**Loneliness & it’s effects on College Students**

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Abstract

Loneliness is a universal human emotion that is both complex and unique to each individual. It has no single common cause and almost everyone experiences this. However, adolescents and young adults are affected the most. Loneliness is a widespread and significant problem on college campuses. Prolonged loneliness in young adulthood is a risk factor for concurrent and future mental health problems and attrition, making college a critical time for support. Cognitive and behavioral interventions show promise for decreasing loneliness and can be widely disseminated through technology.

Keywords: loneliness, complex, unique, feelings

What is Loneliness?

 Loneliness is commonly defined as a distressing feeling that accompanies the perception that one's social needs are not being met by the quantity or especially the quality of one's social relationships. Common definitions of loneliness describe it as a state of solitude or being alone, however, loneliness is a state of mind. Loneliness causes people to feel empty, alone, and unwanted. People who are lonely often crave human contact, but their state of mind makes it more difficult to form connections with other people.

Mental and physical health are interconnected. Social isolation and loneliness's adverse health consequences range from sleeplessness to reduced immune function. Loneliness is associated with higher anxiety, depression, and suicide rates. Isolation and loneliness are also linked to poor cardiovascular health and cognitive function. Loneliness has a wide range of negative effects on both physical and mental health, including:

* Alcohol and drug misuse
* Altered brain function
* Alzheimer's disease progression
* Antisocial behavior
* Cardiovascular disease and stroke5
* Decreased memory and learning
* Depression and suicide
* Increased stress levels
* Poor decision-making

(*Loneliness: Causes and Health Consequences*, 2022)

College students who are lonely often describe themselves as shy and/or depressed, empty, hopeless, restless, alienated, anxious, and unloved. This includes negative evaluations of their own bodies, sexuality, health, appearance, behavior, and functioning. (Ponzetti, 1990) They are also more introverted and feel their lives are directed by forces outside their control. Overall, they are less talkative or talk more about themselves, ask fewer questions of their partners, make fewer partner references during the discussions, and change the topic under discussion more. Lonely students are also less effective nonverbal. (Ponzetti, 1990)

* In a 2017 survey of nearly 48,000 college students, 64% said they had felt “very lonely” in the previous 12 months, while only 19% reported they never felt lonely, according to the American College Health Association. Students also reported feeling “overwhelming anxiety (62%) or “very sad” (69%), and that “things were hopeless” (53%). Nearly 12% seriously considered suicide. (*Campus Loneliness Fact Sheet*, 2020)

Researchers suggest that loneliness is associated with social isolation, poor social skills, introversion, and depression. Loneliness, according to many experts, is not necessarily about being alone. Instead, if you feel alone and isolated, then that is how loneliness plays into your state of mind. For example, a college freshman might feel lonely despite being surrounded by roommates and other peers. A soldier beginning their military career might feel lonely after being deployed to a foreign country, despite being constantly surrounded by other troop members.

Method

It is important to measure loneliness because, although it has been found to be associated with a range of poor health outcomes, we have more data on loneliness in older people, but much less for other age groups. We also need to understand more about what factors are most associated with loneliness; what the effects of loneliness are for different people, and how can we prevent or lessen it. Many different approaches have been used to measure loneliness. These include both loneliness multi-item scales and single-item measures. Some measures ask about loneliness directly while others ask about emotions associated with loneliness from which loneliness is then inferred. There are advantages and disadvantages associated with each.

The method I used to determine the loneliness of my fellow peers was the recommended four questions to capture different aspects of loneliness. The first three questions are from the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) three-item loneliness scale. The wording of the UCLA questions and response options are taken from the English Longitudinal Study of Ageing, and the last is a direct question about how often the respondent feels lonely, currently used on the Community Life Survey. (*Table* 1) The scores of each induvial can be added together to give you a possible range of scores from 3 to 9. Researchers in the past have grouped people who score 3-5 as “not lonely” and people with the score 6-9 as “lonely”. With “Hardly ever” having a score of 1, “Some of the time” having a score of 2, and “Often” having a score of 3. (*Table* 1)(*Table 2)*

Results

Out of a sample size of 70 responses, 33 or 47% of the sample students scored to have either experience or currently be lonely.

33 / 70 = 0.4714

0.4714\*100 = 47.14%

While conducting the UCLA three-item loneliness scale some weaknesses of the test were shown. The test only uses negative wording, it doesn’t use a mix of positive and negative wording which could lead to a ‘response set’ – where participants give the same answer without really thinking about what they’re being asked. Additionally, the results could be distorted. The result of the three-item scale across a population are sometimes turned into an average, which could prove unreliable as the scale does not quantify loneliness but simply gives it a numerical category.

Conclusion

Feeling connected to others is important for our mental and physical wellbeing and can protect against anxiety and depression. If you feel alone or socially isolated for a long time, you might experience physical or mental problems or do things that are bad for you. Without adequate treatment or outreach, young adults experiencing a mental health issue are more likely to receive lower grade point average, drop out of college, or be unemployed than their peers without a mental health challenge.

Without being able to know everyone’s unique situation, it’s important to encourage and promote and healthy connected environment for students to prosper and succeed.

Discussion

Loneliness can have a serious effect on your health, so it is important to be able to recognize signs that you are feeling lonely. It is also important to remember that being alone isn't the same as being lonely.

If loneliness is affecting your well-being, there are things that you can do that can help you form new connections and find the social support that you need. Work on forming new connections and spend some time talking to people in your life. If you're still struggling, consider therapy. Whatever you choose to do, just remember that there are people who can help.

My proposal to combat loneliness is a campus wide app that would allow students submit their thoughts and feelings anonymously and respond to each other anonymously. Additionally, the app would double as a space for students to easily post an event they may plan or want to host, and other students would be able to see.

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Tables

Table 1

