

Report of the Intergenerational Citizens' Summit on Loneliness - PROFILE Project Mutualité Chrétienne Liège

10.12.2022 - 6h – 9h pm

Organizers : Mutualité Chrétienne and ULiège



Lonely? Let's unite!

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Procedure, impressions, reflections, results

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1. Who and where ? Participants and location

It was at the Mutualité Chrétienne of Liège that 18 people gathered around the theme of solitude. The event was an intergenerational dialogue. During three hours, exchanges took place, opinions and questions were shared.

The group was mostly composed of seniors, with only one young person aged of 22 years old. Participants were recruited through a variety of channels, including through the newspaper "En marche", through resources provided by the Mutualité Chrétienne, and through an event organized on the social network Facebook in the weeks and days prior to the event.

To register for the event, for which participation was free, a registration form was available on the Mutualité Chrétienne website and it was also possible to register by phone.

Thus, out of 21 registrations, 18 people finally showed up. As the event took place in the evening, some elderly people did not stay until the end of the dialogue, as 9pm was too late for some of them.

In order to increase the conviviality of the meeting, sandwiches and drinks were offered to the participants.

Extract from the event created on the Facebook page

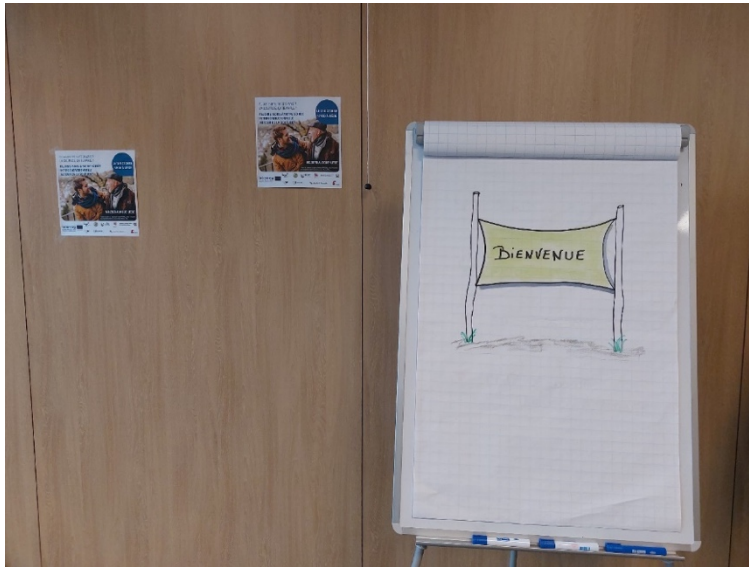
The MC Liège participates in the euPREVENT PROFILE project. It focuses on the prevention and the fight against unwanted loneliness of the elderly and on the awareness of the effects of loneliness. But our young people are also affected by loneliness!

In this context, an evening of intergenerational dialogue (16-27 years and +55 years) is organized at the MC Liège to :

- ✓ Exchange experiences, knowledge and questions about loneliness
- ✓ Become aware of the dangers of loneliness and social isolation, ageism and stigmatization
- ✓ To bring one's own ideas for intergenerational projects

This project is a cooperation between 7 partners of the Euregio Meuse-Rhine. The project is funded by Interreg Euregio Meuse-Rhine.

See you on October 12, 22, at 5:30 pm!



Finally, what motivated those who participated? Why did they come? Various answers were given to this question. Many wanted to understand what was concretely being done at the moment in Liege concerning loneliness among the elderly, they wanted "good addresses". Some wanted to better understand what loneliness was, and how to respond to it in practice. There was a demand for information,

both on existing places and on good practices to adopt when faced to a neighbour suffering from loneliness. Some were also there to tell of their personal experience, and to look for ways to overcome their own feelings of loneliness. The young woman who was there expressed her curiosity and her desire to learn more about the subject in the context of her psychology studies. When asked *"why did you want to attend this meeting?"*, one lady said: *"Sunday is a dead day. I didn't even hear myself last Sunday, not even my own voice"*. The question of Covid was also raised, how not to feel alone when you can no longer hug your grandchildren. One participant talked about the need to get together with others around being a senior herself but also a close caregiver for her parents. She expressed feeling alone and uninformed about available supports. Another person wanted to start thinking about grouped housing. Finally, one person wondered why some municipalities hide behind privacy to not communicate the names of people identified as lonely, while others use them to set up actions.

In summary, the participants had several requests and motivations for coming

- The desire to share tips and good practices in the face of solitude
- The desire to be better informed about the places and the existing help
- The desire to better understand the notion of loneliness and to have more information on its consequences and on possible interventions

Surprisingly, the question of intergenerationality was not mentioned in the motivations to participate in this meeting, although it was intergenerational.

The room chosen for the dialogue was a very spacious and functional meeting room. Other rooms were made available for the sub-group work proposed during the meeting. Finally, a space was also provided to enjoy sandwiches during the break.

2. How and what ? Structure of the event and reflections

The meeting was thus punctuated by four distinct moments:

- A moment of meeting, to get to know each other and to introduce ourselves
- A moment to put into context what loneliness is, what it is not, the difference with social isolation
- A moment of sharing in sub-groups to share one's vision of loneliness, what this term can cover
- A moment to share good ideas, good experiences that worked, points to remember and interesting places

In total, the event lasted 3 hours with a 20 minute break for sandwiches.

Meeting each other

After inviting people to sit down, a brief explanation was given on the context of this meeting and on what the Profile project is. The objectives and the framework of the evening were set out.

In order for the participants to get to know each other and each other's names, a "bingo" game was proposed. This game consists in finding people who correspond to the sentences written in the small boxes of the bingo. For example, it was asked to find a person who liked cats or a person who prefers the

Joue d'un instrument	Parle 3 langues couramment	Ne mange pas de porc	A la main verte	A vu tous les James Bond ou presque
A un chat <i>Jean-Paul</i>	Habite dans la ville où il/elle est né(e)	A déménagé dans les 2 dernières années	A une collection	A deux sœurs
Ne pratique aucun sport d'équipe	Ne s'est jamais épié	Préfère la montagne à la mer	A dû porter un appareil dentaire	A été au cinéma la semaine dernière
Adore lire une BD avant de s'endormir	Déteste les jeux de société	Question mystère	Aime tricher	Ne possède pas sa propre voiture
Aime se lever tôt	Possède un totem	Ne boit jamais de café	Aime le camping	Préfère le dessert au plat principal <i>Marie-Clair</i>

mountain to the sea. If the person was found, you had to write his or her first name in the box. The person who completed a line the fastest won. The participants really enjoyed this game. Afterwards, a round table discussion was proposed where each person had to say their name, place of living and the reason why they had wanted to participate in this meeting. Some had professional experience with the elderly or with the theme of solitude, others came for more personal reasons. After this brief presentation, we could better know in which context and with which wishes the participants were present. After inviting people to sit down, a brief explanation was given on the context of this meeting and on what the Profile project is. The objectives and framework of the evening were set out.

Discussing the theme of loneliness

For this second part of the meeting, distinctions and clarifications were made. A definition of loneliness and isolation was given. These terms were compared and their points of convergence and divergence were specified. Overall, the participants agreed with the definitions given and they served as a basis for the rest of the meeting. However, some participants pointed out that loneliness and social isolation did not only include a "social relations" variable, these aspects also depended on the power of communication: if one has been married for 60 years and little by little, communication with the partner is difficult, loneliness could be felt. Some participants emphasized the evolutionary dimension of loneliness. We can feel lonely in certain places, at certain times, and then it can disappear in whole or in part, come back later... Moreover, one participant mentioned the importance of architecture and land use planning: indeed, living in a neighbourhood where only offices are being built can create social isolation for a person and they could thus feel a lot of loneliness. It is therefore possible to act collectively on loneliness and not only individually. These dimensions elicited a lot of feedback from the participants and were able to expand the dialogue. Many agreed on the idea that political decisions currently reinforce the loneliness of people, young or old, such as the generalization and amplification of automatic checkouts, the fact that everything can be done via the Internet, etc. One participant said, *"to the extent that we are able to do this, we will be able to do it in a more efficient way"*. One person said, *"Nowadays, we don't even go to the post office anymore"*.

Sharing in sub-groups

Then, in sub-groups, the participants were asked to discuss their own vision of loneliness and what this term covers. For 25 minutes, participants were able to talk about loneliness in general, but also to share their personal experiences and their own difficulties. These discussions were not documented in order to let the participants relate their personal experiences to each other.

3 groups were created. Different ideas came out of this moment of reflection. Loneliness was seen as resulting from the impression of being transparent, from the lack of recognition. It can evolve, people can find themselves socially isolated from one day to the next, without warning. Loneliness can occur when we no longer have the opportunity to share our ideas, our feelings, our emotions, the responsibilities of life as a couple, when our desire to communicate is no longer satisfied or when this desire is no longer present. Loneliness does not necessarily come when we are alone. And at the same time, sometimes it is good to be alone too. The participants therefore insist that it is important to take into account the context in which the feeling of loneliness arises for the person. Is the person grieving, separated, bored? Some mentioned the fact that nowadays, many people travel and live on the other side of the world, the family is not together as often and a lack is felt. *"Hugging someone is not the same as kissing your screen"*. One group highlights the difficulties associated with transportation that can lead to loneliness. Pedestrian streets can prevent access to transportation for people with disabilities. Finally, they

feel a sense of intergenerational divide: they did not feel so far away from the life their grandparents had led, but they have the impression that there have been too many changes in a few years, it goes too fast and *"it creates anxiety"*. Thus, according to them, the digital divide reinforces the loneliness of the elderly. A debate was then created: some had the impression that the elderly were not liked in society, that they were no longer asked for their opinion. One person said, *"Young people only come to talk to us to ask us for money"*. Someone will ask, *"Yes, but do we ask the youth what they think? Young people are also not loved, they are not considered"*, thus highlighting the similarities between the situation of young and old. The participants also found it very important to remember that some people like to be alone. The one young participant said that it is important not to make generalizations. Young and old are not homogeneous groups. By not taking this into account, the older people themselves will hinder communication, especially by excluding themselves in an "us vs. them" type scheme. The need for nuance in what is said is thus highlighted, by remaining in the reality of life at the risk of becoming involved in sectarian thinking. The young participant mentioned that they too experience loneliness, and that the life transitions typical of young adults can lead to social isolation: living alone in an apartment, starting a new job, moving to a new city, etc. Both generations agree that networks can help fight against loneliness but also make it worse, even if you have 1000 friends on the networks, if you are alone at home in the evening, the feeling of loneliness could appear and be amplified by the social networks. A participant then launched the trail of intergenerational habitats. Another group insists on the awareness of one's solitude. Sometimes people simply don't realize it. The idea of accepting rather than fighting one's loneliness was also mentioned, accepting in order to better react by oneself: what do I want to put in place? This can allow people to go towards what will give them energy and stay in reality rather than locking themselves in their world. Finally, one participant expressed that some people do not know how to be alone, and that this was a personal problem that was exacerbated when old age and social isolation became more present. Many would laugh and say, *"It is better to be alone than to be badly accompanied"* even if some people do not know how to be alone. Different risk factors were mentioned in this discussion: the place of living, the corona, mourning, health, etc. In the end, everyone agreed that any activity that creates a link is a starting point for fighting against loneliness.

Ideas for action for projects (intergenerational or not) to reduce or prevent loneliness

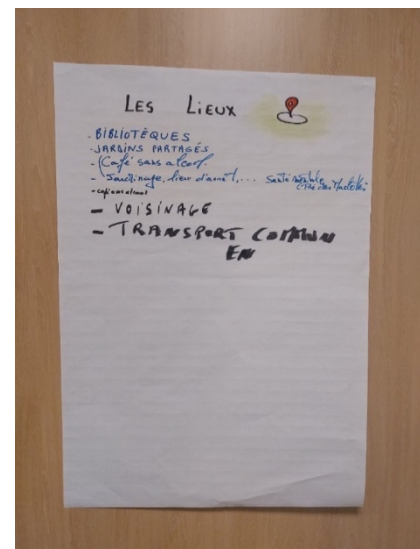
This third part of the evening was a general brainstorming to collect different things:

- The meeting places that currently exist
- Good experiences
- Points of attention to remember
- Good ideas

To support and organize this brainstorming, posters were provided. Everyone had a marker and could go and indicate what they wanted on each poster. When everyone was able to put in what they wanted, the items were read and discussed together. This sharing session was very much appreciated and brought a lot of smiles and goodwill among the participants. The goal was to share and evoke ideas for action to fight against loneliness and to promote intergenerational encounters.

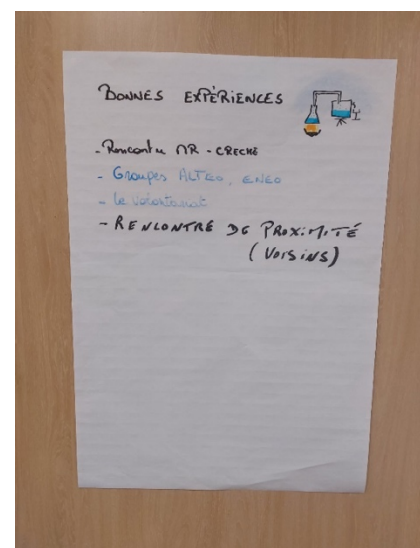
Ideas for meeting places:

- ✓ Libraries
- ✓ Shared gardens
- ✓ Go for a coffee
- ✓ Meeting in the neighborhood
- ✓ Public transport as a meeting place / accessibility to meeting places via public transport



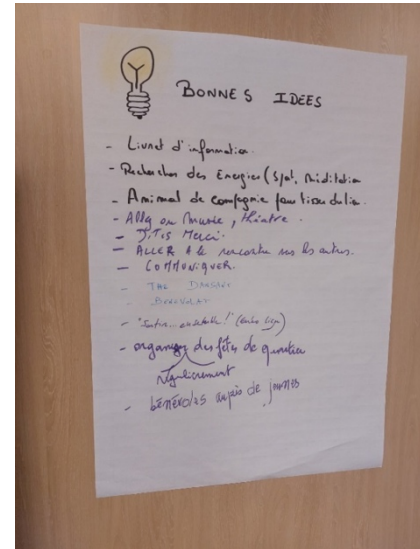
Good experiences to share

- ✓ Intergenerational meetings between nursing homes and day care centers
- ✓ ALTEO, ENEO groups
- ✓ Doing volunteer work
- ✓ Meeting of proximity
- ✓ Shared intergenerational flats



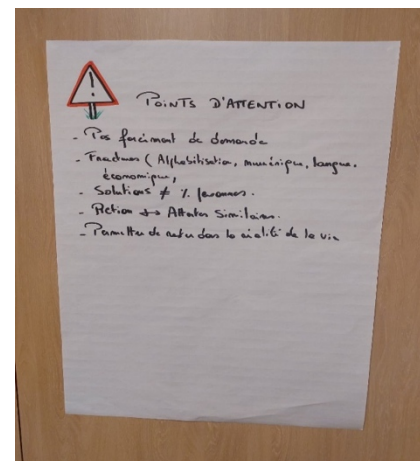
Some good ideas

- ✓ Create an information booklet. From this discussion, the idea of a reference guide in case of emergency was put forward, but what about people who cannot read and who will feel even more isolated?
- ✓ Alternatives to medication: sports, meditation
- ✓ A pet to bond with
- ✓ Going to museums, theaters, tea dances
- ✓ Saying hello, goodbye, thank you to encourage meeting the other person
- ✓ Communicate
- ✓ Do volunteer work
- ✓ Organize regular neighborhood parties
- ✓ Write down memories with the help of grandchildren to create a moment of encounter
- ✓ Find out about the free phone lines of non-profit organizations



Some points of attention

- ✓ Make sure there is a request from the person. Social isolation can be a choice
- ✓ Take into account the digital, economic, language and literacy divides
- ✓ Listen to the needs and expectations of the person



3. Evaluation and general conclusions

During the preparation of this meeting, it was shown how important it is to advertise well enough and to use different channels to reach and attract different audiences.

The failure to recruit young participants suggests that improvements can be made regarding the advertising of the meeting. Also, the time of the meeting (5:30 p.m.) and the location (downtown) may have deterred some or prevented others from attending (classes, extracurricular activities, traffic, etc.).

Overall, the dialogue was very good and dynamic, even if the intergenerational aspect of loneliness was not discussed much because of the low representation of young people.

What do I want to take away from this meeting?

- It widens my field of action
- It diversifies the tracks I was already using
- It increased my knowledge about loneliness
- Creation of social links
- Different opinions from mine were expressed and my opinions were nuanced
- Being able to hear the opinions of youth and have open interaction with them
- It shows how important it is to involve and convince politicians to build collective responses

What are your frustrations with this event?

- Lack of youth
- Inability to focus on the intergenerational aspect of loneliness without youth
- Lack of consideration for specific cases, such as Alzheimer's and the case of family caregivers

From the organizers' point of view, the event worked well. The atmosphere was very good, there was a spirit of cooperation and goodwill. Apart from the intergenerational theme, many aspects of loneliness were discussed. Perhaps we also need to rethink the importance we give to this theme which was not a priority for the participants at the beginning of the meeting.

Of course, for some participants it would have been interesting to extend the meeting, as the discussion was clearly not over. Nevertheless, given the audience and their specific constraints (fatigue, transportation...), it would not have been possible to extend the meeting beyond 9pm.

We are convinced, in view of the thanks and informal exchanges, that the participants went home with the desire to get involved, to get information and to become aware of the subject of loneliness among the different generations.

