

Combating loneliness: a friendship enrichment programme for older women

NAN STEVENS*

ABSTRACT

Research indicates that friendship contributes to wellbeing in later life in various ways: through the provision of companionship in daily life, support during stressful transitions, sustainment of identity under changing circumstances and adaptation to old age. However not all older people have friends available who fulfil these different functions. In order to promote wellbeing and reduce loneliness, an educational programme on friendship enrichment for older women has been developed and implemented in the Netherlands. The friendship programme's main goal is empowerment; it helps women clarify their needs in friendship, analyse their current social network, set goals in friendship and develop strategies to achieve goals. Reduction of loneliness, when present, is also an important goal of the programme. A study that followed 40 participants during the year after the programme demonstrates that a majority succeeded in developing new, or improving existing, friendships and in significantly reducing their loneliness. They also reported changes related to the self and social behaviour. Limitations of the research design, reflection on the feasibility of reducing loneliness through a single type of intervention, and possible applications of the programme's design to other areas, are presented in the discussion.

KEY WORDS – Friendship, loneliness, older women, goals, intervention, successful ageing..

Introduction

Theories of successful ageing view the individual as proactive, regulating the quality of life by setting goals and striving to achieve them, accumulating resources that are useful in adaptation to change with age, and actively involved in the maintenance of wellbeing (Schulz and Heckhausen 1996; Steverink *et al.* 1998). The goal-directed activity of older persons is frequently focused on areas such as health, personal independence, emotional stability, self-esteem, harmonious partnership and satisfactory friendship (Brandtstädter and

* Department of Psychogerontology, University of Nijmegen, the Netherlands.

Baltes-Götz 1990). This article describes an intervention that has been developed to support older women in achieving their goals related to friendship; it also gives a description of changes during the year following the programme. There are various reasons why people of all ages might strive to achieve satisfactory friendships. In later life friends are often sought for companionship. The pleasure that is derived from shared activities and social rituals in friendship have a positive effect on an older individual's wellbeing (Larson and Bradney 1988; Rook 1990). Friends may also serve as sources of support under stressful circumstances, for example, during transitions related to retirement (Jerrome 1981), widowhood (Bankoff 1983; Dykstra 1995; Stevens 1995a) and relocation to housing for the elderly (Armstrong and Goldsteen 1990). By providing information and behavioral cues in new situations, friends who have already weathered such transitions contribute to the process of adaptation to old age (Hartup and Stevens 1997; Hess 1972; Jerrome 1981).

Old friends are especially valuable in sustaining self and identity in a changing world; they do this by sharing experiences and contributing to interpretations of both past and present life events (Hess 1972; Hartup and Stevens 1997). Because friendship is characterised by voluntary involvement and affective ties, friends also play a crucial role in helping sustain self-esteem in later life (Lee and Shehan 1989; Peters and Kaiser 1985). With age this sustaining function of friendship becomes increasingly important (Carstensen 1991).

Despite the advantages provided by friendship in later life, not all older persons have friends within their social networks, people who continue to provide them with companionship and support. Estimates of the number of older persons without friends vary between studies, due to the different methods and samples that are used to assess friendship. In a Dutch study involving a representative sample of 4000 persons aged 55 to 90, 16 per cent did not include anyone outside the family in their primary network, and slightly over half did not include friends at all (Knipscheer *et al.* 1995)¹. In the US 12 per cent of the women and 22 per cent of the men over 65 had no friends, according to a study by Fischer and Phillips (1982).

Friendship is a type of relationship that can become difficult to sustain as people age. Age-related changes in health, relocation and retirement influence older persons' access to actual and potential friends. In a study of the personal networks of persons aged 55 to 90, Van Tilburg (1998) found that the number of friends in the personal network decreased over the course of four years for both young-old and older-old respondents.

An explanation for the decline in contact with friends is provided by social selectivity theory (Carstensen 1991). According to this theory, people select partners with whom to interact according to their perceptions of the benefits (social support, positive emotional experiences) and costs (energy expenditure, negative emotional experiences) of the interaction. With age, people prefer to maintain interaction within their closest relationships, for example with close family and friends, who have been reliable sources of support and positive emotional experiences for many years. They tend to interact less frequently with more casual friends and acquaintances, because of the energy required and less certain outcomes of these interactions.

In another longitudinal study, Jerrome and Wenger (1999) identified three different patterns of friendship change in old age: contraction in the friendship network, expansion, and replacement of friendships that had been lost or had faded. While social selectivity theory predicts the first pattern of contraction, the social compensation model is useful for understanding the other two patterns involving expansion or replacement of lost friendships (Ferraro and Farmer 1995). This model emphasises that individuals have different styles of social involvement that tend to be stable as they age; when social contacts or activities are lost, older people tend to seek other means to maintain their habitual amount of social participation. The model acknowledges that change occurs more often in peripheral relationships than in the inner circle of close relationships. Expansion in friendship, however, may take place to compensate for the loss of a close relationship, such as a partner, to be a companion in social activities and source of emotional support (Bankoff 1983; Stevens 1995*a*).

Programmes to reduce loneliness

Many social service agencies have developed programmes that are designed to stimulate the development of new relationships in later life and to reduce or prevent loneliness among older persons. However, information on the effectiveness of such interventions is rather scarce in the gerontological literature. Some organisations offer a service that matches older persons who seek companionship for leisure activities. In a small study of older persons who had been matched through such an agency, Bodde (1994) found that few lasting relationships developed as a result of this matching procedure and that loneliness persisted among participants. Merely bringing people together who seek new contacts in

later life is apparently not sufficient to alleviate loneliness for some people.

In Great Britain, Jerrome (1981, 1983) studied single older women who joined a friendship club in order to meet new people. Her work provides valuable insight into why such clubs are often ineffective in helping lonely people form satisfying relationships. A friendship club is not a natural meeting place based on mutual interests, in which relationships can develop gradually. Instead, members encounter one another directly as potential friends, which tends to put considerable strain on contact and exchanges. What they have in common, the fact that they are lonely, does not make them attractive to one another as relationship partners. Jerrome observed that members often lacked the necessary social skills to develop relationships with strangers and tended to have unrealistic expectations of friendship.

An alternative approach involves structured group interaction. An example is a course for older widows that has been developed in the Netherlands. The course is designed to support widows in the process of reorganising their social lives; its main goal is to prevent or reduce loneliness. When effects of participation were studied in comparison with a control group, participants demonstrated significant improvement in social skills, a decline in depressive symptoms and an increase in positive feelings during the year following the course. Loneliness, however, had not declined during the same period (van Lammeren and Geelen 1995).

In contrast, a structured group intervention that was organised for older women who were on the waiting list for housing for elderly people in Stockholm, did have significant effects on loneliness (Andersson 1985). Women who were lonely were identified during a preliminary survey, selected for the study and assigned randomly to an experimental or a control group. The intervention consisted of four meetings in small neighbourhood-based discussion groups that were led by home health aides. Topics such as leisure activities and the neighbourhood were discussed. Six months after these meetings, participants demonstrated more frequent social contacts, an increase in participation in organised activities, and a decline in loneliness. There was, however, no change in the availability of a close friend or confidant.

A friendship enrichment programme for older women

The educational programme on friendship enrichment under consideration was developed in the 1990s, to stimulate improvement in

friendship and to reduce loneliness among older women (Stevens 1995*b*)². The decision was made to focus on older women as the first target of this intervention. This was because, in later life, women tend to be widowed and to live alone more often than men. The absence of a partner and living alone increases their vulnerability to loneliness (Knipscheer *et al.* 1995). In a Dutch study on autonomy and wellbeing, older women demonstrated a lower sense of self-efficacy, greater anxiety and a higher incidence of depression than older men (Deeg and Westendorp-de Seriere 1994). As a result of such findings, the development of interventions to improve the wellbeing of older women received priority in Dutch policy on ageing during the 1990s. An important consideration was the likelihood of attracting participants. Because older women continue to be interested in and to benefit from interaction with friends in later life, it was expected that a programme focused on friendship would appeal to them (Adams 1987; Field 1999; Jerrrome 1981).

The friendship programme is an intervention designed to empower its participants. A basic assumption is that participants possess an expertise in relationships that is based on a lifetime of experience. The programme is designed to:

- help women clarify their needs, desires and expectations in friendship,
- analyse their current relationship networks to identify actual and potential friendships,
- formulate goals that involve improvement of existing friendships or development of new friendships, and
- develop strategies to achieve these goals.

The friendship programme combines insights and methods from feminist counselling (Miller and Stiver 1997) and re-evaluation counselling, a self-help method developed by Jackins (1983). Material for the programme is also drawn from literature on social support, social relationships and friendship (Ferraro and Farmer 1995; Hansson *et al.* 1984; Hess 1972; Jerrrome 1981, 1983; Kahn and Antonucci 1980; Larson and Bradney 1988; Rook 1990). Throughout the programme, the importance of self-esteem is emphasised in planning and realising goals related to friendship.

Participants are encouraged to treat themselves as they would a best friend who is always available, whose wishes and desires form important guidelines for action, and who deserves the best possible social life. The programme consists of 12 weekly lessons offered to groups of eight to 12 women. These are structured according to a four-stage model on the effect of relational competence in different phases of relationships

(Hansson *et al.* 1984). The first phase involves expectations in relationships. Theory and exercises focus on variations in friendship and the value of different types of friendship, early experiences in friendship and expectations that influence the ways in which friendships are formed. The second phase in which women can improve their competence involves the development of individual friendship and a network of friends. The gradual nature of the process of becoming friends is emphasised; exercises focus on skills and attitudes that are important in developing friendship (*e.g.* listening, self-disclosure, expressing appreciation and setting limits in relationships).

Participants gain insight in their own social network by filling in a personal convoy of relationships (Kahn and Antonucci 1980). In the convoy, important relationships are identified and situated in three concentric circles around the self, arranged according to importance and closeness. Reflection on their convoys helps women evaluate the friendships that are available, in terms of their own needs and desires. Utilisation of relational resources is the third phase in which relational competence is important. Lonely women often have friends available but are hesitant to call on them for company or support; the friendship programme encourages them to take an active stance in utilising friendships.

Another possibility is that a convoy reveals dormant friendships that can be reactivated. Maintenance of friendship is the fourth phase in which competence can be improved. Reflection on the convoy reveals which types of friendships are missing, which friendships are underused or neglected. Women are encouraged to select goals, based on their analysis of their own convoys (*e.g.* to develop a close friendship, to find a companion for a specific activity), and formulate step-by-step plans to achieve their personal goals. In other words they are asked to visualise 'success scenarios' that provide them with positive guidelines for their own behaviour (Bandura 1980). Throughout the programme they are given homework assignments that involve practising skills, reflecting on personal experience in friendship or taking steps towards reaching their goal. Group discussion on successes and failures and the exchange of information on different strategies to develop or enhance friendship provide participants with extensive material for social learning and comparison.

A follow-up study on friendship change and loneliness reduction

Since the manual for the friendship programme became available in 1995, it has been distributed to over 200 agencies providing social

services to older persons, adult education centres, community mental health centres and women's organisations. A study that follows participants during the year after the programme was carried out in Nijmegen, a city of 150,000 in the eastern part of the Netherlands where the friendship programme was originally developed. The programme is offered by the local agency for senior services in co-operation with the university, to women over 55 residing in or around the city.

Several questions have been addressed in the pilot study:

- Does the friendship programme attract its target group, that is, older women who are lonely or potentially vulnerable to loneliness?
- What motivates women to participate in the programme; what kind of goals do they have?
- How successful are women in achieving their goals related to friendship and in reducing loneliness during the year following the programme?
- How do results compare for women of different educational backgrounds and marital status?

Design and methods

Recruiting lonely older women for a new kind of intervention, a friendship enrichment programme, is a challenging enterprise. When the programme first started, the author feared that asking women to participate in a study would increase the barriers to participation and interfere with recruitment. Because of this, there is no baseline measurement before women started the programme. Instead a study was designed that follows women as they attempt to realise their goals in friendship after finishing the programme. The consequences of this design will be discussed along with the conclusions.

Data were collected by means of a questionnaire given out during the 12th lesson; then women were asked to participate in a follow-up study. Interviews were held within a month and 10 to 12 months after the 12th lesson. The timing of measurements was based on the assumption that it takes time to develop or improve friendships. The questionnaire concerned background information (age, marital status, educational level, subjective health), motivation for participation and satisfaction with the programme, and a loneliness scale (De Jong Gierveld and Van Tilburg 1999). Loneliness is defined as 'a situation experienced by the individual as one of an unpleasant or unacceptable discrepancy

between the amount and quality of social relationships as realised, compared to the relationships as desired' (De Jong Gierveld and Van Tilburg 1995: 161). The loneliness scale consists of five positive and six negative items, assessing a sense of belonging and discrepancies in the area of desired relationships. Scores on the scale range from 0 (not lonely) to 11 (extremely lonely); a score greater or equal to 3 indicates loneliness, while a score above 9 is considered as extreme loneliness. This scale has been used in several surveys and has proved to be a reliable and valid instrument with older persons (De Jong Gierveld and Van Tilburg 1999).

During the interview an important source of information was the convoy of relationships that women had filled in during the fifth meeting. Questions in the interview were focused on those persons in the convoy that were identified as friends, their location within the convoy, their age and marital status, duration of the friendship, and shared activities. During the interview 10 to 12 months after the programme, respondents were asked to re-examine the convoy and describe any changes that had taken place, especially in friendship. They also completed the loneliness scale a second time.

Non-parametric tests for paired samples were used to determine whether changes in friendship and loneliness were significant, specifically the Wilcoxon signed ranks test for loneliness scores and McNemar's test for significance with dichotomous variables. Kruskal-Wallis H and Pearson chi-square tests were used to examine whether or not differences between subgroups of participants were significant.

Subjects

Forty women have participated in the friendship programme and completed both interviews. They were recruited from seven different groups; the response rate was 70 per cent of those who completed the programme. Their ages ranged from 54 to 83, with an average of 63.7 years. The majority lived alone; these included 35 per cent who were widowed, 25 per cent who were divorced and 10 per cent who had never married. Thirty per cent were married and living with their husbands. Slightly over half had completed high school and a third had professional training (*e.g.* as nurses or teachers); only two women had attended university. The participants tended to be relatively healthy with only 35 per cent reporting moderate impairment and five per cent reporting major impairment due to health conditions.

Results

Target group and goals of participants

An important question was whether the friendship enrichment programme attracted lonely older women. As a group the participants appeared to be quite lonely at the first measurement, with an average score of 7.0 (sd. 3.0) on the loneliness scale. In a representative survey, older persons living alone demonstrate average scores between 3.2 (sd. 2.9) and 3.4 (sd. 3.3), depending on their marital status, while married persons average 1.7 (sd. 2.3) on the loneliness scale (De Jong Gierveld and Van Tilburg 1995). The variation in the degree of loneliness among participants was as follows: 12.5 per cent were not lonely, 42.5 per cent were moderately lonely and 45 per cent were very lonely. The percentage of lonely persons was much higher than within the representative survey in which 28 per cent were moderately lonely and only four per cent very lonely. Thus the programme appears to be successful in attracting lonely older women, the majority of whom lacked a partner and lived alone.

The participants provided an indication of their goals when they described their reasons for attending the programme. Goals were often focused on developing new social relationships; women reported that they hoped to meet new people (who were also alone or who lived in their neighbourhood), make a friend, or find a companion for a specific activity like going walking or attending concerts. Almost half the women (45 per cent) described this kind of social goal. More than a third (38 per cent) described social skills that they would like to learn (how to make contact, how to keep friends, how to make up after an argument). Some women (38 per cent) described goals that were focused on change in the self, such as 'getting back my spontaneity', 'finding a balance between being with others and being by myself', and gaining self-confidence. About a quarter (27 per cent) hoped to gain insight into others' experiences in friendship or in women's lives in general. It is interesting that less than half openly expressed a desire to develop new friendships despite the fact that the high loneliness score indicates a discrepancy between these women's actual and desired relationships.

Friendship change during the year following the programme

Before describing changes in friendship it is important to note that most of the participants included friends in the convoys that they completed in the fifth lesson of the programme. Only three women (seven per

cent) named no friends in their convoy. There was a rather large group (42 per cent) who included friends in the inner circle of their convoy, while 60 per cent included friends in the middle circle and 70 per cent in the outer circle. Many women reported that contact with close friends was infrequent (once or twice a year) due to the distance between them, or to some other barrier such as illness. Others saw friends regularly because of some shared activity, but desired more closeness or more frequent companionship. Apparently the available friendships did not fulfil the women's needs and desires in friendship.

During the year following the programme many women (70 per cent) reported that they had made new friends. About one third (35 per cent) of the participants described new friendships that were close, involving a high degree of trust and self-revelation. More than half (58 per cent) reported new 'social friendships' in which activities were shared on a regular basis.

Many participants (58 per cent) continued to have contact with other women who participated in the friendship programme with them. However, not all of these contacts had developed into personal friendships; about a quarter reported that fellow participants had become friends. Thus most new friendships had been developed outside the friendship programme.

Almost half (48 per cent) reported that existing friendships had improved during the past year. A couple of women reported that they had become more confidential with particular friends. One third of the women described changes in their own social behaviour which led to improvement in friendships. Examples include expressing affection for friends, proposing joint outings and activities, calling friends more often, and being more open about how one really felt. One woman described this as 'removing her mask' with friends.

There was not only improvement or increase in friendship; 25 per cent described experiences of loss in friendship, usually caused by natural attrition with age due to a friend's death or illness, retirement or relocation of friends. Three women had ended friendships that were no longer reciprocal. The presence of new friends and improvement of existing friendships were reflected in the convoys. There was a significant increase in the number of women naming friends in the inner circle of their convoy, from 42 per cent to 60 per cent ($p < .05$). There was also a significant increase in the number of circles of the convoy in which friendships appeared ($z = -2.93, p < .01$), indicating more variety in friendships. According to the qualitative data, there were more women with a combination of intimate friendships, characterised by high self-revelation and trust, and social friendships

based on shared activities or group membership, rather than having a single type of friendship available one year after the programme.

While most of the change in relationships was in the area of friendship, improvement in family relationships was also reported by five women, for example with daughters or with husbands. Women described these relationships as warmer or more open (with daughters) or more free and light-hearted (with a husband).

In addition to the changes in social behaviour and actual social relationships, one third of the women reported other changes related to the self. For example, one woman said: 'I have a better understanding of myself: how I relate to other people, which people I choose to relate to'. Another reported: 'I learned that I am valuable as a friend, that I am important to other people.' This is an example of improved self-esteem following the course.

Various changes that have been described suggest that the programme has succeeded in its goal of empowering older women; these include the development of new friendships that correspond to women's goals, improvement in existing friendships or family relationships, the termination of friendships that are unsatisfactory, changes in women's social behaviour so that it is more effective in friendship, and gains in self-esteem.

Change in loneliness

Considering the extent of the changes in relationships and social behaviour, it is not surprising that there was a significant reduction in average loneliness during the year following the friendship programme, from 7.0 (sd. 3.0) to 4.3 (sd. 3.1; $z = -4.75$, $p < .001$). The percentage of women who were not lonely increased from 12.5 per cent to 35 per cent, while there was a dramatic decrease in the percentage that were very lonely from 45 per cent to 15 per cent.

Three women demonstrated an increase in loneliness (Stevens and Van Tilburg 2000). One was a widow who followed the programme soon after her husband's death; although she had developed new friendships, she said that she was feeling the impact of his loss more strongly one year later. A second widow reported that her friends had withdrawn from contact when her husband developed dementia; she was so disappointed that she made no effort to make new friends. A third woman who was divorced, reported that her new partner interfered with her efforts to make friends.

Examination of items on the loneliness scale reveals that significant improvement was often evident on items related to friendship for the

group as a whole. For example, more women agreed that 'There are enough people I feel close to' and 'I can call on my friends whenever I need them'. Fewer women endorsed 'I find my circle of friends and acquaintances too limited' and 'I miss having a really close friend' at the second measurement. Despite the reduction in loneliness, slightly more than half of the women continued to express loneliness on items such as 'I experience a general sense of emptiness' and 'I miss the pleasure of the company of others'. It is important to note that the average score on the loneliness scale remained within the range of the moderately lonely.

Case studies

Different trajectories are involved in the empowerment of older women, depending on their individual living situations, their social skills and the reservoir of contacts available to them at the outset. The variety of goals that women report, their progress in friendship and in reducing loneliness, are illustrated by three women who participated in the friendship programme.

Maria G., a 75-year-old childless widow, had led a very isolated life for the previous two years before her participation in the programme. Her husband had died two years earlier, shortly after the couple had moved into a new apartment in the centre of town. Maria had no contact with her new neighbours, most of whom were younger, working persons. Maria's arthritis made it difficult for her to walk anywhere or take public transportation. She missed both her husband and her old neighbourhood.

Her initial goals were to overcome her difficulty getting out among people; she took a taxi to the friendship programme and often got a lift home from a member of the group. She enjoyed the programme's weekly meetings and the conversations that she had there with other women. Various exercises, such as drawing her convoy, made her aware of her network of social contacts that had been dormant the last two years. When the programme was finished she decided to renew her contact with various people and she became friends with another woman from the programme. She decided to move again, this time to an apartment complex for older persons that was known to be a friendly place. She organised a team of family members and friends to help her move, and made arrangements for regular help with transportation. A year after the programme had ended, she said she was no longer lonely. In Maria's case a combination of circumstances

had contributed to her isolation. She was socially skilled and had a reservoir of social contacts to fall back on once she decided to become socially active again.

Some women participated in the programme to avoid becoming socially isolated. Dora T., a 64-year-old married woman, described the circumstances that led to her decision to participate as follows:

Three years ago my husband was very ill, so ill that I almost lost him. It made me think about the future. If he was to die, who would I have to fall back on for company? My three children are busy with their jobs and families. We had acquaintances, but they are all couples. It was a real shock to realise how much I relied on my husband for company. When I heard that the friendship programme was being offered there, I was immediately interested.

Dora was so eager to make friends that she called six other participants and arranged to meet them in their homes between sessions of the friendship programme.

I wanted to find out what we had in common, whether we might become friends. I found it fascinating to hear more about other women's lives. I still see three of the women I met in the programme. We take walks together, go swimming, talk about our families. I never knew how important contact with other women is; we understand each other so well. Not only did I make new friends, my relationship with my husband has improved as well; it is more light-hearted. I am about to turn 65 and am much happier than I was when I turned 60.

The moderate loneliness that Dora reported at the end of the programme was completely absent within ten months. The friendship programme provided her with a group of women from which she was able to select new friends.

Not all women, however, made friends as easily as Dora. Some who attended the friendship programme had never developed the social skills that are required for making friends. Edith L. was 58 and recently widowed when her social worker referred her to the friendship programme. She had led a rather secluded life, focused on her husband and her two daughters. After her husband's death, Edith discovered that she had a great need to talk to others about her own experiences. So she began to see a social worker. After several months of individual counselling, Edith agreed to try out the friendship programme, though she had never attended a club or group. Her goals were to meet new people and to be able to talk. At the end of the friendship programme, the group leaders referred her to a support group for older persons at the university. Edith reported:

It was in the friendship programme that I first became interested in the stories of others. Before then I needed to be the one talking most of the time. In the support group I felt happier because you had enough time to tell your own story and the group was smaller. I met a couple of women there who I can visit when I'm in the mood. Occasionally we go shopping together downtown.

Edith also became acquainted with a neighbour, a widow like herself, and they meet daily for coffee and to exchange news. A year after participating in the friendship programme, Edith's loneliness has declined though she remains moderately lonely.

Edith engaged in a series of interventions to reduce her loneliness, including the friendship programme. This had supported her in the development of a new, more social lifestyle by influencing her social behaviour. She learnt to listen better and became interested in others, both of which are important for developing satisfactory friendships. Changing a lifelong pattern involving little social interaction outside the family, requires time and occasionally more support than a single intervention can offer.

Social background, relational change and loneliness

An important question is whether women who differ by marital status or educational level were equally successful in attaining desired relationships and reducing their loneliness. For various subgroups with different backgrounds, Table 1 presents loneliness scores and the percentages achieving relational changes during the year following the programme.

Although widows demonstrated the lowest reduction in loneliness, it was nevertheless significant. The differences in loneliness reduction between the subgroups were not significant although widows were rather successful in developing new friendships, improving friendships and other relationships compared to other subgroups. There was no difference between women with different educational backgrounds as far as reducing loneliness is concerned. Although not significant, more of those with secondary school or a higher level of education reported having new friends and improving friendships, compared to those with less education.

Conclusions and discussion

It is clear that a programme focused on friendship enrichment has been successful in attracting lonely older women. These women were

TABLE 1. Average loneliness at T₁ and T₂, change in loneliness, and percentage women reporting new friends and improved friendship, in subgroups according to marital status and educational level

	N	Loneliness		Change in loneliness	Women with new friends %	Women with improved friendship %
		T ₁	T ₂			
<i>Marital status</i>						
Married	12	6.8	3.2	-3.5**	83	41
Widows	14	6.7	5.1	-1.6*	71	57
Divorced	10	7.4	4.7	-2.7**	70	40
Never-married	4	8.00	3.75	-4.2+	50	50
<i>Educational level</i>						
Elementary or intermediate	15	7.1	4.3	-2.8**	67	40
Secondary or university	25	7.0	4.3	-2.7**	76	52

+ $p < .10$, * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$

motivated by a desire to develop friendships that fulfilled their needs and desires in relationships. If necessary they were willing to change aspects of themselves and to adapt their social behaviour to enhance their friendships or wellbeing. The structured group experience provided them with support and encouragement to strive to reach their goals, opportunities to practice social skills, and to develop strategies to improve or expand relationships. It enabled them to compare their experience with others who were engaged in similar activity. The results illustrate how many of the women succeeded in achieving goals related to friendship, as well as goals related to the self and their social behaviour.

Like the older women in the Swedish intervention study (Andersson 1985), the participants in the friendship enrichment programme had significantly reduced their loneliness a year after the programme. Unlike the Swedish women, the Dutch participants in the friendship programme reported a significant increase in close, confidential friendships within a year, as well as an increase in the variety of friendships available. This is not surprising, since the Dutch programme focused explicitly on these two goals.

The Swedish study is unique in that it meets the scientific criteria for an adequate intervention study: *i.e.* participants are assigned randomly to an intervention or control group. This procedure allows attribution of change to the intervention, when found in the experimental group and not in the control group. However, a procedure in which

participants have no say in their own assignment to an intervention or control condition cannot be used in good conscience when the intervention is based on the principles of empowerment.

The women who participate in the friendship programme are self-selected; those included in this study applied in response to an article in a local newspaper. Thus they were likely to be people who were socially active but lonely, a group that De Jong Gierveld (1984) compares to 'the resigned lonely' and 'the disappointed lonely'. Neither of the latter two groups goes to much effort to reduce their loneliness. Little is known about the 30 per cent who participated in the programme but declined to be included in this study. Because of this self-selection, the likelihood that the programme attracts socially active lonely women, and the lack of a control group, it is not clear how much of the change in their loneliness and social lives was directly influenced by the women's participation in the programme. In an earlier article (Stevens and Van Tilburg 2000), a group of participants were compared to a comparison group of women drawn from a large survey on living arrangements and social networks and matched on characteristics such as age, marital status and initial loneliness. Both groups succeeded in reducing their loneliness significantly. This indicates a tendency to reduce loneliness when it is as high as it was in these two samples. When, however, regression to the mean was taken into account, twice as many participants in the friendship programme reduced their loneliness compared to the matched group that did not participate³.

In this article I have examined whether or not certain subgroups of women, such as those who were more highly educated, or those with a certain marital status (married versus widowed), were more likely to develop the friendships that they desired, or to be more successful in reducing their loneliness. In this sample we did not find any significant differences between subgroups. The fact that widows demonstrated the smallest decrease in loneliness is however noteworthy. A general conclusion is that improvement in friendship does not necessarily compensate for all the social losses that older women experience (*e.g.* losses of the partner and other family members, departure of children from the home). During the year following the programme, the average loneliness score for participants remained within the range of the moderately lonely. Slightly more than half of the women, including a majority of the widows, continued to experience a sense of emptiness and missed pleasurable company on a day-to-day basis. It is perhaps unrealistic to expect that an intervention focused on a single type of relationship, friendship, will be effective in helping older women who

have lost a partner and who have to adapt to living alone, to reduce their loneliness completely. It is important to note that a small group of women did spontaneously report improvements in other relationships, with children and partners, following the friendship programme. Apparently what women learn in the friendship programme can be applied to other relationships besides friendship.

In their work on coping with loneliness, Rokach (1990) and Young (1986) emphasise the importance of learning to spend time in solitude by restructuring beliefs about solitary activities and by enhancing 'solitary skills' as strategies for dealing with loneliness. These skills, though important, are not addressed in the friendship programme. Even if they were, the question remains whether it is possible to reduce loneliness completely through a single intervention.

Perhaps the greatest effect of the friendship programme is in bringing older women together in a way that enables them to share experiences in friendship and other relationships, and to discover what they have in common. The sense of solidarity that results from this experience serves as a powerful contradiction to the isolation many feel in their existential situation of living alone in old age.

It would be interesting to compare the effects of participation in this programme with those of other interventions based on principles of empowerment. Recently, a thematic discussion group for older men was developed and introduced as an intervention to be used in senior service centres in the Netherlands; its main goal is to achieve a sense of solidarity among older men. The approach used in the friendship programme in which goals are formulated by participants, along with strategies for achieving them, should be applied to programmes focused on other areas of interest or challenge to older persons. Caserta *et al.* (1999) have described a similar approach in the Pathfinder programme designed to support widows' and widowers' adjustment to daily life after loss of the partner. New programmes might focus on other areas in which older persons are already engaged in goal-directed activity, such as health promotion, harmonious partnership, emotional stability, maintenance of self-esteem and personal independence. This study has demonstrated the potential of structured programmes to generate significant positive changes that result from a sense of empowerment.

NOTES

- ¹ 'Friends' were used only as a residual category in the network delineations procedure, and are therefore probably under-represented. Neighbours, club members and (former) colleagues who are important and are seen regularly are designated as such, not as friends.

- 2 The manual for the Friendship Enrichment Programme is available from the author.
- 3 A new study that has recently begun will include a baseline measurement and a control group drawn from naturally occurring waiting lists. This design will enable the author to distinguish effects of participation in the programme from other factors that contribute to reduction of loneliness.

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Address for correspondence:

Department of Psychogerontology, University of Nijmegen,
P.O. Box 9104, 6500 HE Nijmegen, the Netherlands.
e-mail: stevens@psych.kun.nl