Loneliness does not discriminate!

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Social Relationships Matter
What is loneliness?

"Loneliness is unpleasant, is not synonymous with social isolation or rejection, and is the result of perceived quantitative or qualitative deficiencies in one’s social relations” (Peplau & Perlman, 1982).
The BBC Loneliness Experiment: Evidence base on loneliness demonstrates significant gaps:

1. insufficient sample sizes to test the robustness of findings across different countries and ages,
2. a reliance on studies of older adults for understanding risk factors,
3. the inclusion of loneliness as one element across a range of variables in portmanteau surveys rather than being the explicit focus of the survey.

Such gaps in our knowledge limit development of interventions designed to address loneliness.
Launched in February 2018

BBC RADIO 4
The Loneliness Experiment
Closed May 2018

- 54,988 people took part from 237 different countries, islands, or territories
- 35,638 people in the UK completed at least one measure of loneliness
- 69% of respondents were women
- 44% were in full-time employment; 6% were unemployed
- Respondents were aged between 16 and 99 years (7.3% in 16-24 year age group, 18% were 65+)
Loneliness meant different things to different people.

**Five things people say loneliness is:**

1. Having nobody to talk to
2. Feeling disconnected from the world
3. Feeling left out
4. Sadness
5. Not feeling understood

*Source: BBC Loneliness Experiment (2018)*
Loneliness is an aversive state across the lifespan (Qualter, 1995, 1998)

- Children as young as 5 years of age offer valid definitions of loneliness
- Children offer clear ways of coping with loneliness, reporting a need to connect with others, sometimes physically and sometimes mentally.
- Loneliness motivates people across the life course to connect with others.
Age-related changes in loneliness

- It is stable, but low, from age 7 to 12 years (Qualter et al., 2010).
- It peaks during early adolescence and then very slowly decreases until early adulthood (Qualter et al., 2013).
- Is stable during adulthood, but increases at oldest old age (i.e., 85 years and older).
- No meaningful gender differences (Maes, Qualter, Goossens et al., under review).
Older respondents said adolescence was the loneliest time for them

‘There are so many more sources of loneliness during adolescence compared to other times in ones life’

1. Peer friendship. With a move from friendship quantity to friendship quality from childhood to adolescence.
2. Peer group. By adolescence, there are concerns about ones social standing. Reduces in later adolescence, but the need for intimate friendships is maintained.
3. Romantic relationships. Over the course of adolescence, the quality of the romantic relationship becomes important. Continues to predict loneliness in adulthood.
Younger respondents in the BBC Loneliness Experiment felt lonely more often than older people.
Younger respondents are felt loneliness more intensely.
Are younger adults lonelier than older adults?

Image: BBC Radio 4

Image: ONS

Image: Cigna Loneliness Report
Figure 1. Normative Changes in Loneliness Across the Lifespan

Source: Yang and Victor 2011. 16-105 years
Figure 2. Normative Changes in Loneliness Across the Lifespan

Sources: Yang and Victor 2011: 16-105 years
Qualter et al., 2013: 5-17 years
Are adolescents getting lonelier? Is this normative period of adolescent loneliness lasting for longer?

- Recent examination suggests an increase into early adulthood (Danneel et al, 2018).

- That fits with cross-sectional data from ONS that shows higher levels of loneliness in the 16-24 age group in 2018 compared to other adult groups. Same for other surveys across the world.
Figure 3. Is the normative early adolescent loneliness experience lasting for longer?

Sources: Yang and Victor 2011: 16-105 years
Qualter et al., 2013: 5-17 years
Loneliness is adaptive: Loneliness is an evolutionary mechanism

Loneliness makes us want to reconnect with others
(Cacioppo et al., 2006)
Feeling lonely sometimes is normal and positive.

41% of respondents to the BBC Loneliness Experiment said loneliness can be positive.

Loneliness motivates people across ontogeny to connect with others. It makes us re-evaluate our social connections.
Higher trust in others = lower loneliness

Not new finding, but stronger association for younger respondents.

Links to other work on specific sources of trust. Trust in teachers and classmates even more important than trust in close friends in predicting loneliness.
Higher loneliness = lower self-reported health

Association was the same across all age groups. No relationship with drinking or smoking, except for older age groups.
Loneliness and physical health among the elderly

“As our population profile changes, and we have a larger proportion of over 65s and over 85s, loneliness is becoming an increasingly important public health concern. The impact of loneliness can be devastating and costly with consequences comparable to smoking and obesity (Izzi Seccombe, Local Government Association spokeswoman for public health, Feb 2016)

Loneliness as bad for health as long-term illness, says GPs' chief

GPs will be urged to make time to see lonely patients, who are 50% more likely to die prematurely than people with good social network
Loneliness and physical health among youth

- Poorer self-reported health (Harris, Qualter, et al., 2013; Qualter et al., 2013)
- Increased reports of headache (Stickley et al., 2013)
- Greater sleep disturbance (Harris, Qualter, et al., 2013; Matthews, 2017)
- Delayed sleep onset (Harris, Qualter, et al. 2013; Stickley, 2013)
- Just confirmed with Danish population HBSC data, but not with Canadian QLSCD data (Eccles, Qualter, et al., 2018)
- Increases in BMI for girls (Qualter, Hurley, et al., 2018)
Loneliness and mental health among youth

• Prolonged loneliness during childhood and early adolescence is linked to depression in late adolescence (Qualter et al., 2013).

• Loneliness and depressive symptoms predict each other over childhood (Qualter et al., 2010), and adolescence (Vanhalst et al., 2013).
Loneliness is not a lack of social skills.
Stigma surrounding loneliness

- **Perceived community stigma**: Perceptions that their community stigmatizes loneliness

- **Self stigma/Concealment**: The extent to which participants would reveal/conceal loneliness

- **Participants’ own stigmatizing views of others who feel lonely**: Attributes of a lonely person
Stigma surrounding loneliness

• Views of others who are lonely
Loneliness stigma and age

Perceived community stigma versus self-stigma

Perceived Community Stigma

Self Stigma
Solutions to loneliness

1. Find distracting activities or dedicate time to work, study, or hobbies
2. Join a social club or take up new social activities and past times
3. Change your thinking to make it more positive
4. Start a conversation with anyone
5. Talk to friends or family about feelings

Source: BBC Loneliness Experiment, 2018
Interventions to tackle youth loneliness

• Recent meta-analyses of current published interventions: moderate effects on reducing loneliness in young people (-.398, p<.001). Type of intervention was important: those studies utilizing a social cognition intervention were the most effective (Eccles & Qualter, in prep).
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Loneliness and Social Isolation in Mental Health

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