

Loneliness, social isolation and sight loss

Published by Thomas Pocklington Trust

October 2014

This publication summarises findings from a brief literature review commissioned by Thomas Pocklington Trust and conducted by Dr Suzanne Hodge and Dr Fiona Eccles of the Division of Health Research at Lancaster University.

The aim of this literature review was to develop a better understanding of links between loneliness, social isolation and sight loss, with a view to indicating possible improvements to policy and practice and areas for further research.

Summary findings

- Loneliness and social isolation are not inevitable consequences of sight loss; there is a range of factors that affect people's experiences. Understanding what protects people against loneliness may help in developing a better understanding.
- Loneliness and social isolation occur as part of a complex interactive process involving other factors, especially difficulties with everyday functional activities.
- Loneliness is linked more strongly to how people experience their visual impairment rather than the clinical assessment of their vision; this highlights the importance of understanding people's personal experience of sight loss.
- Relationships and social support help to prevent loneliness in people with sight loss. People's expectations, and the way they feel about their relationships and the social support they receive, are more important than the amount of support they receive.
- Difficulties with communication and social interaction can contribute to people with sight loss feeling socially isolated.
- Factors that play a part in whether and how people with sight loss experience loneliness include: gender, socio-economic status and individual psychological factors.
- Children with a visual impairment may be at greater risk of social isolation in school than their sighted peers.



Introduction

Loneliness and social isolation have been identified as potential consequences of sight loss which can seriously and negatively affect people's well-being. Although, as concepts, loneliness and social isolation are linked and sometimes treated interchangeably, they can be differentiated. Loneliness is best understood as a psychological state in which a person feels a lack of meaningful connectedness to other people; whereas social isolation can be observed when a person lacks opportunities for social contact and interaction.

Research has shown that, across the general population, loneliness and social isolation not only have detrimental effects on mental and physical health but are linked to a decrease in life expectancy. People with a visual impairment have been identified as being at particular risk of loneliness because of the additional risks which visual impairment presents. These include an increased risk of depression and reduced quality of life. Analysis of the English Longitudinal Study of Ageing (ELSA) data commissioned by Thomas Pocklington Trust also highlighted the poorer socio-economic status of people with a visual impairment and earlier analysis of the ELSA data showed that people on low incomes are most at risk of loneliness.

The aims of this review were to develop a better understanding of links between loneliness, social isolation and sight loss, to make recommendations for follow on work and to identify areas where further research is needed. The review is based on searches for academic articles and reports published since 1993 which look at some aspects of the links between loneliness, social isolation and sight loss.

Findings

In reporting these findings it is important to note that the majority of research into loneliness and social isolation has been conducted with older people. This review also looked at research with children and young people.

- **Prevalence of loneliness in people with sight loss**

Research into whether people with sight loss are more at risk of loneliness than those without is inconclusive and, because it has been conducted using different measures, comparing the results of different studies is difficult. A small number of studies suggest a modest increased risk, but others suggest no increased risk. Two recent studies suggest that about

half of older people with sight loss experience loneliness, compared with about one third of older people generally. Research with children and young people shows a similar pattern, with higher rates of loneliness reported in children and young people with a visual impairment than in those without.

- **Relationships and social support**

Social support can be defined as the emotional and practical assistance offered by relatives and friends. There is a small amount of evidence which shows that older people with sight loss who live alone or have low levels of social support are more likely to be socially isolated and lonely than those who have more social support. More important, though, is how people with sight loss feel about the quality of their relationships; if people are happy with the social support they receive they are less likely to feel lonely and isolated. However, people with sight loss are more likely to experience poor quality relationships than their sighted peers.

Research studies of children and young people with a visual impairment shows that they generally have smaller social networks than their sighted peers with some evidence that this leads them to being more at risk of social isolation and loneliness. For instance, sighted young people have been found to spend more time on organised social activities, such as belonging to Scouts, Guides or choirs, than younger people with sight loss.

- **Loneliness as part of an interactive process**

Loneliness and social isolation are part of an interactive process involving a range of factors that can result in a decline in well-being and life expectancy, particularly in older people with sight loss. Although it is not clear whether there is a particular causal relationship at work the key factors involved in this process seem to be the increasing functional difficulties associated with sight loss, such as difficulties with reading, shopping, social and leisure activities and mobility. A decreasing ability to carry out everyday activities may have a direct negative impact on people's psychological well-being and may put them at risk of social isolation and loneliness because of the loss of opportunities for social interaction. It may also impact negatively on people's physical health which in turn can lead to a further decline in their capacity to engage in functional activities, thus creating a cyclical, reinforcing effect.



● **Communication and social interaction**

Research with both adults and children suggests that people with a visual impairment experience difficulties engaging in social activities and this can contribute to them becoming socially isolated and lonely. These difficulties include

- social and environmental barriers such as a lack of awareness on the part of sighted people of how to communicate with people with a visual impairment
- arranging transport to social activities
- poor lighting and the use of background music in public spaces, leading to barriers to participation in social activities
- holding conversations in public spaces may be problematic because of noise levels and can result in people with a visual impairment eventually withdrawing from social situations.

Research into the experiences of children and young people with a visual impairment highlights barriers to engagement in social activities as a particular issue. Such barriers may affect their ability to develop friendships, which in turn can lead to social isolation and loneliness. Research has found that if social opportunities arise, it is often harder for visually impaired adolescents to seek out and approach potential partners at social occasions; and at a time when young people in particular are concerned with appearance, they may become more self-conscious about physical features associated with particular eye conditions.

● **Individual factors**

Much research in this area has looked at individual psychological factors that affect whether or not people with a visual impairment are lonely. Research suggests that older people with a visual impairment who are lonely show lower levels of adaptation to their sight loss. Individual psychological factors, such as the ability to exert control in everyday life, high self-esteem and motivation, are important in influencing whether people with sight loss experience loneliness.

For children with a visual impairment the development of social skills is particularly important in reducing their risk of social isolation. Acquiring these social skills can be harder for children with a visual impairment than for sighted children because they find it harder to read body language and facial cues. They may also face additional challenges compared

with their sighted peers during adolescence, as they begin to explore their identity, develop their independence and develop intimate relationships.

- **Gender**

Gender has been identified as a factor in loneliness generally, with research consistently showing higher rates of loneliness in women than in men. This review highlights a similar gender difference between boys and girls with a visual impairment, with girls more likely to report being lonely than boys.

However, in relation to older adults, one study shows that although rates of loneliness in women with a visual impairment are higher than in men, in women they reduce over time whereas in men they increase. This suggests that there may be differences in the ways that men and women adapt to visual impairment over time, perhaps as their sight loss interacts with other life changes such as increased physical ill-health, loss of mobility and bereavement.

- **Socio-economic factors**

There is a link between sight loss, loneliness and socio-economic status: being poorer increases the risk of loneliness; and, in general, people with sight loss are likely to be poorer than the general population.

- **Self-reported low vision**

Loneliness is linked more strongly to self-reported low vision than to objectively-assessed low vision, highlighting the importance of understanding people's individual experiences of sight loss.

- **Social isolation and the education system**

Children with a visual impairment may be at greater risk of social isolation in school than their sighted counterparts and have problems developing friendships. Studies have highlighted bullying as a particular problem for children with sight loss, contributing to an increased risk of social isolation.

Implications for policy and practice

- Services that work with visually impaired people need to attend to the particular psychosocial support needs of each person that affect their risk of social isolation or loneliness. For adults, this means considering how visual impairment interacts with other factors, such as physical and functional decline, as well as individual psychological and social factors.



- Children with a visual impairment need to be enabled to develop social skills and to access social activities that allow them to develop social networks.
- Particular attention needs to be given to addressing the functional difficulties associated with sight loss, as these have been shown to have as much of a role in the decline in well-being associated with sight loss as loneliness itself.
- Peer support, including sharing practical advice and coping strategies, has been identified as being key to addressing loneliness and social isolation in people with sight loss.

Conclusions and areas for further research

This review has highlighted the complex nature of the link between loneliness, social isolation and sight loss. It shows that loneliness and social isolation are not inevitable consequences of sight loss and that there is a range of factors that affect whether or not people become socially isolated or lonely.

Further research areas identified are:

- The review highlights that the majority of people with a visual impairment are not lonely. Understanding what protects people against loneliness may help in developing a better understanding of the problem where it does occur.
- Exploration of the link between loneliness and the quality of people's relationships.
- A better understanding of the ways in which loneliness interacts with other factors, particularly the increasing functional difficulties associated with sight loss.
- The role of societal barriers to the full inclusion of people with a visual impairment in society.
- The nature of the link between socio-economic status, sight loss and loneliness.
- Social isolation and loneliness in younger adults with a visual impairment.
- Prevalence studies using well-established, validated measures that allow data from different studies to be more easily compared.

Authors

Dr Suzanne Hodge and Dr Fiona Eccles are both Lecturers in Health Research on the Clinical Psychology Doctoral Programme in the Division of Health Research at Lancaster University.

How to obtain further information

This paper is a brief summary of the key findings of the report “Loneliness, social isolation and sight loss” by Dr Suzanne Hodge and Dr Fiona Eccles, Lancaster University which is downloadable from the Lancaster University research portal: www.research.lancs.ac.uk/portal or on request from:

Thomas Pocklington Trust
Pier House
90 Strand on the Green
London W4 3NN

Telephone: 020 8995 0880

Email: research@pocklington-trust.org.uk

Web: www.pocklington-trust.org.uk

In this publication, the terms ‘visually impaired people’, ‘blind and partially sighted people’ and ‘people with sight loss’ all refer to people who are blind or have partial sight.



Pier House
90 Strand on the Green
London
W4 3NN

Tel: 020 8995 0880

Email: info@pocklington-trust.org.uk

Web: www.pocklington-trust.org.uk

Published by Thomas Pocklington Trust

Registered Charity No. 1113729

Company Registered No. 5359336

ISBN 978-1-906464-61-5



www.pocklington-trust.org.uk