

Loneliness as a Risk Factor for Suicidality: Characteristics of Vulnerable Populations and Preventive Approaches

Invited lecture · Nuša Zadavec Šedivy, Martina Mravlja, and Vanja Gomboc

Assist. Nuša Zadavec Šedivy is a post-doctoral researcher at the UP IAM Slovene Centre for Suicide Research and is engaged in research and prevention of suicidal behaviour, focusing on the study of mental health and quality of life of specific vulnerable groups and on the design of preventive activities for suicidal behaviour. As a researcher, she is involved in various national and international research and intervention projects in the field of mental health and suicidal behaviour. In addition to her research work, she teaches in the undergraduate program in Biopsychology and the master's programs in Applied Psychology and Biopsychology at the University of Primorska. She authored and co-authored original scientific articles, scientific abstracts and papers at the conference, and chapters in a monograph.

Martina Mravlja is a PhD student at the University of Primorska. Her research focuses on the elderly population and on how the social environment, especially social isolation and loneliness as risk factors, can influence the (mental) health of the elderly population. She has a strong background in anthropology and cultural studies and has received several scholarships for her academic performance during her previous studies. In her professional work, she is involved in developing guidelines and policies in the field of quality in higher education. She trains experts and representatives of higher education institutions on the topic of quality in education and research. She is currently exploring various frameworks linking ageing, public mental health and higher education to bring the latter closer to the advancement of public mental health and healthy ageing.

Vanja Gomboc is a PhD Student at University of Primorska and a researcher at the UP IAM Slovene Centre for Suicide Research. She participates in the implementation of various national and international research and intervention projects in the field of mental health and suicidal behaviour. Her primary research focus is on suicide media coverage and the public response to media content about suicide. Thus, she cooperated in the preparation of the Recommendations for responsible reporting of suicide during a pandemic. As a member of the Department of Psychology and a teaching assistant in Faculty of Mathematics,

Natural Sciences and Information Technologies, University of Primorska, she also participates in the pedagogical process.

Abstract. Loneliness is an important public health issue as it predicts a low quality of life and leaves adverse mental and physical health consequences. It is closely related to suicidal behaviour, although it is not entirely clear whether the connection goes both ways or just one. It is also unclear whether these contradictory findings are related to the concept of loneliness, inconsistent definitions of loneliness or the different approaches to measuring loneliness. The relationship between loneliness and suicidality also seems to depend on the characteristics of the population studied. Loneliness has been studied and confirmed primarily as a risk factor for suicidality in adolescents and older adults. As adolescents strive for autonomy and fulfilling contacts with peers, unfulfilling contacts may lead to feelings of loneliness and thus contribute to the risk of suicidality. On the other hand, older adults face a variety of losses that can lead to social isolation as well as loneliness. Loneliness is also an independent predictor of reduced functionality and neurological problems in later life. In addition, lonely older adults have as much as 45% higher risk of mortality than non-lonely individuals, which includes the risk of suicide. According to the interpersonal theory of suicide, the feeling of thwarted belongingness in interpersonal relationships is a psychologically painful state resulting from an unmet fundamental need for connection. Previous studies have shown that feelings of thwarted belongingness are associated with loneliness, low social support and reduced meaning in life. Strengthening the sense of belonging can therefore be an important aspect of improving mental health and enhancing quality of life. By addressing loneliness and social isolation with different approaches and interventions, we can make an important contribution to reducing the risk of developing mental health problems as well as suicidality. In this lecture, we will give a brief overview of loneliness in relation to suicidal behaviour in different age groups. Further, we will also look at the specific characteristics of older adults and the factors associated with loneliness and mortality in this population. Finally, we will also present different approaches to reducing feelings of loneliness, the impact of such approaches in the population of older adults and the results of research on the impact of specific interventions conducted on a Slovenian sample of older adults.