A GPA/GPV/KCV Occasional Paper

LONELINESS

Loneliness is a growing social problem which is not talked about enough in our society.

One of the problems facing sufferers is that the term 'loneliness' is so normalised in its use to describe 'the feeling of not being with other people' that it is taken less seriously as a mental health issue. Further, it is often confused with 'social isolation' or 'solitude', which can be an enjoyable state for some people.

Another issue, and one that is perhaps part of the underlying reason why loneliness is not much talked about, is that true, chronic loneliness does not have an easy fix, or a one-size fits all solution.

There are key differences between 'loneliness' as a subjective mental health/emotional issue and 'solitude'. The solution for combating loneliness is often not merely a matter, as some community organisations would have you believe, of providing opportunities for social interaction. Everyone knows that it is possible to be surrounded by other people but still feel lonely.

'Loneliness' is the disconnect between the quality and quantity of your actual social interactions and what you would wish them to be.

A person may be spending plenty of time in the company of others, but the interactions can still be unsatisfying if there is not a feeling of connection, or if there is a specific person they are really wanting to see who is not present.

On the other hand, 'solitude' can have a positive effect on individuals, allowing those with a low tolerance for crowds to recharge their batteries. Studies also suggest that periods of solitude are associated with higher levels of concentration, heightened creativity, and personal growth through identity building. Many people reported an increase in positive feelings once a period of solitude has come to an end.

There are different types of loneliness. 'Transient' or situational loneliness is usually easily remedied by engaging in social interaction. It is most felt after long periods of solitude, or on specific occasions such as the birthday of a departed loved one.

Chronic loneliness is a serious mental health issue, which is not alleviated by a simple social interaction. It is a situation in which a person feels lonely most, if not all the time. In some cases, this becomes a self-perpetuating cycle, where the state of loneliness itself may even make it difficult for sufferers to seek out social situations.

The number of people experiencing 'chronic' loneliness is increasing.

Risk factors

There are several factors that influence loneliness. These may include environmental, economic, or psychological factors.

Feelings of loneliness can be triggered by any major life-event that involves upheavals to a person's usual social circle, such as marriage, the birth of a child, moving to a new city, or starting a new job.

Loss of contact with a significant person in one's life, such as the death of a partner or family member is also associated with feelings of loneliness.

Groups of people likely to be affected by chronic loneliness include retirees, long-term unemployed, those in low socio-economic circumstances, those who take responsibility for caring for members of their family, and recent migrants. One common factor to all of these is that they face barriers to what would be considered 'normal' social interaction within their local community.

Studies have found that young adults (18-29), and older adults (65-79), report the highest rates of loneliness. The figures among older adults are not unexpected, as social isolation often develops due to factors such as people leaving the workforce, experiencing decreasing mobility, and no longer driving.

The figures for adults at the other end of the age spectrum are more surprising, because younger people are thought to be more socially connected due to their involvement in education and/or work.

According to research conducted by Dr Michelle Lim, *"Adolescents and young adults are more reliant than ever on their social networks for support; consequently, experiencing a disruption in a small segment of their friendships, for example, can have a profound impact."* [1]

A study released by the University of California, San Diego in December 2018 suggested that for some people in this younger age group, "the late 20s is often a period of major decision-making, which is often stressful because you often end up feeling that your peers made better decisions than you did, and there's a lot of guilt about why you did this or did that…It's a period of stress, which increases loneliness."

Social Media

It is possible that the rise in social media use has also been a factor in the increasing incidence of loneliness.

"The increasing reliance on digital technology to communicate with others is one societal trend that is hard to ignore. Many are quick to blame the rise of technology and assume that it compromises face-to-face interaction. More recently, the term 'Lonely Paradox' has been used to describe how loneliness can persist even though we are more digitally connected than ever."

Social media comes with both positives and negatives when it comes to loneliness. On the positive side, social media provides an inexpensive way for people to keep in touch with friends and family all over the world.

On the negative side, people's social media profiles are often carefully tailored to show only the best aspects of their life, which can lead outsiders looking in to make negative comparisons with their own life. People might, for example, see images of social gatherings that they did not attend, deepening their own sense of loneliness.

Long term effects of loneliness

Studies into the ongoing effects of chronic loneliness have found that apart from contributing to further mental illness such as depression and anxiety, loneliness also impacts physical health, and is associated with a range of illnesses including dementia, heart disease, type II diabetes, and high blood pressure.

Loneliness often leads to interrupted sleep patterns and, consequently, lessened ability to function in everyday life. Interrupted sleep patterns have also been associated with lowered immunity, and greater incidences of pain, depression, and fatigue.

A study of HIV positive men found that loneliness increases the rate of progression of the disease, and another study has shown that loneliness may decrease the effectiveness of vaccines. The numbers of deaths linked to loneliness are similar to those linked to smoking, and are twice as high as obesity-related deaths.

[1] All quotes in italics come from the paper: *Is loneliness Australia's next public health epidemic?* by Dr Michelle Lim

A self-perpetuating cycle

"While the unpleasant nature of loneliness may motivate a 'lonely' individual to make attempts to connect with others, they are also more likely to be hypervigilant to social threats. This hypervigilance predisposes the lonely individual to seek and find evidence that people around them do not want to connect, or are less trustworthy."

In other words, lonely individuals tend to shy away from attempting to interact with people unless they are sure that they will be accepted. This is a problem that cannot be solved simply by offering opportunities for social interaction, as some support services do.

The root cause of loneliness often stems from social anxiety and a sense of rejection rather than merely an inability to attend social gatherings.

"Furthermore, 'lonely' individuals show fewer prosocial behaviours towards others to protect themselves from social rejection. This in turn increases the risk of being rejected by others, making them an active participant in a self-perpetuating cycle of loneliness. Hence, simply inviting a 'lonely' individual to join a group or interact with others provides either minimal or transient relief from loneliness, particularly once this has become a chronic experience or cycle."

A 2009 study found that loneliness can also spread throughout social networks. This research found that a lonely person is more likely to have friends who are lonely, and they in turn are also more likely to have friends who are lonely.

Taking steps to overcome loneliness

The solution to loneliness rarely consists of simply offering additional opportunities for social interaction, as for many lonely individuals the root cause of their loneliness is often linked to deeper causes such as social anxiety. Campaign to End Loneliness recommends the following steps to take if you are experiencing loneliness:

- **Think about yourself** - What is it that you think you need to do to ease your loneliness? For example, if you are missing spending quality time with family and friends consider reaching out to them and inviting them to visit.

- **Look after yourself** – Take small steps such as eating well and doing some gentle exercise, which may help you to feel more comfortable with your own company.

- **Think about your community** – If you are feeling up to it, consider finding a community activity you can attend. Look for events where you might find people who share your interests.

- **Speak to a health worker** – If your loneliness is not eased by social interactions, consider speaking to a doctor about what services and supports might be available for you.

- **Share your skills and time with others** – Volunteering is a good way to keep mentally and physically active, and you will meet new people too.

Reach Out suggests taking similar steps, but with a greater focus on taking it slow and not stepping too far out of your comfort zone before you are ready. Another suggestion made by Reach Out is to take advantage of the companionship of animals, such as a dog or cat, which may provide some relief to those for whom the thought of spending time with other people is too overwhelming.

Future directions

Experts agree that more research is needed on the impacts of loneliness on society, and strategies that can help to ease the problem.

To begin with, *"[t]here is ongoing debate about the use of the term 'loneliness' and whether the word is negative enough to demand action within a public health campaign. Some argue that using the word itself will reduce the stigma of feeling lonely, while others advocate that positively-worded terms can prompt more proactive discussions amongst 'lonely' individuals and their community. This is because many 'lonely' individuals do not necessarily perceive*

themselves as 'lonely', though they may verbalise distress, dissatisfaction, and worry about their interpersonal relationships and functioning."

Another avenue of research has been raised by the University of California study, which found that, "An inverse relationship exists between loneliness and wisdom." Dr. Dilip Jeste, who was the senior author of the study, says: "In other words, people who have high levels of wisdom didn't feel lonely, and vice versa." Further research is required to discover exactly what aspects of 'wisdom' may be factors in preventing loneliness.

Practical measures that can be taken to decrease loneliness from a clinical point of view include developing a framework *"designed to increase the meaningfulness of existing relationships, promote positive emotions, and focus on thriving during times of adversity."*

It is important that governments take the issue of loneliness as a public health matter more seriously. *"The United Kingdom is currently leading the way in highlighting loneliness as a key public health priority, with the British Government appointing a loneliness minister in early 2018. A minister to address loneliness is justifiable as the portfolio is likely to span across different areas, from health, community, social, to the workplace.*

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See Further References and Friendly Tipsheets on the following pages.

Further References

Why do I feel so alone even though I'm surrounded by people BBC 8/01/26

Read Here

How can I tell if I'm lonely – what are some of the signs
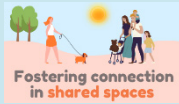
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We created health guidelines for loneliness

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