Gratitude’s Effects on Loneliness in a Geriatric Population

Student presenter: June Conti
Project advisor: William Davis

Most people experience loneliness from time to time, as it motivates us to find a social group and acts as a motivating force to reconnect with others. However, those who experience chronic loneliness are at risk for poor physical health as it can lead to increased risks for a multitude of various health issues, such as heart disease, major depression, and many others\(^1\). It a public health risk among elderly people (65+), a vulnerable population that tends to be socially isolated due to their limited contact with family and friends. As people over the age of 65 are already at a higher risk for poor physical health than the general population, loneliness poses a significant threat to geriatric populations. The negative physical and psychological effects of loneliness can affect longevity and lifespan.

Vulnerable populations, such as people over the age of 65, need special consideration as to how to combat loneliness in a culturally appropriate and accessible manner. Socio-Emotional Selectivity Theory (SST) suggests that as people age, they become more selective in their friendships, focusing primarily on strengthening already established relationships with close friends and family. This suggests that gratitude, a relationship-building emotion, may be an effective intervention in combating loneliness.

My research investigated whether inducing gratitude by writing a letter of thanks to a loved one can be an effective intervention for reducing loneliness symptoms and increasing state self-esteem, positive affect, happiness, and optimism levels in a geriatric population. 120 participants from Veterans of Foreign Wars posts, community gatherings, and numerous knitting groups in Western Massachusetts and Northwestern Connecticut took part in the study, mostly obtained through word of mouth.

---