

Literature Review

Loneliness in College Students

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Abstracts

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Introduction: Loneliness among college students is quite prevalent. Students in their early years experience a transition period when entering university. Conditions with a new living environment, a new social environment, adjustments to peer relations, and a new academic atmosphere, support the occurrence of loneliness conditions in students. This study aims to understand loneliness in college student **Methods:** Literature Review

Results: College students have a greater risk of experiencing loneliness. The impact of loneliness on students is also quite significant, both physically and psychologically. Loneliness can affect mental conditions of depression, anxiety, suicide, and low self-esteem which will ultimately lead to a decrease in quality of life. The physical effects of loneliness can also result in prolonged feelings of fatigue, limited physical activity, cardiovascular disorders, and unhealthy lifestyles which ultimately also have an impact on decreasing quality of life. Intervention and prevention to overcome loneliness are urgently needed, such as improving social skills, overcoming and adapting maladaptive social cognition, increasing social support, mindfulness interventions, and improving friendships. **Conclusions:** Prevention programs for loneliness are very important to implement. Such an intervention could help reduce the burden of the disease in students' future professional lives.

Keywords: Loneliness, Well-Being, College Students

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INTRODUCTION

Loneliness is a phenomenon that occurs in human life. For each individual, loneliness can be experienced differently at different times and under different circumstances. Loneliness involves social isolation. Public Health England defines loneliness as an individual's personal experience, a subjective sense of lacking connection and contact with social interactions, and feeling unwanted or needed. The prevalence of loneliness is significant among university students around the world due to environmental changes such as culture shock and during a pandemic [1, 2]. Loneliness is a painful condition [3]. Loneliness is a subjective experience that is not supported by an objective situation, towards unmet needs namely the need for intimacy and/or social involvement [4]. Loneliness is different from solitude. Solitude is considered a pleasurable and even desirable situation that can promote creative experiences or provide an opportunity to take a break from stressful realities [5, 6].

REVIEWS

Loneliness Prevalence in College Students

Loneliness is defined as the discrepancy between a person's current relationships and the relationships they desire. More than 50 million people (about 26% of Americans) feel lonely. The prevalence of loneliness in other studies ranges from 15-30% of individuals. Students contribute greatly to feelings of loneliness because 75% of new students need adjustment, especially during the first 2 weeks. In the United Kingdom, around 5% of individuals between the ages of 25-44 years old reported feeling lonely most of the day and those under 25 and older than 65 reported higher levels. The prevalence of loneliness tends to depict a U-shaped distribution, with individuals under the age of 25 and those over 65 reporting the highest level of loneliness compared to other age groups. Since many college students are under the age of 25, these findings suggest that loneliness may be a significant problem during

this student period. In 2015, almost 4% of the Dutch population aged 15 years and over experienced loneliness. Student Health Check (SHC) in 2015-2016 showed that 16% of participating students experienced loneliness problems [7].

Research on children and adolescents showed that between 3% - 22% of children and adolescents experienced prolonged periods of loneliness. Additionally, evidence suggests that loneliness may be experienced more acutely and painfully by young adults than by other age groups. In early adulthood, people often leave their homes – mostly for the first time – to pursue higher education. Physical separation from home and change toward greater independence signify an important developmental transition that can be accompanied by loneliness. Starting university often involves relocating to a new place, sometimes abroad, a situational change that further increases the risk of loneliness as people are separated not only from intimate relationships, but also from established social networks and support systems.

Loneliness among students occurs among domestic and international students of all levels of education (both undergraduate and postgraduate). The results of a recent survey from the National College Health Assessment, 64% of the sample felt very lonely, with a higher percentage of women (i.e. 71%) compared to men (56%) and undergraduates (68%) compared to college students. Survey results in Turkey show that 60% of respondents feel lonely, with higher levels being reported by first-year students. A survey of more than 1,000 UK students showed that 34% of respondents, aged 18-24, felt lonely quite often or very often to almost constantly [8].

Factors Affecting Loneliness

College students have a greater risk of experiencing loneliness. The transition to college is a significant change for early adulthood. The changes include the need to interact with other people and efforts to establish new relationships, living in a different location

with new and foreign people, dealing with academics that are potentially more difficult, and being far from their previous homes and family and friends. Fifty percent of students also experience stress levels above the average. Such transitions can have a negative impact on college students. If students do not develop efficient coping mechanisms, greater levels of loneliness may arise as a result. Although a person can experience feelings of loneliness at any time, such feelings of isolation tend to be more prominent among those who do not easily become part of social networks. Students who have a dysfunctional attitude have the potential to experience loneliness. Students tend to experience loneliness when they believe that it will be difficult to find a partner, experience anxiety in interactions with other people, think that other people consider them unwanted, or have negative expectations and perspectives. Individuals who experience loneliness may not have secure attachments with other people, may not have strong social networks or poor support, or individual characteristics that interfere with the development of satisfying relationships. Lonely students also experience difficulties in deciphering information so they cannot respond appropriately when interacting with other people, which also causes an increased feeling of loneliness. The risk factor for loneliness in college students is not much different from adults. Loneliness is associated with several issues, such as fear of intimacy, low self-esteem, or even having past experiences with loneliness due to dysfunctional family life or unsatisfying relationships with others. Among children, loneliness is related to feelings of lack of support from mothers, fathers, and classmates and a history of being bullied predicts significantly higher levels of loneliness among adolescents [9]. Another factor related to loneliness is low academic achievement [10].

The loneliness that occurs at universities also occurs because stress over academic demands, shifting social roles, and the insta-

bility of educational and employment opportunities make students vulnerable to mental health problems, such as anxiety and depression such as during a pandemic [11]. The influence of social media on university also has a negative impact on mental health. Students entering universities are vulnerable to social media demands. Students who censor their identity tend to experience poor mental health problems and students who appear to be as they are do not experience loneliness problems [12].

According to the research results, it was found that loneliness in adolescents was proven to be associated with deficits in family relationships, while loneliness in university students tended to be associated with deficits in peer relations [13]. Self-compassion is also a factor that influences loneliness in students. Students who have high self-compassion will feel less lonely [14].

Loneliness can be a unidimensional or multidimensional concept. Some researchers view loneliness as a single event whose intensity varies. Loneliness is also seen as a multidimensional concept, namely the social dimension and the emotional dimension. Social loneliness occurs when a person does not have a wider social network as desired, while emotional loneliness occurs when someone loses intimate relationships. Emotional loneliness can result in sadness and fear. As a type of loneliness, internal loneliness comes from the perception of being alone in any situation. Factors associated with internal loneliness include personality, locus of control, mental stress, low self-esteem, feelings of guilt, and poor coping strategies with situations [1].

Loneliness Impacts

Loneliness negatively affects academic and social adjustment to a new environment and is an important factor underlying dropout from university. The most frequently reported student stressors were related to social relationships (i.e. relationships with partners, peers, family, and faculty). In addition, difficulties in coping with social pressures at

university and the risk of becoming socially isolated and lonely are thought to play an important role in the increasing prevalence rates of mental illness, psychological distress, low well-being among the student population, and increased demand for support services. Loneliness is the strongest predictor of student mental distress and causes or worsens anxiety, stress, depression, and overall mental health over time [8, 15]. Students who feel lonely and isolated tend to spend their time lazing around so they don't thrive in an academic environment [16].

Loneliness and mental health

Loneliness was the strongest overall predictor of mental distress [17]. Although the mechanism behind loneliness seems simple, as individuals are dissatisfied with the underlying reason, experiencing such feelings over a long period can have significant consequences. Several studies have linked depression to loneliness. Loneliness and rumination were found to be predictive of depressive symptoms; about 88% of individuals with depressive symptoms feel lonely.

In addition to depression, loneliness is often associated with low self-esteem. If a person suffers from low self-esteem, they may subsequently experience increased feelings of loneliness; conversely, someone's loneliness can make them feel inferior. Adolescents who have poor self-evaluations experience more loneliness and more negative emotions, which in turn result in lower life satisfaction. Individuals who experience loneliness are also significantly more likely to have higher levels of anxiety, mental disorders such as phobias, and higher levels of suicidal ideation. Student engagement levels mediated the relationship between semester conditions and suicidal ideation. This suggests that during times of less busy college periods, such as summer sessions, a student's feelings of inclusiveness and sense of belonging can decrease due to changes in his or her social group, which can therefore increase suicidal ideation or suicide [15, 18]. These findings indicate that feelings of lone-

liness due to a lack of feeling can have a significant and serious impact on individuals. In addition, loneliness also has implications for increasing the likelihood of developing Alzheimer's disease and reducing cognitive function [9]. Apart from the impact on mental health, the level of loneliness of students also affects internet addiction [19]. Therefore, intervention and prevention of loneliness is very important for students [20].

Loneliness and Physical Health

Apart from mental health, loneliness is also associated with a number of physical health problems. Loneliness is associated with an increased risk of cardiovascular problems such as high blood pressure, coronary heart disease, or decreased cardiac output. Loneliness was also associated with increased pain, and fatigue, and experienced more symptoms and lower levels of physical activity.

Loneliness has also been found to affect a person's sleep quality so that lonely individuals have less healthy sleep quality and need an excessive number of hours of sleep for recovery than individuals who are not lonely. This in turn can lead to worse daytime functioning, which also predicts worsening loneliness.

In addition to the problems mentioned above, loneliness is also associated with a higher death rate. Individuals with strong social ties have a 50% higher chance of survival. Good relationships with other people can have significant positive effects on one's health. Loneliness significantly leads to health risk behaviors such as smoking [9].

Loneliness Prevention and Intervention

The impact of loneliness on various aspects of physical and mental health, as well as on society, demands adequate intervention to reduce feelings of loneliness. Loneliness is a stigma. Stigma prevents people from communicating, sharing, and collaborating in overcoming this social illness. Loneliness needs to be released, and overcome the stigma attached to it. Community togetherness, interpersonal relationships, social support, and shared care are very important [21]. Pre-

vention programs for loneliness are very important to implement [22]. Such an intervention could help reduce the burden of disease in a student's future professional life [23].

1. Improve social skills

Students who experience feelings of loneliness often have social skills that are less developed than their peers who do not experience feelings of loneliness. Therefore, the way to reduce feelings of loneliness is to train students in verbal and nonverbal communication, in making contact with other people, giving and receiving compliments, and overcoming physical intimacy problems. Improving social skills is proven to reduce student loneliness, increase self-awareness in social interactions, and be more assertive. Social verbal skills play an important role in students' experiences of loneliness as well as depression and anxiety. Improving students' social skills should be considered by universities that seek to reduce the mental health burden experienced by their students [24].

2. Increase opportunities for social interaction

As a result of inadequate social skills, students who experience loneliness often have smaller social networks than students who do not experience feelings of loneliness. In addition to enhancing social skills, interventions to increase opportunities for social interaction help students apply their newly developed social skills when meeting new people. Examples of opportunities for social interaction are study groups, student organizations, and sports clubs.

3. Overcoming and adapting maladaptive social cognition

Changing maladaptive social cognition is the most successful intervention to reduce loneliness. Maladaptive social cognition can be seen as the automatic negative thoughts that a person has about social relationships and negative thoughts about themselves. Maladaptive social cognition arises due to ineffective coping skills resulting in a negative cycle. People who experience loneliness interact with cynicism and mistrust. This mal-

adaptive social behavior is treated through cognitive behavior therapy (CBT) which involves identifying and adapting negative thoughts. Interventions that address maladaptive social cognition are recognized as the most important intervention (four times more effective than other types of intervention) to reduce feelings of loneliness because they are related to personal problems that cause feelings of loneliness [7].

One of the factors causing loneliness involves the individual's social cognition. Lonely individuals are significantly more likely to have negative perceptions of themselves, ranging from feeling inferior, unattractive, or even worthless, to feeling less socially attractive than other people. They tend to perceive the world more negatively and view others as less trustworthy and accepting, which makes them tend to anticipate and worry about negative judgments or other people's thoughts about them.

Cognitive related interventions help students to reframe their thinking, so that their negative thoughts are then transformed into benefits or more beneficial outcomes from loneliness (e.g. loneliness allows individuals to be more creative or discover more about themselves). Interventions that focus on changing social attributions (for example, ways to develop and maintain new relationships, reducing stress, improving communication skills, and the importance of connecting with others) are more effective at reducing loneliness [25].

4. Social supports groups

Social supports from several elements gives people the help they need in certain situations. For example: advice, information, financial support or friendship. Intervention in the form of weekly meetings (for nine weeks) during the first year as a student, discussing topics related to their transition to college. Examples of such topics are social networks, balance between study, work and social life, pressure by peers and college, where to live, expectations versus reality and old social networks. This session is facilitat-

ed by students. Students with social support groups experience significantly less feelings of loneliness, higher perceived social support and increased adaptation to college [7].

5. Reaching out individual experiencing loneliness with befriending

As mentioned above, most research on loneliness focuses on factors and interventions related to helping lonely individuals through changing maladaptive coping strategies, increasing opportunities for social interaction or social support, or improving the social skills of individuals who experience loneliness. Most of the literature focuses on the use of friendship. Even though friendship is still focused on lonely individuals, individuals around lonely people can have a significant impact on the well-being of lonely individuals.

Befriending, is often defined as “a relationship between two or more individuals initiated, supported, and monitored by an institution that has determined one or more parties as parties that might benefit”. Although originally founded to reduce feelings of loneliness, its role has also expanded to help improve and maintain issues such as quality of life and mental health. Helping to improve physical health can also be a potential benefit, as making friends can help spot potential health conditions before they become more serious problems. Peer interventions are usually implemented through external agencies or third parties, working to establish friendly relations between volunteers and individuals who are socially isolated or do not have adequate sources of social support. Buddy programs can leverage technology such as email, online access, or even the use of the phone to increase levels of interaction and support. Friendship can also help individuals who experience loneliness to a larger community. Peer intervention decreases feelings of social isolation [9].

CONCLUSION

College students in university often experience loneliness. Loneliness has negative

effects on mental and physical health such as low physical activity, heart problems, depression, anxiety, low self-esteem and suicidal ideation. Integrative intervention and prevention involving friends, institutions, and family is very helpful in overcoming loneliness in students.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors have no conflict of interest.

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