

Art prevents loneliness

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Loneliness is a growing problem that can be prevented by low-threshold participatory art and cultural activities.

More than 400 000 Finnish adults feel that they are lonely.

photo: Juha Metso



Loneliness concerns all age groups and it appears to be on the increase. According to a survey on adults' health, well-being and services from 2015, more than 400 000 adults in Finland feel that they are lonely.

Loneliness has considerable impacts on public health. Various studies have pointed out that the average lifespan of lonely people is shorter. Loneliness is also known to increase the risk of mental illness.

Research has shown that professionally organized art and cultural activities have positive effects that help to alleviate loneliness, treat health problems, reduce costs of health care and generally enhance well-being.

We propose the following measures towards the prevention of loneliness:

- Organizers of art and cultural activities, such as municipalities, churches and NGOs should increase access to and the accessibility of participatory arts among different age groups and target them especially to those who are in the risk groups, i.e. people who live alone, single parents, immigrants, unemployed people, and people on disability pension.
- Organizers of art and cultural activities should lower the threshold for participatory community art and cultural activities to make it easy for all people to take part, regardless of their background.
- Organizers of art and cultural activities should pay attention to the potentials of participatory art and cultural activities in the prevention of loneliness also among people who live in remote areas. It is the duty of Finland's provinces to ensure that cultural rights and well-being are taken into account when comparing the competitiveness of service providers.

Savings and less illness

Loneliness causes health problems and thereby also direct costs for health care. For example, as many as 70 percent of the adults who feel lonely have suffered from depression within the past year. Loneliness also reduces people's work capacity. Around 50 percent of the adults who feel lonely state that their work capacity has declined.

Prevention of loneliness is important for humane reasons but it can also have positive economic effects. These effects can be calculated in health care costs and taken into account as productivity in the national economy.

The economic impacts of the arts are difficult to quantify. It is however obvious that national health savings are significantly higher than the sums spent on art activities. When the risk groups are identified at municipal level and the persons who belong in them are inspired to take part in community art activities, savings are gained in the costs of treating illnesses caused by loneliness. Employment opportunities are, by the same token, born for artists.

Communal art and cultural activities resonate with an individual's entire personality

In the light of statistics many Finns live alone and feel lonely. Viewing the level of loneliness by age group, it takes on a U-form, centering especially at the early and late stages of life.

According to research, there are several reasons for why people experience loneliness. Loneliness has been reported in connection with physical or psychological illnesses and changes in the family situation. The experience of loneliness is also deepened when paired with problems relating to working life, such as workplace bullying or unemployment.

Loneliness can be prevented through participatory art and cultural activities, of which we present a few examples in this policy brief. Participation in communal art activities is known to support the formation of social relations and networks. Studies have shown that people who engage in shared cultural activities such as, for instance, choir singing, experience their lives in a more positive light and are less inclined to report experienced loneliness.

The well-being effects of the arts resonate with an individual's entire personality, not just her or his physical health. Art activities

The national health savings are bigger than the sums spent on art activities.

carried out in groups empower people to encounter others, share experiences and feelings, and to reflect on issues regarding their own personality. In participatory art and cultural activities social interaction, creative collaboration, discussion, and rejoicing over experiences of success strengthen people's self-esteem, sociality and sense of belonging in a community, which in turn reduces feelings of rootlessness and social exclusion.

A couple of good examples of participatory art and cultural activities are e.g. the PiiPoo - accessible center for art and culture in Lempäälä, Southern Finland, and the Special Music Centre Resonaari managed by HelsinkiMissio.

Research confirms that communality and good human relations support an individual's well-being. Loneliness is not however only a question of human relations but it relates more broadly to the opportunities a person's everyday life offers to feel included and attached to other people. Communal art and cultural activities enable this kind of inclusion and attachment.

It is important to identify and pay attention to the groups at special risk of loneliness and to integrate people who belong in them in participatory and inclusive art and cultural activities. A certain degree of discretion should be applied in the organization of inclusive art and cultural activities and in inviting people to join them, so that the participation is not experienced as stigmatizing. For example, in municipalities the library often serves a meeting place where it is easy to come and activities of this kind can be naturally provided.

Furthermore, the activities need to be realised with an ethically sustainable approach. Short-term projects are not

enough. Permanent structures need to be created for the activities, supported with sufficient resources and skilled, professional staff.

Churches, NGOs and other third-sector actors have a key role in the prevention of loneliness. Many of them are already actively working towards solving this problem.

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Participation in art activities supports the formation of social relations and networks.

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The ArtsEqual policy briefs present to policy makers latest research and research-based discussion produced by the ArtsEqual initiative. The ArtsEqual research initiative, coordinated by the University of the Arts Helsinki, examines, in collaboration and interaction with more than 50 partners, how the arts as public service can increase equality and well-being in Finland and meet the social challenges of the 2020s.



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Arts as Public Service: Strategic Steps towards Equality

ArtsEqual is a cross-disciplinary research project (2015-2020) coordinated by the University of the Arts Helsinki.

Project Leader: Professor Heidi Westerlund, the Sibelius Academy, University of the Arts Helsinki.

Funding Body



Consortium Partners



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