GENERAL INTRODUCTION TO THE LESSONS: INFORMATION FOR TEACHERS

TOPIC: **How to Deal with Loneliness (Not Only) in Older Age: Pressing Issues of Our Time**

Basic Objectives and Topics of the Lessons

Across globalised societies, loneliness and exclusion from social relationships in old age is becoming an increasingly debated topic, both at the level of policies and future institutional plans and at the level of people's individual strategies (e.g. the UK has its own Minister of Loneliness). The model lessons presented here open up this topic and introduce students to the issue of loneliness in old age, the role of social relationships in society and the risk factors that can lead to loneliness (not only) in old age. The lessons aim to integrate the latest scientific findings in the field of social gerontology into the school curriculum, thus creating space to promote potential early intervention to address feelings of loneliness and to activate intergenerational dialogue and empathy. Consequently, in line with the lesson objectives, the individual exercises focus on defining and negotiating the boundaries of the concepts of aloneness and loneliness, their possible causes, risk factors that can lead to them, and communication strategies that prevent or deal with them. **The lessons present loneliness as a universal human experience that is not limited by age, although it is more commonly associated with old age.**

The lessons are meant for pupils in the eighth and ninth grades of elementary school and the first and second grades of secondary and grammar schools, but as a source of inspiration they are universally applicable to different age groups. The lesson materials can be used as part of the teaching of the subjects such as Basics of Social Sciences and Civics or subjects with a similar orientation. They can also be integrated into inspirational workshops for specialised classes and thematic school days, or can be joined together as part of prevention and intervention programmes. The individual exercises focus on deepening the cognitive and affective abilities of pupils, with an emphasis placed on intergenerational understanding and deepening of sensitivity to the topics of ageing, ageism, the life cycle, psycho-hygiene and society-wide contexts, while supporting language learning (use of foreign language videos) and leading to active citizenship. Moreover, they can also be used in lessons aimed at prevention.

In addition to the General Introduction for Teachers, the presented materials also include 3 lessons with teacher materials and pupil worksheets. The lessons proceed from the basis, but each applies different didactic methods and emphasises slightly

different topics. The lessons can thus be used arbitrarily one after another or just one of them can be chosen:

- *Lesson A: Aloneness and Loneliness at Various Stages of Life* (intergenerational empathy and understanding, emphasis on prevention): 45+ minutes
- *Lesson B: What Is Aloneness and Loneliness and How Can We Actively Listen to Others?* (activation, empathy, active listening): 45-60 minutes
- *Lesson C: Loneliness and Ageism at Various Stages of Life* (active citizenship, intergenerational empathy): 90 minutes

The materials were produced as part of the project - 'A Life Course Perspective on the GENdered PATHways of Social Exclusion in Later Life) (GENPATH)' - project code TJ03000002, supported by TA ČR. More details about the project can be found on the website of Centre for Research on Ageing (CERA) or on the website of Masaryk University.

INFORMATION MATERIALS ON THE TOPIC

How to Deal with Loneliness (Not Only) in Older Age: Pressing Issues of Our Time

Over the past decades loneliness and social isolation have become increasingly publicised topics, affecting all people regardless of their age, gender or sex. The 1960s saw the onset of the 'loneliness epidemic' spreading predominantly through Western societies. So is this topic a modern phenomenon, or is it just rather trendy to talk about it? And how can we as a society respond to these problems?

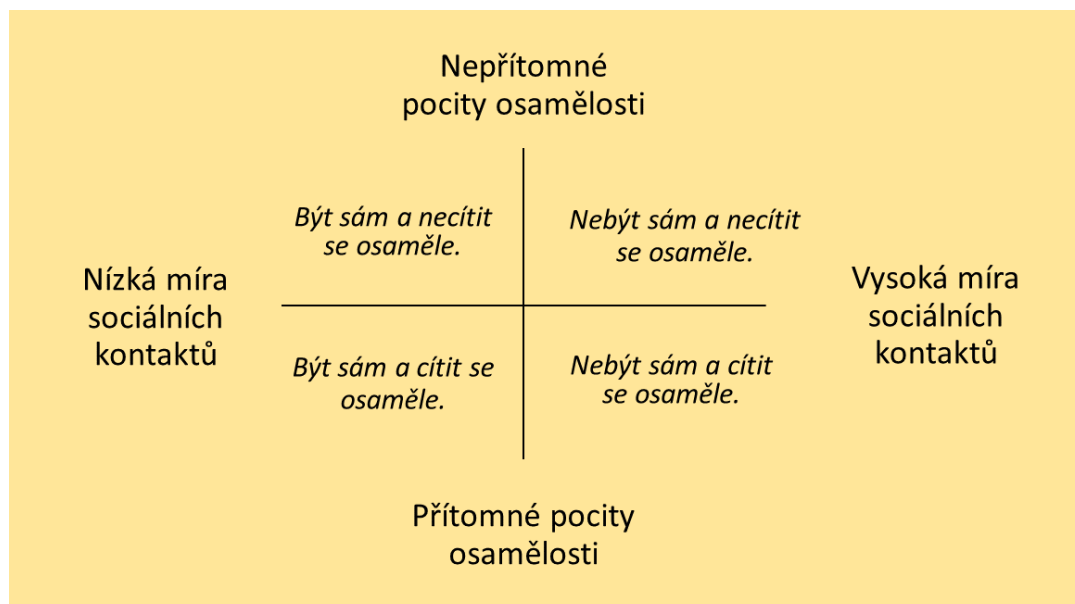### Aloneness and Loneliness in the Context of Age and Gender

In the European context, current surveys suggest that on average 7% of the adult population (roughly 30 million people) very often feel lonely (d'Hombres et al. 2018). However, more people in Eastern and Southern Europe suffer from loneliness than in the West and North, which may be linked to the overall level of social and institutional trust in these societies (Hansen et al. 2021). Although social isolation and feelings of loneliness are seen in every age group, they have a more pronounced impact on the older population. For this reason, in 2010 the European Commission declared the issue of social exclusion and isolation among older adults to be a major challenge for ageing societies, which today also include the Czech Republic. It is estimated that around 5% of Czechs over 65 experience loneliness frequently and a further 24% at least occasionally (Lee 2020). Nonetheless, loneliness, which affects the over-65 year-

olds most significantly, is far from being an exclusive experience of this population. In the USA, the UK and Australia, for example, people under 25 are most at risk of loneliness.

Loneliness, as a state associated with unpleasant feelings, must be distinguished from feelings of solitude, i.e. the positively experienced state of 'being alone'. *Loneliness* is traditionally defined as 'an undesirable discrepancy between the desired and achieved level of social contact' (Dykstra 1995: 321). It can have significant negative effects on a person's health (physical and mental), life expectancy and overall quality of life. Feelings of loneliness may (but do not have to) lead to *social isolation* as a result of low social contact. In contrast, *solitude/aloneness* is a sought-after state that brings a plethora of positive feelings, inspiration, rest and relaxation. Thus, for example, a quote by John Milton '*Solitude is sometimes the best society*' is used in common speech in English speaking countries.

Loneliness is sometimes used inaccurately as a synonym for exclusion from social relationships or social isolation. However, fewer relationships do not automatically mean greater loneliness. Loneliness comes as 'a critical consequence of processes of exclusion from the domain of social relationships' (Morgan et al. 2021: 99-100). It is therefore possible to have contact with only a few people and yet not experience feelings of loneliness, or to be in the middle of a crowd and feel lonely. This 'paradox' is illustrated in the table attached below (based on Celdrán & Martínez 2020: 3).

Nepřítomné
pocity osamělosti

	Být sám a necítit se osaměle.	Nebýt sám a necítit se osaměle.	
Nízká míra sociálních kontaktů			Vysoká míra sociálních kontaktů
	Být sám a cítit se osaměle.	Nebýt sám a cítit se osaměle.	

Přítomné pocity
osamělosti

Program Zéta   GENDER·NET Plus
Promoting gender equality in H2020 and the ERA

	Lack of feelings of loneliness		
Low level of social contacts	Being alone and not feeling lonely	Not being alone and not feeling lonely	High level of social contacts
	Being alone and feeling lonely	Not being alone and feeling lonely	
	Existing feelings of loneliness		

Its horizontal axis shows objective aloneness in the sense of the quantity of social contacts and the vertical axis demonstrates the subjective experience of loneliness. Loneliness can be suffered both by people with few social contacts and those who have many contacts around them. Thus, the quantity of relationships in this case does not mean the elimination of the negative feelings of loneliness, and it is therefore important to observe in particular the nature and quality of relationships with other people. The confusion between loneliness and aloneness can then lead to the stigmatisation of people who have fewer contacts or actually feel lonely. This in turn contributes even more to their social isolation. Consequently, in addition to the number of relationships, the subjectively experienced quality of these relationships is also important.

Feelings of loneliness are just one of many indicators denoting that a person is at risk of exclusion from social relationships. Others include feelings of not sufficiently belonging to a place or group, or generally poor satisfaction with life. In the context of loneliness, exclusion is most commonly referred to with regard to older people, where exclusion relates to inequalities in access to services, opportunities and rights, as well as to the general domains of communities, services, mobility, cultural and economic facilities, social relationships, etc. (Walsh, Scharf, Keating 2017: 93). In turn, some research suggests that loneliness in older age affects women more, as they are more likely to become widows and live alone in households, but other research indicates that men have weaker social networks outside the family in older age (for more on gender differences and such, see Burnholt et al. 2020). However, no significant gender differences have been observed in the Czech Republic.

What Are the Risks of Social Exclusion and Loneliness and How Can They Be Prevented?

The quality and quantity of social relationships is today demonstrably linked to a person's mental and physical health. According to a much cited study by Vivek H. Murthy, loneliness and weak social ties have a similar effect on human health as smoking 15 cigarettes a day. Thus, strong social relationships and social support not only ward off diseases of civilization, but are also reported to reduce the risk of death

by as much as 50% - more than lack of physical exercise, obesity, excessive alcohol consumption, or smoking (Holt-Lunstad, Smith, and Layton 2010). Some research shows that strong, high-quality social relationships also reduce the risk of dementia and the incidence of Alzheimer's disease (Bennett et al. 2017).

Throughout life, there are situations that can increase the risk of loneliness, both at a younger and older age. These include relocation (for study or work), loss of friends and family (through death, separation, conflict), widowhood or separation from a spouse/partner, retirement or loss of mobility. These so-called life transitions and their association with loneliness are often taboo in society and subsequently people's ability to cope with them decreases. One of the important elements in preventing loneliness is therefore creation of a safe space for communication about life transitions and increase of the general awareness about support options.

Recent research from the GENPATH project shows that unresolved conflicts and loss of social relationships with family members or close friends at a relatively young age have a significant impact on the development of loneliness in older age. Conflicts and disagreements alone are not a sign of a reduction in the quality of social ties. However, if they are not resolved and dealt with in a safe environment over a long period of time, they can damage the network of relationships of the person in question. Consequently, one of the pillars of preventing loneliness is to promote the ability to communicate one's emotions and needs at a young age, as well as the art of listening to the needs of others. As the quality of family relationships and security also play a significant role in the development of feelings of loneliness, it is absolutely crucial to start loneliness intervention early in life. Quality of life in old age begins early.

For the practical introduction of these topics into teaching, the project has created model lessons for elementary and secondary schools, which are available in the materials of the Methodological Portal at rvp.cz.

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