

**What condition makes a person irritable,
depressed, and self-centered, and is
associated with a 29% increase in the risk
of premature mortality ?**

LONELINESS

“Loneliness breaks the spirit”

Jewish Proverb

Objectives

- Understand the condition of loneliness and its prevalence worldwide.
- Understand the effects of loneliness on health.
- Understand measures to 'diagnose' loneliness.
- Be familiar with the biology of loneliness.
- Recognize treatment options.

The Condition of Loneliness

Definition: Loneliness is typically defined as the discrepancy between a person's desired and actual social relationships. A unique condition in which an individual perceives him/herself to be socially isolated even when among other people. "Lonely in a crowd".

(EMOTIONALLY DISCONNECTED FROM OTHERS)

NOT synonymous with social isolation which is an objective measure of social interactions and relationships.

(LACK OF CONTACT WITH OTHERS)

Humans require the presence of others who value them, whom they can trust, and with whom they can work together to survive, prosper, and care for their young so they can reproduce.

Prevalence of Loneliness

- **8-12%** of children (kindergarten-6th grade).
- **7%** of adults endorse intense/persistent loneliness on validated instruments.
- **32%** of adults >55 “feel lonely at any given time”; **19.3%** of adults older than 65 report feeling lonely “much of the previous week.”
- The prevalence of loneliness increases with aging.
- Despite living in the most technologically connected age in the history of mankind, rates of loneliness have doubled since the 1980s.

Prevalence of Loneliness

- Loneliness is an equal-opportunity affliction.
- Income, education, sex, and ethnicity: **NOT PROTECTIVE.**
- **NOT ASSOCIATED** with some peculiarity of individuals who are lonely but instead are due to the effects of loneliness on ordinary people.
- Other contributors: delayed marriage, increased dual-career families, increased single residence households, and reduced fertility rates.

Health Effects - Loneliness

“15 Cigarettes a day”

“Loneliness has surprisingly broad and profound health effects”
(Cacioppo,J.)

PHYSICAL:

- increased vascular resistance
- elevated systolic blood pressure
- less restorative sleep
- diminished immunity
- increased HPA activity
- reduced anti-inflammatory activity
- abnormal circulating white blood cells (WBCs)

Health Effects - Loneliness

PHYSICAL: Heart surgery patients who have strong social support networks and spiritual practice have one-seventh the mortality rate of those who don't!

Health Effects - Loneliness

MENTAL:

- Increased risk of cognitive decline and progression of AD.
- Decreased executive functioning in “future alone” group.
- Impaired executive functioning secondary to hypervigilance for social threats.
- Increased depression, suicidal ideation and behavior.

Measures of Loneliness

- UCLA Loneliness Scale developed 1994 is current 'gold' standard. (Russell)
- Belcher Extended Loneliness Scale 1973

Biology of Loneliness

Functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) of the brain for subjects who met criteria per UCLA Loneliness scale:

- Decreased activation in the ventral striatum (reward circuit)
- Increased attention to “negative social cues” (increased alert for social threats)
- Increased activation in the amygdala (fear circuit)
- Reduced prefrontal cortex activity (executive control/restraint)

Biology of Loneliness

- Loneliness may serve an adaptive purpose and motivate reconnection with others; unpleasant for the individual but essential for species survival.
- Loneliness is the social equivalent of physical pain and, like physical pain is functional in motivating individuals to alleviate the social pain by seeking out connections they need to feel safe, secure, and content with life.

Treatment Options

- 1) Improving social skills
- 2) Enhancing social support
- 3) Increasing opportunities for social contact
- 4) Addressing maladaptive social cognition

Treatment Options

Improving social skills

Treatment Options

Enhancing Social Support

Treatment Options

Increasing Opportunities for Social Contact

Treatment Options

ADDRESSING MALADAPTIVE SOCIAL COGNITION:

Meta-analysis of successful interventions for loneliness confirms this intervention has the greatest mean effect size and offers the best chance for reducing loneliness.

This intervention (primarily Cognitive Behavioral Therapy CBT) directly addresses the 'regulatory loop' of loneliness. Lonely subjects have increased sensitivity/surveillance for social threats, preferentially attend to negative social information, remember more of negative aspects of social events, hold more negative social expectations and behave in ways that confirm their negative expectations.

Takeaways

1. Social connections are critical to ward off loneliness: religious/spiritual congregations, service organizations, charity work, continuing adult education, clubs/social organizations.
2. Discover and cultivate CONFIDANTS – those you know and trust, and who offer you support are vital.
3. Make social connections in the WORKPLACE a priority. Consider “The Inside Scoop”
4. Make yourself AVAILABLE. Headphones off, look up from the phone, say hello to everybody. Consider a “digital cleanse”.
5. Advocate for the Silver Line a help line for older people in the U.K. where they can speak to a live person for as long as they want 24/7 x 365 days. The service averages 10,000 calls/week.

Comments or suggestions?

Thank You

please
take our
Survey



mmLearn.org, a program of Morningside Ministries, is for educational purposes only and does not replace or supplant consultation with physicians and other healthcare professionals. mmLearn.org, its authors, presenters and consultants do not assume liability for errors or omissions.

Thank You

The logo for mmLearn.org features the text "mmLearn.org" in a large, bold, black serif font. The text is set against a background of horizontal stripes in red, orange, and yellow. A large, stylized white arc, resembling a rising sun or a protective shield, curves over the right side of the text.

mmLearn.org



a program of Morningside Ministries