

Is it Loneliness or Solitude?

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Abstract

Loneliness, social isolation, aloneness, and solitude are frequently used interchangeably but are actually different. Loneliness is particularly salient now, due to the international restrictions on social activities imposed as a result of COVID-19, which brought loneliness into open discussion worldwide. The article highlights loneliness as a multidimensional construct and reviews its impact on cognitive, behavioral and affective functioning. In doing so, particular attention is given to loneliness as it manifests through the various life stages, as well as how personal predisposition and contextual factors may exacerbate it. In this article we also review solitude, and a clear distinction between loneliness and solitude is established. Finally, we conclude by addressing the global claims of loneliness during the pandemic and its implications. We offer a point of view which may assist in coping with it.

Keywords: Loneliness; Solitude; Alienation; Isolation; Consequences of Loneliness; COVID-19

Research indicates that there exist an increasing number of people who report having nobody to confide in, resulting in a fundamental loss of social ties and human contact that was usually present throughout the past generations ([1,2]. Research, especially in the West, has indicated that when individuals are able to substitute virtual reality for the real world, social connections become diminished, and individualistic goals become more heavily targeted [3]. Cacioppo., *et al.* [42] found that loneliness is not only linked to poor mental and physical health, but that its rates have increased in recent times. For instance, loneliness for middle aged adults and the elderly was estimated to be experienced by about 11-17% of this demographic in the 1970s yet has now risen to 40% [4], and this trend extends across the globe. Victor [5] noted that loneliness has always been part of the human condition and infuses popular culture, asserting that the origins of loneliness can be traced to Durkheim's writings on anomie, and less so to Marx's concepts of alienation. In any case, all writers have emphasized the notion that humans are social animals and thus depend on their social relations for wellbeing. As Sonderby [6] puts it, there

are two approaches to the conceptualization of loneliness. First, and arguably the favored theory, is the "social needs" approach which hones in on loneliness as it relates to social connections and its emotional impact. Secondly, is the "cognitive approach" which posits that the perception and personal appraisal of one's own quality of social relationships is what dictates loneliness.

The consequences of loneliness: It's toxic for your health

Undoubtedly, all of us are familiar with bouts of loneliness. While most temporary bouts may be resolved on their own or addressed by taking action (e.g., by seeking out social contacts or refining social skills), the pathology that follows prolonged and chronic loneliness often requires some type of intervention to overcome it. Left unchecked, loneliness has been seen in tandem myriad of detrimental concerns, including but not limited to, inconsistent sleep, cognitive disruptions, malaise, mental health concerns, and negative implication on physical health such as heart conditions [7].

Social relations and Health

Not only has loneliness been observed to correlate with increased mortality risk and depressive symptoms [8], loneliness has also been theorized to have a physiological, physical and neurological impact. For instance, loneliness has also been observed to correlate with a compromised immune system [9]; heightened blood pressure [7]; heightened hypothalamic pituitary adrenocortical activity [10], and inflammation [11]. Furthermore, loneliness has even been observed to relate to a heightened likelihood of Alzheimer's disease prognosis [12]. It is worthwhile to mention, the impact of loneliness is not solely limited the human population.

In fact, Cacioppo and Cacioppo's [13] review of the literature showcased how loneliness can affect the health of various animals as well; i.e., "social isolation has been shown to decrease the lifespan of the fruit fly... promote the development of obesity and type 2 diabetes in mice... delay the positive effects of running on adult neurogenesis in rats (... increase the activation of the sympathetic adrenomedullary response to acute stressors in rats (; ... increase morning rises in cortisol in squirrel monkeys ... and elevate 24 hr urinary catecholamines and oxidative stress in the Watanabe heritable hyperlipidemic rabbit" (p. 61).

Affective features

Following a comprehensive review of the literature involving a wide demographic that included children and youth, university students, and adults, Heinrich and Gullone [14] have discovered that loneliness perpetually includes a large group of negative and upsetting sentiments (see also [15]. Among them are feeling undesirable, disliked, and dismissed [16], feeling miserable, and discouraged seeing oneself as unattractive, frantic, sad, and vulnerable [17]. experiencing social anxiety, rejection, feelings of being irrational, rejected, and inferior [18-22].

Cognitive features

McWhirter, *et al.* [23] found that low self-esteem was the most common attribute felt by lonely individuals. It was further suggested that low self-esteem and loneliness have a bidirectional influence as both play a role in the growth and upkeep of each other (see [24]. Accordingly, desolate individuals see themselves as second-rate, useless, ugly, unlovable, and socially clumsy [14],

and with prolonged loneliness, these negative self-appraisals intensify. Loneliness was likewise observed to be related with self-consciousness, self-focus and a tendency to be hyper-sensitive to feelings of rejection [25-27], while also likely to be viewed as untrustworthy and not having desirable social skills [28]. It is thus easy to see how this may create a negative feedback loop of misery, worthlessness, hopelessness and of course, further loneliness.

Behavioral features

Loneliness commonly manifests itself behaviorally through inhibition and ineffective social skills [29,30]. Lonely individuals, ordinarily, are less inclined to face social challenges, lack assertiveness, have inept social skills, and often find themselves relinquishing control in group settings [18,31-33]. Interestingly, a common theme of a self-reported social skill deficit is the inappropriate use of self-disclosure [34,35], which often sabotages the ability to make connections. The lonely individual's helplessness also translates to a more passive and inefficient approach to coping with stress [36], as they often withdraw and disengage, and instead look for solution and help from others [37,38] - help which may not be readily available.

Cacioppo and Patrick [39] who reported that as one becomes more eager for social connection and validation, they wind up needing and even demanding attention, validation and social intercourse.

Lonely individuals tend to have stronger reactions to para-social interactions (i.e., when an intimate relationship is imagined to exist between TV viewers and a fantasy character, such as one of a movie or show they follow). Specifically, the literature has observed that lonely individuals placed a higher need to place a sense of belongingness with media characters [40], and also became overly distressed over para-social break ups [41].

Who are the lonely?

As Cacioppo, *et al.* [42] put it, although some populations are more vulnerable to the effects of loneliness, alienation, and social isolation, loneliness does not discriminate. Anyone may experience loneliness. Though we have so far briefly touched on loneliness, social isolation, and the impacts of an absent or frail social and emotional supportive network, who are the forlorn? The individuals who feel detached, distanced and in isolation?

How would they feel and act, and what are their attributes? How can we notice when we are experiencing loneliness? Living in the new age, Pappano [43] noted that “we are losing touch. And we don’t even realize it” (p. 1). Other researchers endorse this stance and have observed that those of us who feel lonely will often find themselves drawn to watching other people, e.g., on TV, in stores, social media, etc. [24,44]. Yet, everyone experiences loneliness in a different way, and though there are broad affective, cognitive, and behavioral implications that resonate with many, loneliness is not experienced in an entirely consistent manner from individual to individual [14,45].

So, what is actually loneliness?

In referencing the various takes on the definition of loneliness, we must mention an important contribution from Fromm-Reichmann’s [46], who stated that rigorous scientific explanations must be considered to truly understand loneliness. Until Fromm-Reichmann’s [46] claim, loneliness was viewed merely as psychological condition, and measurement tools emphasized individual differences, rather than the actual effects of being lonely (e.g., [47-49]). Another widely influential contribution to our understanding of loneliness comes from Weiss [49], who stated that loneliness could be of either the emotional or the social type. Emotional loneliness was described as the state occurring when an individual lacks an intimate partner and feels isolated and anxious as a result; social loneliness, on the other hand, was used to describe bored and unfulfilled individuals who felt that their social networks were insufficient in meeting their social needs.

Cognitive theorists considered loneliness to be the consequence of having social relations that do not meet one’s personal and subjective expectations, resulting in psychological distress [50,51]. While this may accurately represent loneliness in some conditions, loneliness can also be experienced in the presence of other people (e.g., being in a crowded train or bus). Another experience of intense loneliness could be found in a romantic relationship that is fading and leaving both individuals feeling a lack of connection. Although this does not meet the criteria for social isolation, within the context of love and intimacy the crushing anguish of loneliness can still be clearly felt [24,52].

In our analysis of the literature, we found there to be six themes that have been put forth by the various theoretical orientations and

which are characteristic of loneliness’ experiences: 1. Feeling lonely is a result of loss or separation; 2. It may begin in early as childhood, or even birth, and has the ability to be consistent throughout one’s life; 3. It is related to a lack of purpose or meaning; 4. It is hard to endure; 5. It propels people to find significance and connection; 6. It may have an evolutionary root; and, 6. It brings forth the potential to seek out growth and opportunity [53].

Despite being in a boundless and magnificent universe, if brutal social conditions are embedded in our environment, then self-alienation, emptiness, and a feeling of insignificance are practically inescapable. Every individual who strolled on this planet has encountered loneliness, whether they’d like to admit to themselves or not. In our opinion, loneliness is an output that is created when certain environmental conditions are “aligned”. Put simply, to be human is to experience loneliness. We view loneliness itself as non-dominant recessive trait, which expresses itself when the necessary inputs are “toggled”. These inputs are almost always intense disruptions to one’s reality, e.g., unfulfilled affection, belongingness, intimacy, alienation, or even the philosophical pondering of death [54].

The shades of loneliness

So far, we have drawn from the available literature to describe loneliness. Next, we will clarify what chronic and transient loneliness are, how these two elements differ, and we will further clarify what loneliness is not. In doing so, we must discuss some relevant constructs which stem from loneliness including depression, anxiety, and solitude.

When addressing components to human relations, Rokach and Sha’ked [24] marked the psychosocial objectification of loneliness and the presence of romantic relationships as two core elements, while also labelling the latter as a protective factor against loneliness. They further elaborated by stating that essential loneliness and transient loneliness (also referred to as reactive loneliness) are two common forms of loneliness, commonly in the presence of intimate relationships. This is like the separation made between endogenous and reactive depression in which the previous one is believed to be an immutable characteristic of an individual’s make up (as opposed to being a response to a life event). Ultimately, essential loneliness is a primal dimension to an

individuals' disposition. Thus, essential loneliness is often credited as being a result of one's personality characteristics and natural development (e.g., self-esteem, feelings of social inadequacy, a consistent inability to develop intimate relationships, etc.) Essential loneliness has been conceptualized as a state of being disconnected and not belonging, while also being attributed to early attachment disruptions [55]. Transient, or reactive, loneliness on the other hand is typically set off due to undesirable interactions and dynamics in a relationship, thus having more of an ability to be changed, improved, and overcome [24].

Understandably, it is within the realm of possibility to experience transient loneliness through brief bouts of the experience. These occasional bouts often resolve with time and often don't have long-term implications [56]. But, when loneliness is persistent in a person's life, the experience may be considered as chronic loneliness, and this may entail a host of emotional, behavioral, and cognitive implications [57]. Furthermore, the literature has observed the chronically lonely to have significantly more severe depression, anxiety, global loneliness, and neuroticism, while also possessing lower levels of self-esteem, confidence, extraversion and an external locus of control [56]. Personality traits are also different between these types of loneliness [18]; for instance, the chronically lonely direct their interpersonal deficits inwardly and attribute them to stable characteristic, the transiently lonely, however, are less self-critical in their perceptions, as they often recognize situational and personal factors as playing a role in their experience with loneliness [25].

Solitude

Lonely people are not necessarily alone. Being alone is the objective reality of being geographically isolated from others. Essentially, the two states can be mutually exclusive, as one can be alone and not lonely. Recalling past memories, daydreaming, and planning a trip are all examples of being alone while not necessarily being lonely. Therefore, being alone is neither "good" nor "bad". A brilliant conceptualization of the distinction between loneliness and solitude come from Cacioppo., *et al.* [7], who likened solitude to the glory of aloneness, while loneliness is the pain of aloneness. Long [58] identified nine different sorts of solitude, which he then classified into three categories: the solitude of self-expansion (self-discovery, creativity), negative solitude (feeling lonely, wanting a

diversion), and solitude associated with a sense of connection with others (intimacy, spirituality). Although it is widely understood that loneliness and solitude are distinct concepts, it should be noted that solitude, rather than loneliness, allows people to engage in self-exploration and creativity (see [59] Long and Averill, 2003). In our opinion, what Long [58] referred to as "negative solitude" is simply another name for "loneliness," and it does not really represent the word "solitude." Being lonely is not necessarily being alone, as we mentioned earlier. Greenwood and Long [60] found that the "self-expansion solitude" predicted media involvement, where people who became involved with media characters and stories experienced a creative and transformative process that facilitated personal growth.

The deciding factor of how we feel is not the circumstance itself, but our perception of it. Loneliness will undoubtedly be felt when we are alone and when we desire human interaction and companionship. However, solitude is defined as the desire and need to be alone and not wishing to be in the company of others at that particular time. It is possible to find immense joy and fulfilment in isolation when we need time for ourselves and wish to get away from the incessant barrage of everyday tasks, chores, expectations, stimulation, and inconveniences. When we are alone and at peace, we can ponder, meditate, contemplate, write, engage in hobbies, etc. While spending time with family and friends may be cherished, solitude is also a treasured time, our time, that may help us revitalize, reenergize, and reinvigorate (see also [39]). Thus, solitude may be described as the freedom from the demands of others, and an allowance to attend one's needs and desires [59].

In today's technologically-frenzy society, our ability to be left alone has been tested. Merton [61] emphasized that solitude is not a departure from, or a separation of, everyday life but rather an integral component of having a meaningful existence. It is thus no wonder why solitude is at the heart of many spiritual traditions (e.g., Buddhism), with its state functioning as a catalyst for grounding oneself and inching closer with the authentic realities of existence.

Traditionally, solitude was thought to be essential for spirituality, enlightenment, and creativity. Several religious and mythological figures have been described as having spent significant amounts of time in solitude, extending from the Abrahamic (Moses, Jesus,

Mohammed, etc.), to the Dharmic religions (e.g., Buddha, Guru Nanak, etc.), and extending to the mythology of the ancient Greeks. To name a few, Jesus' journey into the wilderness, Buddha's meditation under the Bo Tree, and Odysseus's 10-year voyage into his homeland were all moments where solitude led to enlightenment. To emphasize this point, Long and Averill [59] lights the fact that many spiritual, theological, creative, and aesthetic advances have emerged from isolated experiences, which in turn, have influenced countless social movements and practices (France, 1996; [53,62].

Great writers (e.g., Kafka, Gibbon, Rilke) and philosophers (e.g., Kant, Hume, Wittgenstein) produced some of their finest work during moments of solitude [63]. One famous example is that of Henry David Thoreau, an American poet and philosopher, who willingly isolated himself to in the Walden Pond for more than two years in order to seek solitude [64]. Thoreau ascribed his prolific writings to the creative energy gained during moments of solitude, and as he maintained, there is no companion as companionable as solitude [64]. According to Storr [63], several of the globe's greatest minds seldom built intimate bonds or raised families. They required solitude to create and become. Beethoven, to name another well-known example, became increasingly isolated as his deafness progressed and had a tough time forming close relationships as a result. As Storr [63] commented, Beethoven's deaf world allowed him the freedom to detach from the intrusive sounds of the external environment and from the rigidities of the material world, while also granting him the ability to tap into more of his unrealized potential.

Although solitude can be a beneficial experience that causes one to grow and flourish, this capacity must first require one to be okay with the total absence of social interaction [65]. Moustakas [66] hailed the healing and growth-promoting process of solitude as he maintained that it allowed access to our untapped potential, resulting to unique revelations, greater understanding about ourselves and the world, as well as an enhanced ability to connect to others. Solitude has been demonstrated to alleviate a person's dependence on people for company and sharpen one's sense of personal control [67,68]. Incorporating more opportunities for solitude may enable lonesome individuals to manage the depression that can accompany extremely long spells of loneliness in a better way [69]. Improving solitary skills is even advocated

as part of therapeutic modalities for the lonely. When we are in solitude, we have the chance to take care of ourselves. As these moments allow for improvement, self-awareness, and meaning, translates to fuller insight into one's needs, while also equipping us with the necessary skills to be in accepting and loving relationships with others. Solitude relieves the individual of dependence on others for company, which may increase one's sense of personal control [67,68].

Loneliness and solitude

Although both loneliness and solitude refer to being alone, how we experience it distinguishes the two constructs. When we wish to be around people, feeling forgotten, irrelevant, and abandoned by everyone around us, we get lonely and long for another's presence and love. On the other hand, those of us who want solitude seek it for the exact opposite reason: they prefer and require being alone in order to participate in pursuits that are held dear, e.g., introspection, getting in touch with nature, reading, or relaxing from the continual onslaught of stimuli in our daily lives. Where loneliness is uncomfortable, tiring, and has a variety of detrimental repercussions, solitude can be described as invigorating and revitalizing.

Loneliness during a pandemic

On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization declared the COVID-19 outbreak a global pandemic and closures of schools, businesses, social venues in many parts of the world were mandated to prevent the spread of the virus. Additionally, many countries declared states of emergency which resulted in strict public health measures and effectively put cities under lockdown. It was found that the imposed physical isolation which was accompanied by economic instability, fear of infection, and stress surrounding the uncertainty of the future had given rise to loneliness that was experienced as a major factor of the pandemic [70].

While social interaction was a sought-after activity that would, commonly, bring pleasure and the feeling of being part of a larger group, COVID-19 and its restrictions increased the fear of contagion from social interactions, and made even limited interactions within closer social circles to be deemed as "dangerous" [71]. Prior research has shown that these types of disruptions are related to heightened loneliness, depression, and anxiety [72]. Moreover, the imposing of physical mobility restrictions like quarantining was

likely to increase the experience of loneliness [73], as they could have increased the discrepancy between desired and perceived social relationships, and prevented or seriously limited social interactions which are the building blocks for adaptive functioning [74]. As a result, the levels of loneliness, as well as the levels of depression and anxiety, have increased significantly during the COVID-19 pandemic [75,76]. Freyhofer, *et al.* [77] found that maladaptive coping strategies with the stress experienced during the COVID-19 restrictions and loneliness in the form of denial, substance use, and behavioral disengagement played a significant role in the trajectory of mental health outcomes, and that loneliness is a notable partial mediator of subsequent depression and anxiety, which may seriously and negatively affect one's life and functionality.

Conclusion

In closing, loneliness is a multidimensional construct, and its state can be conceptualized as producing up to five distinct outcomes for those who experience it either in tandem or independently. This includes emotional distress, a sense of inadequacy and alienation, interpersonal isolation, self-isolation, and a markedly changed awareness of oneself [24]. Loneliness is non-discriminative—every person from every walk of life will experience it at some point in their lives, and this experience is not an undifferentiated stressor but instead uniquely felt by those who experience it. The manifestations of these symptoms, while distinctive, are predominantly predicated upon the type of loneliness experienced. That is, it depends on whether loneliness arose due to a personal predisposition that may have roots in early attachment disruptions (i.e., essential loneliness) or due to a reaction to one's environment and life changes (i.e., transient loneliness). Nevertheless, for all individuals, the pain of loneliness may be excruciating, principally impacting one's self-esteem [23]. In the presence of loneliness, we default to blaming ourselves for feeling that way to begin with, and thus attribute our state to harsh negative self-appraisals. In turn, this further exacerbates our loneliness and allows us to continue to fall prey to those negative evaluations, creating a negative feedback loop that is difficult to get out of [14,24]. This problem, however, is not solely an individual one, as society harbors prejudiced and stigmatized notions toward the lonely, which ends up being self-inflicted by those who experience it.

It is important to re-emphasize however, that loneliness can sometimes lead to positive outcomes. For instance, loneliness can act as catalyst, spurring individuals to re-evaluate their social world and sharpen their social skills [66].

Rokach and Brock [60,78]. In this way, loneliness can be used as a marker for growth and self-discovery. On the other hand, solitude, is a state which always defined positive outcomes for those who experience it. The state of solitude can be simply described as the luxury of escaping a demanding and stimuli-filled environment. While both loneliness and solitude are typically experienced alone, the perception that distinguishes the two is vastly different; loneliness is despised and troublesome to deal with, while solitude is intentionally sought after and provides a soothing and therapeutic effect. Times of solitude are cherished and may lead to the potential for enhanced capacity for intimacy, discovery, creativity, and spirituality [58], while times of loneliness always include internal and social hardship.

Today, in a world where the prevalence of loneliness and individualization is increasing, disconnection seems to be the sole connection that most of us share. Making matters worse is the reluctance for us to admit, not only to our social networks but also to ourselves, when we are lonely. In this way, the COVID-19 pandemic brought us together in our collective isolation and allowed us to admit it openly without being stigmatized. While we have yet to know the full extent of the implications of the COVID-19 pandemic, thankfully, a positive byproduct is that we all experienced loneliness 'together', granting us the ability to overcome the heuristic that only the "weak" are susceptible to being lonely. Knowing that nobody is impervious to its effects, the hope is that it will enhance our ability to empathize with those who are lonely, in the future, and perhaps encourage us to accept it when we ourselves experience it.

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