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# LONELINESS

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**Loneliness affects many people who suffer from it invisibly. Loneliness is not only an unpleasant feeling, but it can also lead to numerous secondary problems. It can cause mental health and physical health conditions. Loneliness can be a strong motivator and driving force towards greater connectedness with oneself and with others. One way of treating it is helping a person reconnect with oneself and others through a focus on internal and external communication patterns.**

Keywords: loneliness

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## Introduction

Loneliness is a feeling that one needs more connectedness. Using this signal is an important way to get rid of the loneliness. Loneliness typically includes anxious feelings about a lack of connection or communication with other beings, both in the present and extending into the future. As such, loneliness can be felt even when surrounded by other people. The causes of loneliness are varied and include social, mental, emotional, and physical factors. Loneliness is, however, a response to subjectively experienced isolation. Much depends on a person's needs and expectations.

Loneliness has been linked to reduced health. In 2005, results from the American Framingham Heart Study demonstrated that lonely men had raised levels of Interleukin 6 (IL-6), which is correlated with heart disease. A 2006 study conducted by the Center for Cognitive and Social Neuroscience at the University of Chicago found loneliness can add thirty points to a blood pressure reading for adults over the age of fifty. Loneliness reportedly impairs cognition and willpower, alters DNA transcription in immune cells, and leads over time to high blood pressure. Lonelier people are more likely to show evidence of viral reactivation than less lonely people. Lonelier people also have stronger inflammatory responses to acute stress compared with less lonely people.

## Empathy

Small children usually see themselves as the centre of the world. Over time, the focus shifts outward and the exploration of the world around increases. Empathy, a translation of the German "Einfühlung", is the ability to feel what another is feeling. Since one cannot directly feel what another is feeling information from others is required to provide a good estimate of what the other is feeling. As pointed out, it is possible to be very well connected with others and still feel lonely, since loneliness is the subjective sense of meaningful connectedness. Empathy is thus an antidote to loneliness. If one is empathic one can reduce the level of loneliness in the other because a meaningful communication with the other is established. Empathy requires understanding of information about feelings, which establishes a close connection with another. This understanding is lastly what reduces the loneliness.

## Causes

Loneliness can be experienced in many different situations, even among friends or at the peak of one's career or creativity, since it is entirely subjective. It depends on the level of meaningful social communication one needs and the level one is experiencing at a given moment in time.

## Genetics

Communication systems are to a significant extent genetically encoded, despite the high degree of plasticity of the brain. A twin study found evidence that genetics account for approximately half of the measurable differences in loneliness among adults, which was similar to the heritability estimates found previously in children. These genes operate in a similar manner in males and females. The study found no common environmental contributions to adult loneliness.

## Mental Health

Loneliness can be increased if one is suffering from depression. However, this is different from the feeling of loneliness which is a result of a subjective experience of disconnectedness from others or the world in general. This subjective feeling of loneliness can have many causes, but they all have in common that there is less of a perception of meaningful messages from others and from within oneself than needed. This means there can be a greater need for messages from other or less messages or both. The real environment is not a good predictor of loneliness.

Other mental health conditions which affect the communication with the world and with oneself can also increase the experienced levels of loneliness. Schizoid personality disorder and schizophrenia can effect the boundaries between the outside and the inside world and lead so to changes in how meaningful communication is received and processes. In schizophrenia, for example, an inability to distinguish correctly information sources outside and inside the person can make meaningful communication with the outside world impossible, which can lead to isolation and in some cases loneliness.

## Life Experiences

The feeling of loneliness can be stronger if one experienced a perceived loss earlier in life. Especially in children, the absence of a parent, even if only temporary, can cause strong emotions of distress, especially if the attachment style is insecure to begin with. The important component is that there is a break in expected communication, which can make an individual feel less secure.

## Social Isolation

As already mentioned, loneliness is a subjective. The actual degree of social isolation is secondary. One can feel lonely in a crowd or not lonely in a hut in the woods. The important criterion is how communication

with the environment is experienced. What makes a person lonely is the fact that they need more social interaction or a certain type of social interaction that is not currently available. Individuals need certain types and levels of communication with others not to feel lonely. Part of this may be genetically encoded, since to a large extent it is determined by the communication and interaction patterns in the past and how they were processed. Nevertheless, an increase in social isolation is bound to raise the chances that an individual feels lonely, holding all other variables constant.

Solitude, however, can also have positive effects on an individual regarding improvements in cognitive functioning, particularly after especially stressful experiences or elements of burnout. But even the feeling of loneliness itself can provide impetus and motivation for change and new activities. Emily Dickinson and many others are examples.

## Technology

Although the Internet has frequently been seen as a cause of loneliness, this is very likely not the case. It depends largely on how one approaches the own feelings of loneliness. If they are a starting point to find greater connectedness, the Internet can provide many opportunities for virtual and real-world contacts. From spontaneous or special interest meetups to online dating, the Internet helps people connect with each other who seek greater connectedness. On the other hand, if one uses the Internet for an escape from the world, can use the Internet to numb the senses. As a communication medium, the Internet is largely neutral, and its effect depends on how it is used.

Much non-communication technology has been linked to increased human loneliness, such as commuter trains or assembly lines. However, in many of these cases strategies and other technologies can be used to help people communicate more and more meaningfully with each other.

## Transient vs. chronic loneliness

Transient (state) loneliness is temporary in nature, caused by something in the environment, and is easily relieved. Chronic (trait) loneliness is more permanent, caused by the person, and is not easily relieved. The latter case is related to the communication patterns used by an individual. Transient loneliness may be cured by different activities or different environment, while the chronic loneliness usually requires an examination of the own communication patterns. (Haverkamp, 2010b)

Research seems to indicate that loneliness has increased, particularly in those living in less densely populated suburbs and in the case of elderly people. However, this is difficult to say since loneliness is a subjective feeling and one would need information how people subjectively felt at different points in time. It is even possible to feel lonely if one is objectively well connected with other, while it is also possible.

## The Environment

Certain environments are better suited to reduce loneliness than others. An environment which facilitates communication between people also reduces loneliness, particularly if people can talk about topics not related to the workplace. This may be helped by providing other sources of information.

## Health

Loneliness can have various adverse effects on a person's mental and physical health.

### Mental Health

In adults, loneliness is a major precipitant of depression and alcoholism. People who are socially isolated may report poor sleep quality.

In children, a lack of social connections is directly linked to several forms of antisocial and self-destructive behaviour, most notably hostile and delinquent behaviour. In both children and adults, loneliness often has a negative impact on learning and memory. Its disruption of sleep patterns can have a significant impact on the ability to function in everyday life.

Research from a large-scale study published in the journal *Psychological Medicine*, showed that "lonely millennials are more likely to have mental health problems, be out of work and feel pessimistic about their ability to succeed in life than their peers who feel connected to others, regardless of gender or wealth".

### Physical Health

Chronic loneliness can be a serious, life-threatening health condition. It has been found to be associated with an increased risk of stroke and cardiovascular disease. Loneliness shows an increased incidence of high blood pressure, high cholesterol, and obesity.

Loneliness is shown to increase the concentration of cortisol levels in the body. Prolonged, high cortisol levels can cause anxiety, depression, digestive problems, heart disease, sleep problems, and weight gain.

"Loneliness has been associated with impaired cellular immunity as reflected in lower natural killer (NK) cell activity and higher antibody titres to the Epstein Barr Virus and human herpes viruses". Because of impaired cellular immunity, loneliness among young adults shows vaccines, like the flu vaccine, to be less effective. Data from studies on loneliness and HIV positive men suggests loneliness increases disease progression.

## Treatment

If there is an underlying mental health condition, treatment of the mental health condition, such as a depression is a first important step. This can involve psychotherapy, medication and supportive therapies. The author has developed communication-focused therapy (CFT) for the treatment of depression which focuses on meaningful communication and its restoration in patients who suffer from depression. (Haverkamp, 2017b)

Central to any treatment of loneliness is to work on the communication patterns a person uses in the interactions with the environment. (Haverkamp, 2010a, 2017a) Important steps are an awareness for the communication patterns used in different situations and with different people and for the communication with oneself, reflection and experimentation with them, and insight.

Imagined interactions (II) can also have a positive effect. Nostalgia has also been found to have a restorative effect, counteracting loneliness by increasing perceived social support.

Meaningful communication can also happen within a religious context. A 1989 study found that the social aspect of religion had a significant negative association with loneliness among elderly people. The effect was more consistent than the effect of social relationships with family and friends, and the subjective concept of religiosity had no significant effect on loneliness.

Increasing opportunities for social interaction and addressing abnormal social cognition (faulty thoughts and patterns of thoughts) are usually a result when individual communication patterns are explored. Better and more adaptive communication patterns also result in better social skills in general.



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