

# Loneliness Social Isolation

Marja Aartsen

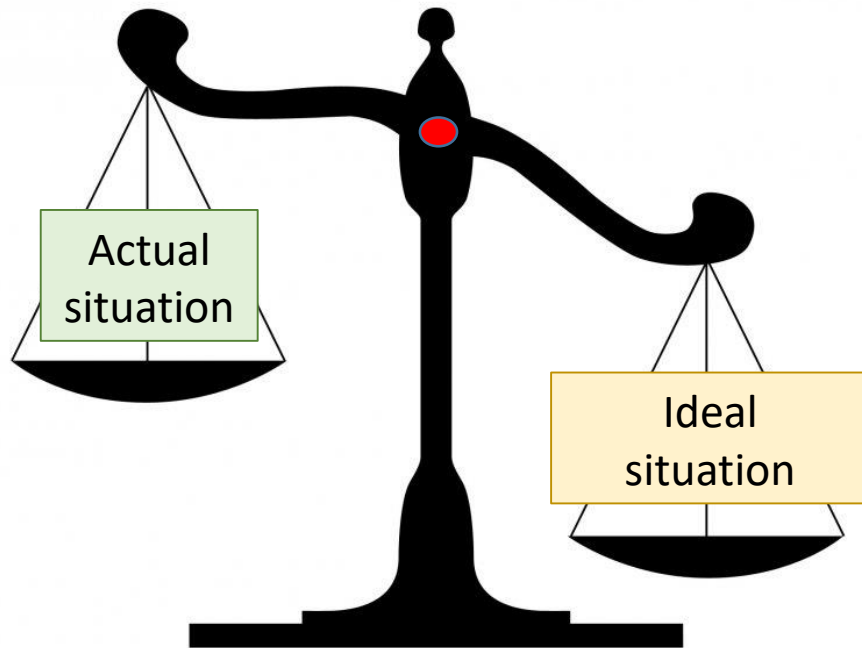
Oslo Metropolitan University / NOVA

# Loneliness versus Social Isolation

**Loneliness is a negative feeling** which arises when

- The number of social relations one has is smaller than one would like to have
- The quality of the social relations is lower than one would like to have

*(Perlman & Peplau, 1981)*



Number too small: social loneliness

Quality too low: emotional loneliness

*(Weiss, 1973)*

Reducing the imbalance looks easy:

1. Improve the actual situation
2. Lower expectations
3. Tighten the screw that keeps the scales in balance => coping strategies

# Loneliness versus Social Isolation

**Social isolation** refers to the absence of social relations and is thus an objective and **quantifiable situation**

- Very few or no social relations
- Not necessarily a negative situation
- When people prefer to be alone, it can be a sign of solitude (the glory of being alone)



However: research suggests that also **being alone** might lead to health problems and increases the risk of a premature death

*(Stephoe et al., 2013)*

# Duration and free choice

- Is loneliness a temporary response to a loss of a loved one?
- Is it chronic, spanning more than a year, or even a whole life?
- Is the social isolation deliberately chosen (the glory of solitude)?
- Or an escape from conflicting or even abusive relations?
- Or are people excluded from social participation because they lack possibilities to socially engage (lack of money, lack of good housing, lack of transport, language problems, health problems, being discriminated)

Who to blame? The individual? The society? The welfare state?

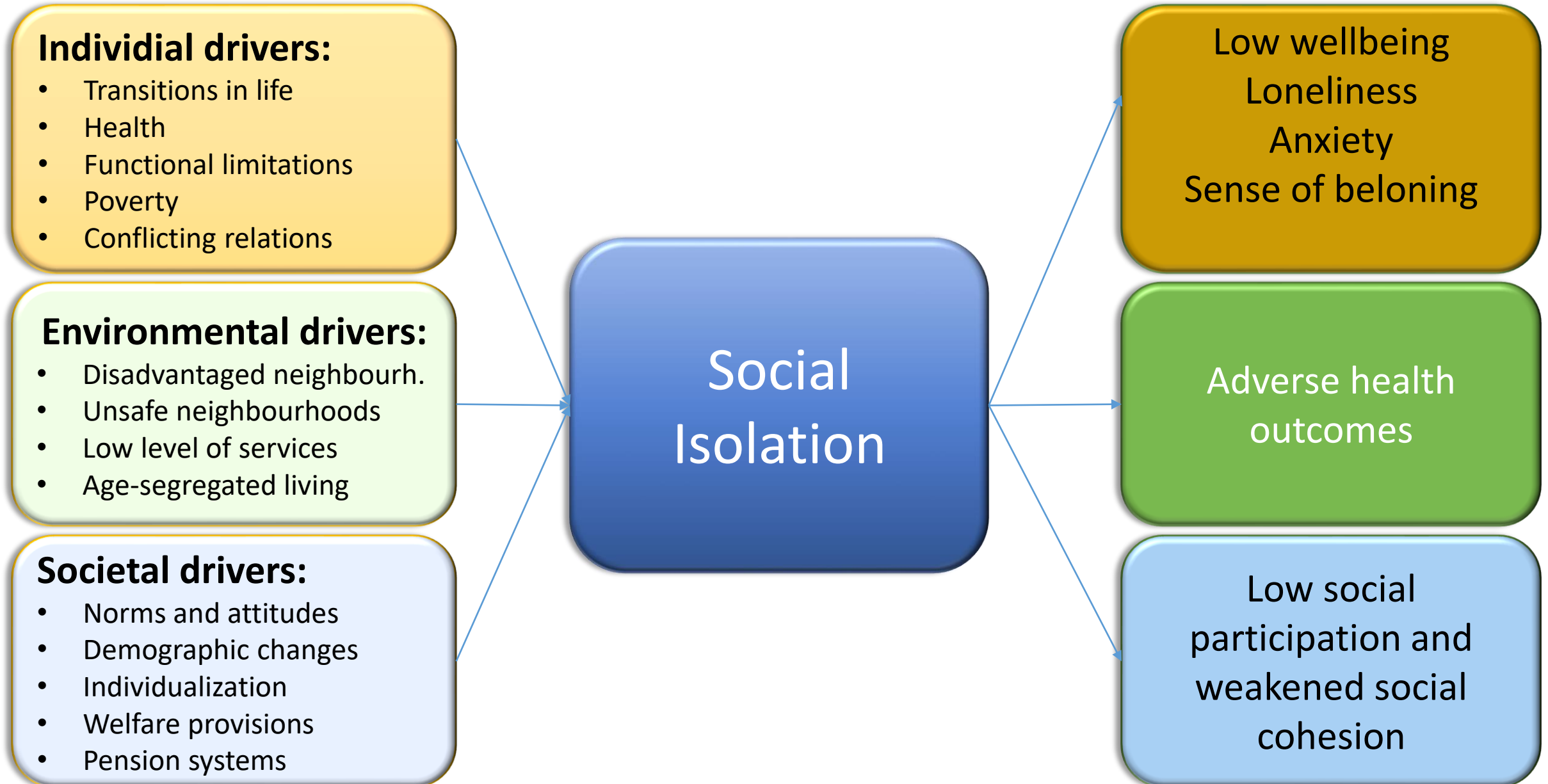
# Critical note on common knowledge about loneliness (debug the myths)

- Lonely is a common problem among old people
  - Fact: Loneliness is not more common in older than younger people, only more common among the very old, and prevalence of severe loneliness ranges between 3 and 20%.
- People in individualistic societies are most lonely.
  - Fact: older adults in northern European countries tend to be less lonely than those in the more familialistic southern European countries.
- Loneliness has increased over the past decades
  - Fact: Loneliness levels have decreased, albeit slightly. *(Dykstra, 2009)*

# Social isolation and loneliness are related but different concepts, nevertheless...

- Even without feeling lonely, social isolation can have negative consequences for health and society, and thus has policy relevance
- Even without being socially isolated, loneliness has negative health impact, and thus has policy relevance
  
- But: Strategies to reduce social isolation may be fundamentally different from strategies to reduce loneliness

# Causes and consequences



# Social isolation is linked to other domains

- Civic participation
- Health and social care services
- Material and financial resources
- Cultural aspects of society (norms and attitudes)
- Quality of the neighbourhood

*(Walsh, Scharf & Keating, 2017)*



# Life course influences on social exclusion: from childhood to old age: 3 pathways

**Pathway:** low status family, low education, bad working conditions, early retirement



**Cumulative:** the longer in poverty, the poorer the outcomes in later life



**Latency:** a direct effect of childhood circumstances on the brain, body, personality



# A life course perspective on social isolation

- Present degree of exclusion is shaped by conditions and decisions in earlier in life;
- Effects on social exclusion and its outcomes **vary by time and place**, norms, values, and policies, and hence, varies across societies;
- **Linked lives**: developments in a person's life are interconnected with developments in other people's lives;
- Life course **transitions** are of particular importance (bereavement, retirement);
- There is an **accumulation of advantages and disadvantages** probably resulting in **inequalities in social exclusion in later life**;
- Women from earlier birth cohorts have lower levels of education, have more often disrupted working careers, lower pensions, and consequently live more often in poverty than men, which increases their odds to become socially excluded.

# Summing up and directions for interventions

- Social isolation is a multifaceted social problem with substantial disruptive consequences for individuals and society
- The large variation in social isolation across welfare states indicates a key role of the macro-social context
- The large variation in social isolation across neighbourhoods indicates a key role of the local-social context
- Loneliness is not a universal concept and prevailing ideas very much a white western world concept
- Life course approach: current social situation may have a very long history, is linked to other peoples lives and may have different meanings in different places
- Whole system approach: causes for social isolation and loneliness are on the micro, meso and macro level, hence interventions should address the individual, environment and society