

Loneliness among University Students as a Growing Concern

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Abstract

In this article, we delve into a theoretical perspective on the prevalence of loneliness among university students. Despite previous research exploring various aspects of loneliness, there has been a general neglect in examining the effectiveness of various therapies specifically for university students. The paper begins by defining loneliness, exploring its types and causes, and highlighting its effects on university students. It then offers suggestions for alleviating loneliness through various strategies. A secondary objective is to emphasize the importance of universities providing support by organizing various social activities to unite students and encourage further research into effective methods of combating loneliness. The paper will review existing research to identify the causes of loneliness among university students, assess its impact on their lives, and suggest potential strategies to address it.

Keywords: Social activity, Loneliness, University Students, Strategies

Introduction

Humans are indeed social animals, evolved to live in groups and communities. Throughout history, humans have relied on social interaction to survive and thrive. Social connections provide emotional support, help us meet our basic needs, and allow us to learn and grow as individuals. The COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent lockdowns have highlighted the importance of social connections in our lives. The lockdowns have forced many people to isolate themselves from others, which can be difficult and lonely. It has been a challenging time for many and has emphasized the importance of face-to-face conversation and human contact in our daily lives. While being alone can sometimes be beneficial for personal growth and self-reflection, prolonged isolation can have negative effects on mental and physical health.

According to the American Psychological Association (APA, 2020), loneliness is "a subjective feeling of social isolation or being alone despite being surrounded by other people. Loneliness is 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 (Hawkley & Cacioppo, 2010c; Pincus & Sorensen, 2001). It is a complex emotion with many different components that have been studied for hundreds of years. It is a subjective feeling of social isolation or being cut off from other people (Cacioppo et al., 2010). It's important to understand that loneliness is not the same as being physically alone, as people can experience loneliness even when in the company of others (Perlman & Peplau, 1981). Loneliness is a

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multidimensional phenomenon. There are three components to the concept of loneliness (de Jong-Gierveld, 1989). The first component is centered on the emotions felt due to the lack of intimate attachment, resulting in feelings of emptiness or abandonment. This component is commonly referred to as the "deprivation" component and forms the core of the concept. The second component deals with the individual's time perspective, where they interpret their loneliness situation as either hopeless, changeable, or treatable. In addition, they may blame themselves or others for their situation. The third component includes various emotional aspects such as grief, sadness, shame, guilt, frustration, and despair (Beebe, 2000). Loneliness is associated with a number of health problems, including an increased risk of heart disease, depression, and premature death (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2010). Research has also shown that loneliness is a risk factor for poor mental and physical health (Cacioppo et al., 2010). Although loneliness is not healthy, it is a normal and universal feeling that everyone experiences at some point in their lives (Perlman & Peplau, 1981). It may not be a problem in and of itself, but it could be a sign that something is wrong with a person's social connections or support network (Cacioppo et al., 2010).

The complexity of life and the competitive environment have caused people to become absorbed in their work, leading to isolation. Starting university can pose significant emotional challenges for students, as they often have to leave behind their hometown, family, and friends (Yung et al., 2023). This shift can be challenging, as it requires them to balance maintaining their hometown connections while forging new friendships in their university environment. Before forming new bonds, the physical distance from long-standing relationships can leave university students vulnerable to loneliness. Changing one's environment, social connections, and expectations can result in notably elevated levels of loneliness, and these challenges are particularly prominent among university students. Similarly, university students in academia face constant pressure and competition, which has led to a kind of isolation. The rigorous and result-oriented university environment has turned them into input-output machines as a result, loneliness has become a common problem among university students (Holzer et al., 2023).

According to a study by the American College Health Association in 2020, 30.8% of college students reported feeling "very lonely" within the past year (Buelens et al., 2020). Additionally, another study found that lonely university students tend to have lower grade point averages and are more likely to engage in unhealthy behaviors, such as substance abuse (Böke et al., 2019), internet-related addiction – such as problematic smartphone use (Hu et al., 2023).

Loneliness is a fundamental issue that affects students' mental health and academic performance. University life is associated with high levels of stress, which increases the risk of depression and anxiety. Loneliness among university students can be attributed to several factors, including social isolation, academic workload, cultural differences, and personal experiences. Although some loneliness is normal in university life, prolonged loneliness can have detrimental effects. Numerous research studies have established a connection between loneliness and a variety of psychological issues, including depression, psychological stress, and anxiety (Campagne, 2019; Matthews et al., 2019; Mushtaq, 2014; Richard et al., 2017), as well as sleep disturbances (Griffin et al., 2020). Moreover, loneliness has been linked to cardiovascular problems (Petitte et al., 2015), as well as overall morbidity and mortality (Schinka et al., 2012; Yanguas et al., 2018). For example, in the case of university students, loneliness has been positively correlated with feelings of depression and anxiety (Jaud et al., 2023), excessive media consumption (Aalbers et al., 2019), difficulties in initiating and maintaining sleep (Hayley et al., 2017), and an

increased risk of academic underachievement (Stadtfeld et al., 2019). Consequently, loneliness is recognized as a significant risk factor for a range of adverse health outcomes and can contribute to poor overall health conditions (Tzouvara et al., 2015).

Overall, addressing loneliness among university students is essential to promoting their mental health and well-being. Further research is needed to identify the factors that contribute to loneliness and to develop effective interventions to prevent and treat loneliness among university students.

Types of Loneliness among University Students

During the academic phase of university, there are several types of loneliness that university students may experience. The most common types of loneliness among university students are social, emotional, and self-perceived loneliness (Wingsiong et al., 2016). Social loneliness refers to a lack of close relationships or a feeling of being left out by one's peers. This type of loneliness may be prevalent among first-year college students. The transition from high school to university is a significant one, involving both structural and social changes, and this transition has a significant impact on relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles (Wheaton, 1990). Such significant changes can be challenging and can result in loneliness. The second type of loneliness is emotional loneliness, which refers to a lack of emotional intimacy in relationships. This type of loneliness can happen to students who feel that their relationships aren't deep enough or who can't tell others how they feel. Both social and emotional loneliness can be detrimental to a student's well-being, leading to insecurity, isolation, and depression. Students need to be aware of the signs of social and emotional loneliness. The third type of loneliness is self-perceived loneliness, which refers to an individual's perception of his or her loneliness. This type of loneliness may be experienced by students who believe they are lonelier than their peers, even if they have a robust social support network. This experience of loneliness can occur even when a student is surrounded by other students and is actively engaged in conversations with peers. This type of loneliness can be detrimental to a student's mental and physical health, leaving them feeling isolated and disconnected. The feeling of self-perceived loneliness can lead to increased stress, anxiety, and depression. It is important for students to be aware of these different types of loneliness and to seek support if they are experiencing any of them.

In addition to the traditional forms of loneliness, a new form has emerged in the technological age. The younger generation is heavily immersed in social media and has adopted it as a means of socialization. Although many students are active on these platforms and may have established a network of friends and followers, the majority of these relationships exist only in the virtual world. In times of crisis or when there is a strong need for face-to-face interaction, these students may feel completely alone and abandoned in the real world. This modern form of loneliness can be called technological or virtual loneliness.

Causes of Loneliness among University Students

Loneliness among university students can be caused by a number of factors. One possible cause is the transition from school to university life or the transition to a new environment. Students may feel isolated in a new city, country or campus where they need a strong social support network. The change in environment may require rapid adjustment challenges that require assimilation and adaptation to survive in the new environment. These challenges can be devastating, especially if someone lacks immediate social support. This may be particularly true for international students, who may have left

friends and family behind to pursue higher education (Du & Wei, 2015). The unfamiliar environment can leave them feeling completely alone.

Another cause of loneliness among university students is the difficulty of making friends. Some students struggle to find others with similar interests, or are reluctant to put themselves out there and make new connections (Park et al., 2016). This can be particularly true for students who are shy, introverted or have social anxiety. Because of their personality traits, they are unable to socialize and feel left out.

In addition, the demands of university courses and the pressure to do well academically can make students feel lonely. Students may feel overwhelmed by their workload and not have the time or energy to invest in social activities or relationships (Hawkley & Cacioppo, 2010b). It is worth noting that loneliness is a subjective experience and what is lonely for one person may not be the same for another. Some students may thrive in a more independent environment and may not feel lonely even if they do not have a large group of friends. In other cases, a person may feel lonely even if they have a large social circle.

Unhealthy romantic relationships among students can also lead to loneliness. When romantic relationships between university students end, the students involved may experience feelings of loneliness. This is because during the romantic relationship, each partner may have ignored other social relationships and focused only on the romantic relationship. As a result, many social relationships fade over time and a person may feel lonely once the romantic relationship is over.

A lack of social activities or fun games that bring students together can also contribute to loneliness. Some universities need to organize activities that provide opportunities for students to socialize. Campus activities focus more on academics and students may avoid such activities. This lack of social activities and fun games can leave many students feeling isolated, leading to loneliness. This feeling of loneliness can be overwhelming, making it difficult for students to perform academically and maintain mental health.

Impact of Loneliness on University Student's Overall Health

Loneliness generally has a negative impact on one's physical and mental health, raising their risk of morbidity and mortality (Hawkley & Cacioppo, 2010b). Numerous studies have been conducted on the effects of loneliness on cardiovascular health, and its effects are well known (Henriksen et al., 2019). According to a meta-analysis of longitudinal data on 35,925 individuals, weak social ties are associated with a 29% rise in incident coronary heart disease and a 32% increase in stroke (Henriksen et al., 2019). In addition to these neuroendocrine issues, loneliness can also compromise one's immune system (Uchino et al., 2016) and loneliness can cause serious health issues, including death, by interfering with normal blood pressure, sleep cycles, and cortisol levels (Uchino et al., 2016). Numerous negative mental health outcomes, such as depression, suicidality, a lower level of happiness, poor sleep, and worsening general physical health have been linked to loneliness (Cacioppo et al., 2006).

Similarly, loneliness among university students can be detrimental in a number of ways. According to research by (McIntyre et al., 2018), loneliness is a significant factor in determining students' wellbeing and mental distress. A growing proportion of university students report feeling lonely, despite

university often being promoted as a time of increased social connectedness where students meet lifelong friends or romantic partners (Diehl et al., 2018).

In order to make up for the absence of offline contacts, lonely students are more likely to become addicted to their smartphones (Enez Darcin et al., 2016). There is a strong correlation between loneliness and smartphone addiction and its rising use, according to numerous other research (Banskota et al., 2020; Enez Darcin et al., 2016; Mahapatra, 2019). People who are lonely are compelled to use a smartphone to form relationships and satisfy their sense of belonging (Fumagalli et al., 2021) lonely people feel neglected and are drawn to repetitive behavior as a means of mood enhancement; as the repetitive behavior becomes stronger and more frequent, the psychological dependence on the repetitive behavior increases. Students who experience loneliness try to cope with the bothersome feeling of loneliness by using smartphones excessively (Enez Darcin et al., 2016).

One of the psychosocial problems that contribute to academic laziness is loneliness. The psychosocial syndemic theory, which claims that having several psychosocial problems can enhance academic procrastination, may help to explain this academic failure (Shi et al., 2019). An earlier investigation found a moderately significant beneficial connection between academic procrastination and loneliness. A higher level of loneliness is associated with higher academic procrastination (Khairul Anam & Hitipeuw, 2022).

Unsurprisingly, Not surprisingly, there is a strong association between loneliness and depression, as supported by various studies (Heikkinen & Kauppinen, 2004; Jaremka et al., 2013; Victor & Yang, 2012). Longitudinal data indicate that loneliness serves as a distinct risk factor in the development of depressive symptoms and an escalation in alcohol consumption (Cacioppo et al., 2006; Qualter et al., 2010; Stickley et al., 2014). Drawing parallels between loneliness and insecure attachment reveals a potential mechanism: individuals with insecure attachment styles may face an elevated susceptibility to depressive symptoms and problematic drinking due to their heightened sense of loneliness.

University students frequently experience loneliness, which frequently results in mental illness (DiTommaso et al., 2003a). According to (Hawkey & Cacioppo, 2010a) and (Victor & Yang, 2012), loneliness is most prevalent throughout adolescence and early adulthood, a population that includes the majority of university students. In addition, university students experience a new social milieu and pressure to build new relationships regardless of their demographic traits (Mauder et al., 2013). While this period of transition generally encourages loneliness, insecurely attached people may be more susceptible to its effects (DiTommaso et al., 2003b; Wiseman et al., 2006).

Diet and physical activity are two crucial components of university health that are connected to loneliness. Unhealthy eating patterns and lack of exercise are the main causes of overweight and obesity. Citation8 Loneliness is a strong predictor of unhealthy weight and physical inactivity, according to numerous cross-sectional and longitudinal research (DiTommaso et al., 2003b, 2003a; Hawkey et al., 2009; Wiseman et al., 2006). According to research by (Lauder et al., 2006), social isolation and physical activity levels are oppositely correlated. Lonely students also reported having less confidence in their ability to engage in physical activity. Food preferences and eating habits may be affected by loneliness. According to (Masheb & Grilo, 2006), loneliness has been identified as one of the causes of excessive food consumption in overweight people with psychopathological symptoms like eating disorders.

There isn't enough research to support addressing loneliness as a way to enhance college students' health, despite the correlation between loneliness and physical inactivity among college students found in earlier studies. So, in order to possibly clarify any connections between loneliness and a higher bodyweight among young adult college students, we sought to investigate the relationship between loneliness and dietary behaviors. The negative impact of loneliness on both academic and social adjustment in a new environment has been well documented (Wohn & LaRose, 2014). In addition, it has been suggested as a significant contributor to university dropout rates (Ali & Gregg Kohun, 2007; Shao et al., 2010).

Loneliness is associated with more health problems (Hayley et al., 2017). It can pose serious challenges for university students, including mental health problems, academic difficulties and social isolation. Loneliness has been found to be a significant predictor of poor mental health in university students, increasing the risk of depression, anxiety and other mental health problems (Holmes et al., 2020; Lim et al., 2020). Academic performance is also affected, as higher levels of loneliness are associated with lower grades and an increased likelihood of dropping out (Milic et al., 2021). In addition, loneliness can disrupt social relationships and lead to isolation, resulting in feelings of not belonging and difficulty connecting with others (Rokach, 2014).

Theoretical Perspectives of Loneliness

There are numerous theories regarding loneliness in adulthood, but the study will focus only on some of the most prominent ones that are related to the adulthood. One of these theories on loneliness in adulthood suggest that loneliness in adulthood can be influenced by various factors, such as social isolation, a lack of meaningful relationships, and life transitions (Freak-Poli et al., 2022; of Sciences Engineering et al., 2020). These theories propose that loneliness in adulthood may stem from a combination of individual characteristics, such as attachment styles and self-esteem, as well as societal factors like changing social norms and technological advancements. Additionally, research has shown that loneliness in adulthood can also be influenced by cultural factors, such as collectivist versus individualistic societies; individuals in collectivist cultures may experience less loneliness due to stronger social support networks and a greater emphasis on community cohesion (Qualter et al., 2010). Some psychologists argue that loneliness in adulthood can also be attributed to a decline in social support networks, such as the loss of close friends or family members (Freak-Poli et al., 2022). Last, but not least, certain psychological theories suggest that unresolved past traumas or unresolved conflicts within relationships could contribute to feelings of loneliness in adulthood.

Key Strategies to combat mental health issues regarding Loneliness among university students

Cognitive-Related Strategy

An individual's social cognitions are often cited as a component that contributes to loneliness. As briefly indicated above, lonely students are substantially more likely to experience unfavorable self-perceptions, including feelings of inadequacy, unattractiveness, or even worthlessness, as well as feeling less socially adept than others (Heinrich & Gullone, 2006). In a similar vein, they are more inclined to see other people and the world as negative and to consider others as less trustworthy and accepting, which makes them more likely to anticipate and worry about unfavorable evaluations or ideas that others may have about them. Due to loneliness, students may be more driven to interact with others in order to minimize their feelings of isolation; nevertheless, they may also experience a hypervigilance of social

danger, which further influences their unfavorable views of the world and attitudes toward others. Consequently, these prejudices affect their day-to-day interactions, which may result in more unfavorable exchanges, resulting in not only increased feelings of loneliness and isolation, but also the confirmation of their negative opinions about themselves and others. As a consequence, the individual may wind up rejecting the people closest to them those most needed to ease their feelings of social isolation resulting in a vicious circle of escalating loneliness. In addition, students with this condition often assume they are powerless and unable to alter their circumstances, mistaking psychological attributes (e.g., shyness or poor social skills) for more adjustable situations and features. As a consequence of this negative, vicious loop, research has focused on educating students about the negative and unrealistic ideas that may be contributing to their present circumstances (TSAI & REIS, 2009). It is likely that by minimizing such negative ideas and prejudices, feelings of loneliness might be diminished. Such approaches have historically been quite successful. In their meta-analysis on the effectiveness of therapies for loneliness, (Masi et al., 2011) found that interventions that target such maladaptive social cognitions were the most successful in reducing loneliness levels among participants. Earlier research addressing cognitive-related therapies, for instance, has helped undergraduate students reframe their views so that, instead of negative thinking, they emphasize the positives or more helpful results of loneliness. However, such efforts to reframe were ineffective, but the researchers highlighted that it might be due to methodological problems and individual variations, recommending that more study is required. Others have examined the efficiency of several specialized methods for treating loneliness that aim to impact the cognitive-behavioral elements of the disorder (McWhirter & Horan, 1996). Interventions that focused on changing social attributions were significantly more effective than interventions that focused solely on intimate relationships in reducing loneliness. Other studies have examined behaviors such as rumination and loneliness and found that the lonelier a person is, the more likely they are to brood over their circumstances (Zawadzki et al., 2013). Through these processes, a lonely student may perceive an event as negative and continue to ruminate and think about it for extended periods of time, thereby transforming it into a more chronic and ongoing experience of stress and decreasing their propensity to reach out and work to resolve their feelings of isolation. Furthermore, it is possible that such maladaptive cognitions, which are common among lonely students, are specifically directed towards a particular person or event, as students who rated their characters as lonely engaged in behavioral changes only toward those who excluded them when playing a virtual environment game (Luhmann et al., 2014). It is possible that lonely students view specific individuals, such as their friends, as partially responsible for their feelings of loneliness because their needs are not being met. As a result, they may be more dissatisfied with their current relationships than with those with whom they do not have established relationships, such as strangers or acquaintances.

Activities-Oriented Strategy

There are strategies that students can use to combat loneliness and build a sense of community on campus. Get involved in extracurricular activities: Joining clubs, teams, or organizations can be a great way for students to meet new people who share similar interests. This can provide a sense of belonging and camaraderie that can help reduce feelings of loneliness. Attend campus events: Many universities host events such as concerts, lectures, and social gatherings that provide opportunities for students to connect with others. Students can make new friends and build a sense of community on campus by going to these events. Take advantage of counseling and support services: Many universities offer

counseling and support services for students who are struggling with loneliness or other mental health issues. These services can provide students with the support they need to cope with feelings of isolation and connect with others. Staying in touch with friends and family can provide a sense of connection and support for students who are feeling lonely. This can be done through phone calls, video chats, or social media. Giving back to the community can be a great way to meet new people and make a positive impact on the world. Many universities offer volunteer opportunities that can help students connect with others and build a sense of purpose. Finding a mentor can be a great way for students to connect with someone who has more experience and can offer guidance and support. Many universities have mentorship programs that can help students find a mentor who is a good fit for them. Having a good schedule can help keep students from feeling overwhelmed and lonely, keep them productive and on track with their studies, and give them something to look forward to. Finally, it is important for students to be kind and open to others and to practice self-compassion and self-care, as these can help to build and maintain positive relationships.

In short, loneliness among university students is a common problem, but there are strategies that students can use to combat it. By getting involved in extracurricular activities, attending campus events, taking advantage of counseling and support services, staying in touch with friends and family, volunteering, seeking out a mentor, staying organized, and being kind and open to others, students can build a sense of community on campus and improve their overall well-being.

Suggestions

Loneliness is one of the worst emotions that a person may experience. Loneliness is not only a bad sensation or emotion that may occur in human existence, but it is also an exceedingly harmful mood. If we see an individual in our universities, families, or communities who is feeling lonely or sad, we should reach out to them in any way we can as human beings, even if we have never met them before. As students, it is our duty to establish a link of trust with individuals who are experiencing loneliness by being sincere with them. This can be done by being present, listening without judgment, and providing unconditional support. Through this, we can create an environment of compassion that can help foster positive relationships and build resilience in those struggling with loneliness. Being genuine and taking time to understand their feelings without the pressure of providing advice or a solution can be all that is needed to bring someone who is feeling lonely back into a healthier state of mind. When assisting a person who is suffering from loneliness, it is important to keep everything between you and the individual and not discuss it with others who may not be able to help. Additionally, it is important to make sure that any kind of help offered is done with the intention of empowerment. Offering tangible resources, such as assisting them in connecting with others or simply being present and listening, can be extremely helpful in reducing loneliness. While it may be tempting to provide solutions, it is best to let them know that their feelings are valid and that there are ways for them to work through these feelings in a healthy way.

Specific activity suggestions to mitigate the negative impact of loneliness include joining social clubs or organizations that align with personal interests, such as book clubs or sports teams. Other suggestions include volunteering for community events or organizations, attending local meetups or networking events, and participating in group fitness classes or workshops. In addition, engaging in hobbies or creative activities, such as painting, writing, or playing a musical instrument, can also provide a sense of

fulfillment and connection with others who share similar interests. Universities should also provide opportunities for joining clubs and organizations related to academic fields or extracurricular interests. Additionally, taking advantage of campus resources such as career services or counseling centers can help students connect with like-minded individuals and find support in their personal and professional development.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent lockdowns have shed light on the crucial role of social connections in our lives. Loneliness, defined as a distressing feeling of social isolation or being alone despite being surrounded by others, is a complex and multifaceted emotion that has far-reaching implications for our mental and physical health. This article has explored the various dimensions of loneliness among university students and its impact on their overall well-being. Loneliness among university students can be attributed to a range of factors, including the transition to a new environment, difficulty in making friends, academic pressures, and unhealthy romantic relationships. It is essential to recognize that loneliness is not a fleeting emotion but a significant risk factor for various adverse health outcomes, including depression, anxiety, sleep disturbances, and even cardiovascular problems. Moreover, loneliness can hinder academic performance, leading to lower grades and a higher likelihood of dropping out. Understanding the types and causes of loneliness among university students is crucial for developing effective strategies to combat it. Cognitive-related strategies that target maladaptive social cognitions and behaviors have shown promise in reducing loneliness levels. Additionally, engaging in activities, getting involved in extracurricular clubs and organizations, attending campus events, seeking counseling and support services, and maintaining connections with friends and family members are vital steps in addressing loneliness on university campuses.

In summary, loneliness is a prevalent and pressing issue among university students that has far-reaching implications for their mental and physical health, as well as their academic success. To promote the well-being of university students, it is imperative to raise awareness about loneliness, provide support services, and foster a sense of community and belonging on campus. Loneliness should not be ignored but addressed with empathy, compassion, and evidence-based interventions to ensure that university students can thrive in both their academic and personal lives. Further research is needed to better understand the dynamics of loneliness among this population and to develop tailored interventions that can effectively combat it.

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