

Loneliness and life's stages: A commentary

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ABSTRACT: Loneliness is an integral part of life. It may be experienced periodically or on a continuous basis, but regardless, humans are all aware of its existence and influence on their lives. In this commentary, we examine the loneliness that humans face, from cradle to grave, and how it feels. Age, life experience, maturation, personal awareness, and cultural background bring about and affect our loneliness experiences. We highlight the experience as it presents itself in each of life's stages.

KEYWORDS: adolescence; adulthood; childhood; elderly; loneliness; young adults

1. Introduction

Loneliness is a universal experience, transcending geography, personal characteristics, and age. This commentary will offer a window through which we can better understand the loneliness experienced in each age group. While loneliness is experienced by all, it is a personal subjective experience, and as such, it is experienced differently at every stage of life^[1].

Beutel et al.^[2] who reviewed the available literature on loneliness and the life span, found that the need to belong and be valued by others is present throughout life and that youngsters in the late adolescence years experienced more intense loneliness than adults. Loneliness was found to intensify once again in late adulthood.

In that regard, Heinze^[3] pointed out that "Even though Bowlby^[4] hypothesized that attachment is essentially instantaneous and almost always occurs between the mother and her offspring, attachment bonds are not limited to mothers and are formed throughout the life cycle, with the concomitant negative effects when bonds are broken. Since all humans experience loneliness, periodically or on a constant basis, this commentary highlights how loneliness affects us at various ages and stages and how it can be addressed.

2. Childhood

Up until relatively recently, childhood loneliness has not been well explored^[5]. Sullivan^[6], for instance, observed that there may not be a need to research childhood loneliness since it only first emerged during adolescence, while Weiss^[7] saw loneliness being experienced mainly starting when the youngster is searching for additional attachment figures, in addition, or even instead of his parents. Realizing that children may be lonely, may be devastating to their significant others, indirectly influencing researchers into believing that loneliness is not experienced by young children. At present, however, there is a wide agreement that children can, indeed, experience loneliness, and it may have significant consequences for their growing up years^[8]. Various studies in and out of North America demonstrated that preschoolers were able to identify when they were lonely and could differentiate between loneliness and solitude^[1]. Moreover, as Galanaki^[9] observed, up to a whopping two-thirds of school children experience loneliness.

According to research, there is a correlation between intense loneliness in children, and the physical health problems, negative emotions, and low self-esteem that kids experience^[10,11]. It was found that the manner in which lonely kids relate to their peers indicates their expectation that they will be rejected. “Their interpersonal approach, communication style, and nonverbal cues reveal their alienation, self-concept, and beliefs in their inability to change their distressing situation and to develop satisfying social relations”^[12]. It can be seen that children who feel alienated, actually perpetuate their social isolation by not being attractive, or even pushing away other children. It is imperative that childhood loneliness be understood, since it may lead to adulthood loneliness, which may bring about psychosocial consequences associated with loneliness^[5,13]. Examples of problems and issues that lonely children experience include adjustment problems, which include having poor peer relations, feeling excluded, and having a lower level of peer support^[14-16]. Lonely children were observed to be sad and bored.

3. What contributes to childhood loneliness?

3.1. The family’s role

The home where a child grows up is of great importance in the manner in which he grows up^[17]. Of particular interest is the interaction that exists in a given family, as it may provide the child with a feeling that he belongs, and sharpen her interpersonal skills^[4]. Children growing up in a loving and comforting home, where they have secure relationships with family members, end up being better prepared for the outside world^[18]. Lyu^[17] found that the family structure can positively affect a child’s and adolescent’s health behavior. The better the social capital that the family offers the growing child, the better the child’s physical activity, and as the authors were interested, the better his sports performance^[19]. Families also influence children’s loneliness. For example, when the child meets caregivers’ insensitivity or emotional unavailability, it creates a negative view of the world and makes them more prone to loneliness. So, while infants may not experience loneliness, their care by significant others may bring about loneliness when they grow up and enter elementary school^[20]. Margalit^[12] observed that factors aside from the infant’s interaction with parents that may affect its loneliness in later years include “the breakdown of the nuclear family, the reduced involvement on the part of the several fathers, the rising divorce statistics, and the increasing mobility of modern society, all of which contributed to increased loneliness until it reached epidemic proportions.” School is known to significantly affect children’s lives in general and their loneliness, similarly to the way the family does. Unfortunately, it is common for children who come from an alienating family to end up being alienated in school as well.

In the family context, children do what they see that their parents do; the loneliness that the parents experience may be transmitted to their children^[21]. In addition to the social learning that may be involved in transmitting loneliness to offspring, it may also be that the tendency towards loneliness is a function of heritability. Research suggests that family similarity in loneliness can indeed be rooted in genetic influences^[22]. Research found that between 37% to 48% of the variance in loneliness is explainable by genetic factors^[23,24].

3.2. Loneliness in school

It is the child’s relationships with peers and teachers that may increase their vulnerability to loneliness^[12]. There are children who do not initiate social contact or relate to peers in a friendly manner during recess, which consequently end up being mostly alone in school, and feeling unwelcomed and unconnected to the other children. What may follow are lowered academic performance, emotional

difficulties, or behavioral problems^[25]. A positive correlation between how a child feels about school and his academic performance was found by Ladd et al.^[26] and Valeski and Stipek^[27].

Research found that the quality of the student-teacher relationship may aggravate or relieve the child's loneliness^[28]. The teachers are at the basis of what makes the school so important in the student's life. The manner in which the material is taught by the teacher is greatly influenced by her interaction with the class and the individual child, and her ability to support the child when that support is needed significantly affects the child and his ability to cope with loneliness^[29]. Based on Bowlby's attachment theory^[4], the child's affectionate bond with his parents may be mirrored by his closeness to his teacher. A secure attachment, as described above, is instrumental a-la-Bowlby^[4], in encouraging the child to seek closeness when needed. On the other hand, when the child's parents are cold, neglectful, or rejecting, it may result in loneliness that the child may feel at home and therefore may look to the teacher to fulfill functions that parents are destined to fulfill.

3.3. The adolescent years

Adolescence, which was referred to as the period of 'storm and stress'^[30] ranges between the ages 13–18 years old. During this tumultuous period, youngsters get into conflicts with parents^[31], exhibit mood disruptions or extreme emotions^[32], may start (or continue) to abuse substances^[33], and peers become most important to the teenager, which places them in danger of peer pressure^[30]. Hall^[34] referred to adolescence as "a period of semi criminality", as it may involve engagement in risky behaviors that may be related to loneliness and social alienation^[1,35,36]. Adolescence is a transitional period leading to early adulthood, a period characterized by individuals relating to their intimate partners as their principal attachment figure^[37]. As such, emotional loneliness^[7] may set in, and if the youngster is without a partner or friends, social loneliness may be experienced^[12,38]. It has been observed that adolescence is a crucial developmental period that ushers in numerous social changes and greater sensitivity to loneliness^[39]. Emerging needs for intimacy as well as the various social changes the adolescent encounters, are particularly prevalent during adolescence, and consequently, as suggested by Sullivan^[6] it may give rise to loneliness^[40]. It appears that if the adolescent lacks the social skills to address those life changes, and their expectations regarding intimate relationships are not fulfilled, loneliness may likely result^[39]. During that time, the youngster is relying on his parents and needs relationships with his peers. Those two needs sometimes clash, leaving the adolescent confused and feeling alone^[40].

Adolescence is the peak period of high risk for loneliness, 66%–79% of young people report experiencing loneliness at some point, while up to 30% experience it on a constant basis^[41]. Miller^[42] maintained that during adolescence, loneliness has the potential to be followed by adverse mental health issues in adulthood^[41–43]. A meta-analysis by Holt-Lunstad et al.^[41] predicted that loneliness will reach epidemic proportions by 2030, a dire prediction that suggests that the connection between loneliness and mental well-being needs to be disentangled.

Lonely adolescents were found to be passively sad and turned inward^[36,44]. They exhibited high levels of stress^[45] as well as high levels of social anxiety^[46]. They displayed behavioral problems involving peer rejection and victimization^[47,48]. Focusing briefly on my own research, I highlighted the emotional distress, intense pain and turmoil, and hopelessness experienced by adolescents. Adolescents' loneliness is also characterized by social inadequacy, and feelings of social alienation, which may cause the youngsters to distance themselves from others in order to minimize the chances of rejection, thus resulting in painful loneliness^[1,48].

4. Emerging adults

Young adults, aged 19–30, have progressed from adolescence to, now, start their life journey personally and professionally. Unlike adolescence, emerging adulthood lacks the turbulence, mood swings, and frequent conflicts that adolescents engage in in the study of Hatcher et al.^[49]. In Western culture, adults in their 20s start to disengage from their families and prepare themselves for life vocationally, academically, and socially, during which they also need to make decisions regarding friendships, social and civic interactions, sexuality, marriage, children, careers, and more^[50]. They go through intellectual changes, and their growth is completed, but “their potential for greater strength increases during early adulthood and reaches a plateau at about age 30”^[51]. Many young adults experience a minor life crisis, wondering what life is all about and examining their previous life choices^[50]. Loneliness often results from these confusing times but is less poignant or disturbing than in adolescence or old age^[25]. Should the young adult encounter difficulty in creating such intimate relationships, or connecting to the larger community of his peers, loneliness will result. Commonly, during this phase in our lives, loneliness is less poignant or disturbing than in adolescence or old age^[25].

5. Adulthood

The period of 31–64 years of age, or adulthood, is commonly the period of one’s peak physical and mental abilities. This time marks the height of adults’ vocational journeys and career building. This age group attends to their nuclear families and often goes through various trials, tribulations, and triumphs. People at this stage of life experience birth, growth, and the striving for independence of their offspring^[30,52]. As people mature and progress toward middle age, they complain of declining vigor and youthfulness, which encourages them to let go of unrealistic dreams and goals that they may have harbored^[50].

Between the ages of 45–55 women commonly experience menopause, which is often accompanied by physical changes. Men go through andropause, which affects their physical and sexual abilities. Men seem to evaluate their adulthood years by their careers and achievements, while for women, their children’s growth and the time they start a family of their own, are what define their achievements in life. The so-called midlife crisis is prompted by adults becoming aware that their remaining years are less than what they already lived, necessitating their giving up some goals and aspirations that they wanted to fulfill. During that time, the adults experience the “empty nest” syndrome, when their kids leave home to start their own lives, which provides the parents with almost unlimited opportunities to live life as they want and engage in enriching and exciting activities that they may have been prevented from doing while they were working and raising children^[51,52].

The research found that loneliness mediates between interpersonal stress, depression, anxiety, and health in adults^[53–55]. During adulthood, some events that may be related to loneliness include widowhood, or the death of a parent, for instance. Women are known to become widowed during that time, along with losing a parent, which occurs around the age of 60^[56]. In addition, some adults experience the loss of a child or a spouse, and these stressful events may bring about loneliness^[56]. Research has demonstrated that during the busy midlife years, loneliness is reduced since life is filled with goals, responsibilities, and social and work engagements. When adults find themselves alone, they embrace it as a respite from their hectic lives, and rather than loneliness, they experience it as solitude^[25,57,58]. However, if their social network is small, these adults are likely to have negative interactions with family and friends and experience loneliness to a greater extent than their peers^[59].

6. Old age

Rook and Charles^[60] indicated that “the world is aging at an unprecedented rate, with older adults representing the fastest growing segment of the population in most economically developed and developing countries,” and while those younger than 80 are not lonelier than the general population, the ones referred to as old-old are, indeed, lonelier than the rest of the population^[61]. Up to 40% of the elderly experience loneliness^[62], and up to 50% of those older than 80 reported feeling lonely frequently^[63,64]. And while older women report more intense loneliness than older men, they are likelier to interact with their adult children and receive support from them^[65].

The older population of the Western world is rapidly increasing^[66]. Among the changes that the elderly face are declining health, possible cognitive changes, changes brought about by retirement and lifestyle, and losing a spouse through illness or death, all of which may lead to loneliness and social isolation^[67,68]. With advancing age and frailty, the elderly are more limited and may not be able to engage in social relationships as they previously did^[63,69]. The vast majority of the elderly population experience at least one chronic health issue, and 50% experience two., That results in reported loneliness, depression, and stress^[70,71].

Research on centenarians, the very old, found that many of them struggle with social isolation^[72,73]. The loss of social support that the very old experience, and the various health issues that they encounter, can interfere with communication with family members, and that may negatively affect their ability to maintain their social network, in the face of needing that network’s support and possibly guidance as well^[74]. Living alone, at old age contributes to increased health problems, such as increasing the risk of falling, dehydration, and physical injuries^[69,75]. Older adults who may be dealing with poor health may also face shrinking social participation, which often results in loneliness. And so, while life expectancy is increased in Western culture, there is also an increase in the length of time that the elderly may be ill, alone, and disabled^[60,65,76]. Pikhartova et al.^[77] observed that “later life can be a time of challenge exemplified by changes in roles such as becoming a (great) grandparent, retirement and other significant life events such as bereavement, and potential reductions in social network and support... It can also mean ill-health, and reduced mobility for oneself or others, which may compromise opportunities to build up new friendships or maintain existing relationships. Less obvious, but potentially more problematic for the aging individual, are stereotypes about old age and later life reflecting the negative assumptions of older people held by contemporary society.”

Wilson et al.^[78] found that there is a negative correlation between loneliness and physical and cognitive activities. Loneliness has been found to be associated with a rapid decline in general cognitive functioning and even hastens the appearance of Alzheimer disease^[79,80]. “Loneliness may trigger prolonged activation of the HPA axis to decrease neural reserve through decreased dendritic arborization in the hippocampus and prefrontal cortex, leading to decreased memory and learning”^[80]. Loneliness in older age was found to be related to living alone and a less-than-desired quality of interaction with one’s offspring^[81,82]. van Beljouw et al.^[83] indicated that “Loneliness was highly prevalent among older persons with depressive symptoms (87.8%). Lonely people suffer from worse mental ill-health (e.g., more severe depressive symptoms, more often a depressive disorder, and a lower quality of life) compared to not lonely individuals. Depressive symptoms were regarded as a logical consequence of loneliness. Lonely people perceived little command over their situation: causes of loneliness were attributed externally to perceived deficits in their social networks, and they mainly expressed the need to be listened to.”

7. Culture and loneliness in old age

It is quite clear. The aging population is growing rapidly. That increase is predicted to reach 8% of the British population in 15 years, or about 2040. Gatz et al.^[84] estimated that those Americans who were born in 1950 can expect to live more than 19 years longer than those who turned 65 in 1950. Studies in various countries in North America and Australia, loneliness was examined in those 65 years and older, and found that 5% to 10% of them were lonely. However, in southern Europe (i.e., Spain and Portugal), up to 15% of the elderly reported being lonely. In Eastern Europe, they found the highest rates of loneliness, such as in Poland (21%), Russia (24%), and Ukraine (34%)^[85].

Dykstra^[86] attempted to explain such puzzling results, in that there may be a smaller elderly population in collectivistic cultures, possibly due to the higher levels of institutionalization and solitary living in individualistic cultures such as North America and Western Europe. Accordingly, Dykstra believes that the elderly, are not as lonely as they are presumed by many to be. In collectivistic cultures, which include such countries as Italy, Greece, and South America, the elderly are used to being in intimate relationships that change in older years due to illnesses and lack of mobility, and the change in their circumstances results in those elderly reporting a greater level of loneliness than those living in Western Europe, where being alone is more familiar and is thus not perceived as a lonelier period in life^[86,87]. Chinese elderly, live in a collectivistic culture where a strong emphasis is placed on familial relations, and the relationship between living alone and psychological well-being may be more salient in Chinese populations. Most elderly people prefer and are expected to live with their children. Thus, living alone may arguably have a particularly strong negative effect on the well-being of the elderly^[88].

To conclude, as we have demonstrated above, research indicates that loneliness, while unwelcome by most of us, is an integral part of life, existing and experienced throughout life, and causing significant distress^[89]. The loneliest group are emerging adults, while adults in their prime, experience loneliness the least. It is incumbent on us, as a society, to be aware of it, remove the stigma that is commonly associated with it, and require ourselves and the state to offer programs and assistance to those struggling with loneliness. As far as limitations are concerned, this is but a commentary. A more thorough and comprehensive review would present a larger and more detailed picture of loneliness as it is experienced throughout life, and that may guide those who wish to address it, as to what can be done to lighten the pain for those who experience it.

Conflict of interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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