



# Stay Connected

## People Involved in Friendships with the Elderly in Nursing Homes

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### Highlights

- Various studies have explained the various kinds of relationships that exist in nursing homes.
- Friendship is one relationship that can be established by the elderly in nursing homes.
- This study intends to provide an overview or general understanding of people who become friends with the elderly and the existing problems or barriers related to friendship in nursing homes.

### Abstract

*Background:* Relationships with friends have an impact on the physical and psychological health of elderly people. Older people living in nursing homes can have a great opportunity to make broader social networks. *Study aims:* This study aims to identify people who are involved and the barriers regarding friendships of the resident of nursing homes. *Method:* The method used in this study is a literature review of existing research on friendship in nursing homes in three scientific article databases including Scopus, ScienceDirect, and Emerald. *Result:* The studies reviewed were conducted in various countries including Australia, Netherlands, Turkey, United Kingdom, and United States. Friendships that exist in nursing homes do not only occur between fellow residents. The elderly who are living in nursing homes also make friends with caregivers, health workers, daily visitors and their old friend. There are several obstacles for the elderly in nursing homes in making friends including limited physical conditions, dementia, trust issues, age and gender gaps, preferences, and an unfriendly environment. *Conclusion:* Seniors in nursing homes can make friends with fellow residents, staff, and old friends. However, there are also many elderlies who find it difficult to have close friends in nursing homes.

Keywords: Elderly; Friendship; Gerontology; Nursing Home; Social Relationship

## **INTRODUCTION**

Data shows that the number of nursing home residents aged 65 and older is increasing yearly (McCain, 2023). Elderly people move into nursing homes for a variety of reasons, such as being abandoned by family, needing special care, or simply wishing to do so. Moving to a nursing home is considered to be one of the most stressful events of later life. Older adults are forced into an unfamiliar environment and are adapting to the transition from productivity to stagnation and the consequent loss of roles or peers. Newly admitted residents have been reported to be at a high risk of depression (Hoover et al., 2010; McSweeney & O'Connor, 2008; Sutcliffe et al., 2007). Many residents viewed the experience primarily as a loss and were unable to create new bonds and meanings. They felt rejected, alienated, or reluctant to connect with their peers. On the other hand, there were also residents who understood their changing situation and tried to fit in with the nursing home. They worked actively to adapt to their new surroundings and establish new lifestyles and identities.

Previous studies have repeatedly found that social relationships are essential to the quality of life of nursing home residents (Bergland & Kirkevold, 2005; Bowers et al., 2001; Cooney et al., 2009; Custers et al., 2012; Tseng & Wang, 2001), life meaning and satisfaction (Bitzan & Kruzich, 1990; Haugan, 2013; Huss et al., 1988; Nussbaum, 1983; Takkinen & Ruoppila, 2001), and psychological well-being (Carpenter, 2002). Research results suggest that social isolation is associated with an increased risk of all-cause mortality, cardiovascular disease, cancer, negative health behaviors, and the common cold (Nicholson, 2012). Residents who participate actively in society have a lower risk of depression, loneliness, or poor physical health (Drageset, 2004). They also have lower mortality, better cognitive function, and better mental health (Kiely & Flacker, 2003; Street, Burge, Quadagno, & Barrett, 2007). Therefore, making friends in a nursing home is considered to be a factor influencing residents' life satisfaction and well-being.

Friendship is a form of interpersonal bond and it is the essence of the human need for belonging (Yavuz Güler & Çakmak, 2019). Several studies have examined the definition of friendships in people aged over 60 years (Patterson et al., 1993; Roberto & Kimboko, 1989). Older adults categorized friends as likable, confidants, and trustable with the clusters: devotion, commonality, reciprocity, relational stratification, frequent contact, positive attributions, positive impact, understanding, and familial comparison. Friendships are very important because they allow older people to feel a sense of trust, personal values, and a willingness to maintain social skills. This indicates that the quality of social relationships formed at this stage is more important than their quantity or frequency (Conner et al., 1979; Ishii-Kuntz, 1990; Lang & Carstensen, 1994; Mancini, 1980; Van Tilburg, 1998; Ward et al., 1984).

Most of the research has focused on the relationships residents develop with staff rather than other residents (Bergland & Kirkevold, 2008; Cook & Brown Wilson, 2010; Heliker & Nguyen, 2010; Hubbard et al., 2003; McGilton & Boscart, 2007; McGilton et al., 2003, 2012; Medvene et al., 2006; Nakrem et al., 2011; Palacios-Ceña et al., 2013; Powers, 1991). Other studies only explain how residents develop relationships with people in nursing homes and identify the dynamics of friendships in old age (Roberts & Bowers, 2015; Güler, Çakmak, & Ayyildiz, 2020). Because of the limited information currently available on who are involved in friendships with nursing home residents and its existing problems, further research is needed. Understanding the people who become friends with the elderly in nursing homes and existing barriers related to friendships in nursing homes appears to be a prerequisite for developing interventions that may improve the quality of life of these people by improving friendships. Therefore, this study aims to explore the people who become friends with the elderly and the

existing problems or barriers related to friendship in nursing homes. This study fills a gap in the literature and the results are expected to be particularly helpful to those working with older adults. Findings can be used to optimize the people involved in building relationships with the elderly, as well as to minimize the risk factors that hinder friendships in nursing homes.

## **METHOD**

This research is a literature review (Snyder, 2019) involving research articles that discuss friendships made by residents of nursing homes. The inclusion criteria used in this study were research results written in English, providing qualitative data, and discussing the friendships that residents forged. Pure quantitative articles, literature reviews, and friendship discussions that do not involve residents will be excluded from this study. The authors use three scientific article databases including Scopus, ScienceDirect, and Emerald.

The search for articles was carried out on April 10, 2023, using (friend OR friendship) AND “nursing home” as search keywords. Several filters are used in each website database to specify search results. All search results are entered in a spreadsheet table to facilitate the title and abstract screening process. After the title and abstract screening are complete, then proceed to the full-text screening stage. At the end of the screening process, snowballing was carried out to check whether there were articles in the references that met the inclusion criteria. Snowballing is looking at the list of references from all the selected articles to find other articles that might fit the inclusion criteria.

The analysis was carried out qualitatively by looking at the suitability of the research data in the article with the aim of the current literature study. Any data that contains information about people who are involved in friendships with nursing home residents will be recorded. Similar treatment was also carried out when finding data related to boundaries or challenges that occur in friendships carried out by residents of nursing homes. Once this information has been collected, the information from the individual articles is combined to form a comprehensive picture that is useful for answering research questions.

## **RESULT**

The search process yielded more than 5,000 articles from three databases including Scopus, ScienceDirect, and Emerald. In the Scopus database, the filters used include the year range of publication, language, document type, and source type. The ScienceDirect database is limited to journals that have been subscribed to, published in the last ten years, and are research articles. Meanwhile, in the Emerald database, several filters used are related to access, publication year range, and content type. After the search filter was applied, the remaining articles were 1299 articles. The process of eliminating articles caused by the application of filters can be seen in Table 1. The articles obtained from the search process in the database along with the use of filters were then reviewed by three reviewers.

The title and abstract screening were carried out by three reviewers and each reviewer carried out the screening process independently. After the screening is completed, articles deemed appropriate by at least two reviewers will be included in the next process, namely full-text screening. The three reviewers read the entire contents of the article to determine whether the article met the inclusion criteria or not. Discussions were held between reviewers when there were differences of opinion in the full-text screening process. After selecting the articles that passed the full-text screening, one of the reviewers conducted a snowballing screening. The entire

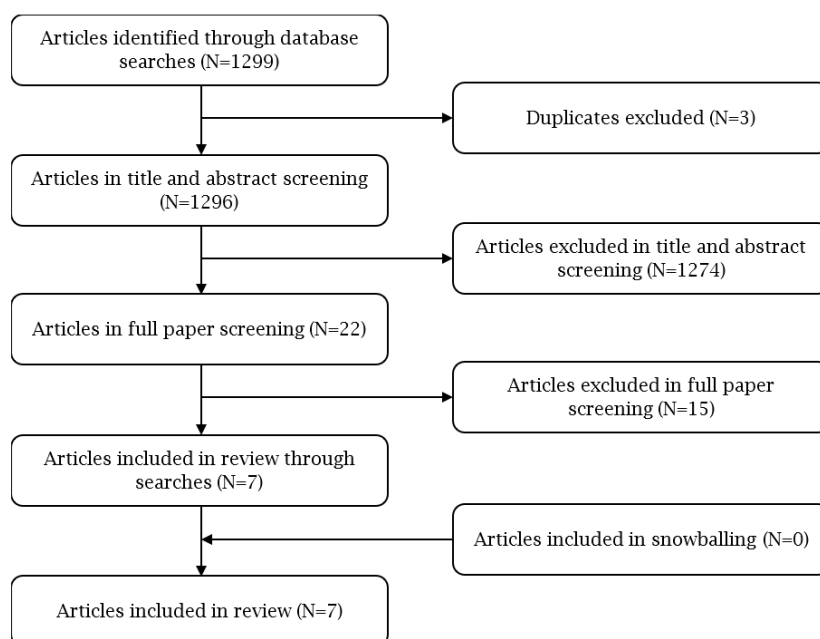
screening process is shown in Figure 1 which has also been supplemented with the number of articles included and excluded at each screening stage.

**Table 1.**

*Filters used in the search process in the database.*

Database	Filter	Articles	Final
Scopus	Without any filter	528	165
	Year range: 2013-2023	235	
	Language: English	226	
	Document type: Article	168	
	Source type: Journal	165	
ScienceDirect	Without any filter	4290	679
	Subscribed journals	2630	
	Years: 2013-2023	869	
	Article type: Research articles	679	
Emerald	Without any filter	Over 1000	455
	Access: Only content I have access to	824	
	Year: 2013-2023	501	
	Content type: Article	455	

There were seven articles that were considered to meet the inclusion criteria based on the screening process that three reviewers had carried out. These seven articles have answers to research questions related to the people involved (Boelsma et al., 2014; Casey et al., 2016; Davison et al., 2019; Jones et al., 2019; Roberts & Bowers, 2015; Thomas et al., 2013; Yavuz Güler et al., 2021) and obstacles or challenges (Boelsma et al., 2014; A. N. S. Casey et al., 2016; Davison et al., 2019; Thomas et al., 2013; Yavuz Güler et al., 2021) in friendship among the elderly in nursing homes. The studies reviewed were conducted in various countries including Australia (A. N. S. Casey et al., 2016; Davison et al., 2019; Thomas et al., 2013), Netherlands (Boelsma et al., 2014), Turkey (Yavuz Güler et al., 2021), United Kingdom (Jones et al., 2019), and United States (Roberts & Bowers, 2015).



**Figure 1.** The flowchart in article screenings

### *People involved in friendships*

Friendship of nursing home residents can be made with fellow residents (Boelsma et al., 2014; Casey et al., 2016; Davison et al., 2019; Roberts & Bowers, 2015; Thomas et al., 2013). Friendships in nursing homes are considered more intertwined with fellow residents when compared to friendships established with nursing home staff (Roberts & Bowers, 2015). The amount of time for activities such as eating together and other routine activities makes residents get to know each other more quickly (Davison et al., 2019).

Friendship with fellow residents can also be established because of the atmosphere of warm social interaction in the nursing home (Thomas et al., 2013). This warm atmosphere includes the habit of greeting each other between resident and the habit of visiting one another. Some residents deliberately open their bedroom doors so that other residents can visit them. Some residents felt very happy when they managed to make friends with other residents because before having friends they felt very lonely (Boelsma et al., 2014).

People who are also involved in friendships with nursing home residents are caregivers or nursing home workers (Casey et al., 2016; Jones et al., 2019; Yavuz Güler et al., 2021). Residents of nursing homes will make friends with caregivers they like (Jones et al., 2019). They will talk more with the caregiver they like. Residents of nursing homes share everything with caregivers and even entrust their future lives to them (Yavuz Güler et al., 2021). Residents feel love and respect for caregivers, both nurses and people who come temporarily to become caregiver interns.

Friendship is also established with health workers who always come to visit nursing homes (Thomas et al., 2013). The health workers in question include doctors, nutritionists, and other health practitioners who frequently visit nursing homes to provide health services for the elderly. Apart from health workers, residents of nursing homes can also be friends with daily visitors (Casey et al., 2016). Daily visitors can be like family or friends of residents who regularly visit every day. Daily visitors eventually not only build relationships with family or friends they visit, but also interact and even make friends with other nursing home residents. This is supported by a good environment in the nursing home, such as gazebo facilities or the like, as well as a friendly culture of communication.

The situation where the elderly live in a nursing home does not automatically make them lose communication with their past friends. Some nursing home residents also still interact with their old friends, even those who live far from the nursing home (Thomas et al., 2013). Friendship with old friends is only made by a few residents of nursing homes. This is due to the remote location and limited modes of transportation that can be used.

### *The barriers to making friends*

Various kinds of conditions owned by the elderly raise challenges or limits for them to make friends. The first problem that becomes a limitation is related to physical limitations (Yavuz Güler et al., 2021). Making friends is considered difficult for the elderly because they have limitations in various activities caused by decreased physical abilities. Apart from the difficulties experienced by the elderly themselves, they assume that other people will be reluctant or afraid to have relationships with the elderly like them (Yavuz Güler et al., 2021).

Decreased ability also occurs cognitively where many elderly people have dementia. Making friends is difficult because communication is impaired, especially in the elderly with dementia (Casey et al., 2016). Some elderly people feel annoyed because they have friends who

have dementia (Davison et al., 2019). Seeing this fact, residents of nursing homes eventually became reluctant to tell their life stories to friends with dementia (Davison et al., 2019).

Age and gender differences are also considered to be a barrier for nursing home residents in building friendships (Casey et al., 2016). This is felt in residents who are in early age of the elderly or around 60 years. They find it difficult to make friends with fellow residents who are much older, say 80 years. Elderly people in nursing homes also feel reluctant to make friends with different genders because they already have partners. There are also those who are reluctant to make friends because they secretly have a crush on one of their friends (Casey et al., 2016).

Friend preferences also make it difficult for some elderly to make friends. They find it difficult or even unable to find friends who are considered suitable (Davison et al., 2019). The compatibility in question is the similarity in interests and personalities. Residents of nursing homes are afraid to make friends because they don't know anyone they can trust (Casey et al., 2016). They are worried that the stories and even the secrets they convey to their friends will actually be used as material for gossip by their friends. This is because sometimes residents talk badly about other residents with other people.

The nursing home environment also has an important role in the process of forming friendships for residents. Physical facilities such as comfortable chairs or gazebos for snuggling can support the formation of friendships (Thomas et al., 2013). Residents will have difficulty interacting with other people if there are no comfortable facilities for them to sit together to communicate. The culture of communication in the nursing home environment also influences their friendship. The elderly in nursing homes have difficulty making friends when the people there tend to be quiet and are not used to greeting each other (Boelsma et al., 2014).

## **DISCUSSION**

This study aims to identify the individuals who form friendships with the elderly and the existing problems related to friendship in nursing homes. The results of the study show that there are five parties who can build friendships with the elderly, namely caregivers, fellow residents, health practitioners, daily visitors, and friends outside the nursing home. Additionally, there are several factors that can hinder the elderly from building friendships in nursing homes, including physical impairment, dementia, age and gender gaps, trust issues, lack of compatible individuals, and an unfriendly environment.

Barriers to social participation that have been reported elsewhere, including illness/disability, loss of contact with friends/relatives, lack of a supportive community, and lack of acceptable social opportunities (Goll, Charlesworth, Scior, & Stott, 2015). Consistent with that finding, this study shows that physical impairment, including dementia, and an unfriendly environment are identified as factors that hinder the elderly from building friendships. The finding that physical impairment is a barrier for the elderly to build friendships is also consistent with the results of a study by Yang and Grol-Prokopczyk (2021) which showed that new-onset severe pain (physical impairment) predicted a decrease in the number of friends.

Good relationships with friends are essential for the joy of life in the elderly living in nursing homes (Rinnan, et al., 2018). Friendship is associated with fewer depressive symptoms and is a protective factor that can prevent young and older elderly individuals from social isolation (Han, Kim, & Burr, 2019; Sheng & Wu, 2020). This indicates the importance of facilitating the elderly living in nursing homes to build friendships with the five parties mentioned above, especially to reduce social isolation, decrease depressive symptoms, and increase happiness. However, this study does not provide a specific picture of which parties have significant

relationships or impacts in building friendships. Therefore, further research is needed to explore this issue so that nursing home managers can involve significant parties more intensively in building friendships with the elderly.

## CONCLUSION

Friendship is important for the elderly in nursing homes so that they have friends to talk to and don't feel lonely. Friendships can be made between nursing home residents and fellow residents, caregivers, health workers, daily visitors, and old friends. There are several obstacles for the elderly in nursing homes in making friends. These obstacles include limited physical conditions, dementia, trust issues, age and gender gaps, preferences, and an unfriendly environment.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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