) all ages.'

Last year, the Zonnebloem founded a special department for young clients and volunteers.

Meaningful social involvement is the best way of combating loneliness, sociology professor Jenny De Jong said at a recent Loneliness Symposium.

'Joining a sports club will not make you feel less lonely. However, volunteering at the Zonnebloem to help others fight loneliness, will also make your own loneliness disappear,' she added.

De Jong and her colleague, gerontology professor Theo van Tilburg, have been doing research about loneliness since 1965 and have interviewed tens of thousands of people.

What initially began as a national research project has meanwhile grown into an international study on loneliness conducted in 26 countries by local researchers.

At a symposium in Amersfoort, the two presented some interesting findings to an audience of 200 professionals in health care and social services.

Among others, they asked the audience who was likely to be lonelier - a mother in cold Finland or a mother in warm Italy.

The audience overwhelmingly said Finnish mothers would be lonelier arguing Italy's stronger family life and the climate would improve people's social life.

'The contrary is true,' De Jong told her audience. 'Loneliness is caused by a discrepancy between personal expectations and reality.'

In Italy, the expected norm is that children visit their parents regularly. If the adult son skips one visit, his mother immediately feels lonely.

By contrast, the Finnish mother knows half the country is snowed in for several months of the year. She also knows geographical distances are vast. As she does not expect weekly visits, she will not be lonely if her son drops by only twice per year.

The researchers distinguish between emotional and social loneliness. The former results from a lack of a meaningful friendship while the latter indicates a lack of a broader social network.

Most people have between nine to 14 people in their social network; the more people one has, the less lonely one feels. People with more than 70 friends in their network, are the least lonely, the researchers found.

As expected, married people are generally less lonely than single people. The social networks of single people are comparable to those of married people.

In other words - single people do not suffer from social loneliness in larger numbers than married people. The problem is emotional loneliness - the lack of a meaningful relationship. In this respect, singles score very high.

'That does not mean that only a romantic relationship can bring people happiness,' the researchers added.

'Singles who fill the gap by forging close friendships with relatives or friends, are comparable with married people when it comes to emotional loneliness.'

De Jong said: 'The good news is that people can overcome loneliness at all ages by forging new friendships. Contrary to common belief, expanding your social network is possible at all ages, including very advanced ages.'

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