

Summary

Small gestures

The importance of neighbours for older people in rural villages

Growing older is accompanied by an increase in practical and socio-emotional problems. As more and more frail older people continue living independently for longer, the people around them are becoming more important for their quality of life. This publication looks at the relationship between older people living in rural villages and their neighbours, and at the importance of those neighbours in the extent to which older residents experience day-to-day problems. A key aspect here is the difference between the many resilient older people and the frail older persons who benefit most from friendly and helpful neighbours. The results show that elderly people living in rural villages are becoming more isolated from their neighbours when they age: the number of contacts in the village is declining and older persons are developing a slightly more pessimistic view of social interactions in the village. This applies particularly for frail older persons, for example those with severe physical impairments.

The degree of connection with fellow village residents appears to do little to ameliorate practical day-to-day problems. Those with lots of local contacts do experience fewer problems running the household and maintaining their home and garden, which could indicate that they receive help from their neighbours, but there is no relationship between the number of local contacts and the degree to which older persons experience problems with transport. Connecting with other village residents appears to be more important as a buffer against socio-emotional problems. This applies particularly for loneliness: older people with lots of local contacts and a positive view of social interactions in the village are much less often lonely than their peers with few local contacts and a less positive image of local social interactions. There is moreover an inverse relationship between having a positive view of social interactions in the village and feeling depressed and unsafe. Although frail older persons have relatively few local contacts, they more often receive help from other people in the village. However, the way this help is arranged changes with increasing frailty. As they grow older and more frail, older persons less often ask for help from others and more often receive help because it is offered by neighbours. Mediation also becomes more important, both by the local authority and welfare agencies, as well as by the older person's own network. Policy aimed at promoting the well-being of independent-dwelling older persons will therefore need to take account of the difficult social position of frail older persons, including in the local setting, and will have to find solutions to the impediments that may prevent them receiving help.