

Forum: World Health Organisation

Issue: Measures to combat the consequences of loneliness

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Introduction:

The issue of loneliness has become increasingly prevalent over the past few decades, and it is continuing to worsen in light of the COVID-19 pandemic. This struggle is widely referred to as a 'loneliness epidemic', as it can impact people of all ages and social statuses. Feeling lonely for extended periods of time can easily translate into the severe deterioration of mental health. This could result in reduced self-esteem, feelings of anxiety, and even depression.

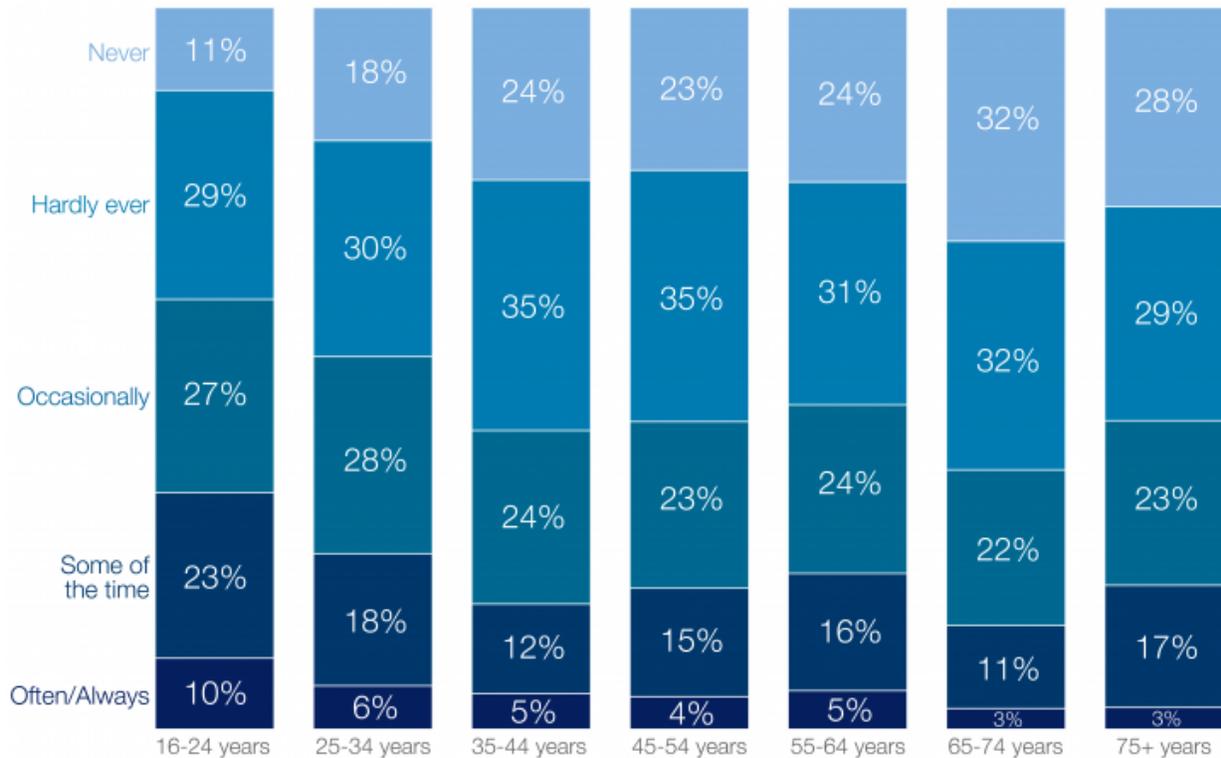
When discussing the topic of loneliness, it is vital to remember that one can still feel lonely without being physically isolated. In fact, there are a growing number of people, primarily adolescents and young adults, who feel *social* isolation. This could be due to a lack of social connections or interaction with friends and family, and it is precisely why the pandemic is so significant to the issue of loneliness. Despite the development of the Internet, which has allowed people from around the world to share their opinions and seek support from one another, loneliness amongst teenagers still remains rampant on an international scale. It is important for governments and healthcare systems not to overlook the loneliness of people in these age groups because of the stereotype that mainly older people feel lonely.

Delegates should explore measures to reduce and combat the consequences of loneliness to create more accepting and harmonious communities where everyone feels a sense of belonging.

Reported frequency of loneliness by age in England, 2017



The survey asked people living in England: "How often do you feel lonely?" with the following response categories: "often/always", "sometimes", "occasionally", "hardly ever" and "never".



Data source: UK Office for National Statistics (ONS). Results from the Community Life Survey, 2016 to 2017. OurWorldinData.org - Research and data to make progress against the world's largest problems.

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Link to this image [here](#)

Definition of Key Terms:

- 1. Loneliness:** A state of being without company that produces a feeling of bleakness or desolation. [Merriam Webster]
- 2. Isolated:** Not near to other places, or feeling unhappy because of not seeing or talking to other people. [Cambridge Dictionary]
- 3. Depression:** Persistent sadness and a lack of interest or pleasure in previously rewarding or enjoyable activities. [WHO]
- 4. Mental Health:** A state of well-being in which an individual realizes his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively, and is able to make a contribution to his or her own community. [WHO]



5. **Solitude:** The quality or state of being alone or remote from society (usually voluntarily). [Merriam Webster]
6. **Ostracism:** the action of intentionally not including someone in a social group or activity. [Cambridge Dictionary]

Background Information

History

According to theconversation.com, *'Although loneliness may seem like a timeless, universal experience, it seems to have originated in the late 16th century'*. Loneliness in that time period used to be less about issues concerning personal mental health, but rather issues of safety. There used to be physical danger in straying too far away from a familiar society. However, over the years, it has evolved into a matter related to a person's wellbeing and inner emotions. Industrialisation and urbanisation have led to a larger number of people living alone. Modern loneliness is no longer simply tied to the concept of being physically apart from other people; it can also reflect a state of feeling emotionally detached from one's surroundings.

Impacts of loneliness

There are several significant impacts of loneliness on various stakeholders in society.

Individual health

Extreme feelings of loneliness can lead to health issues for individuals. Some examples include increased alcohol consumption and subsequent poor decision-making. Such actions can be rather harmful to the individual and may even lead to other long-term health problems. Therefore, it is critical to control the spread of loneliness in order to prevent these health risks (which could definitely decrease peoples' quality of life).

Governments

The issue of loneliness is also one that impacts governmental bodies. Policymakers worldwide are trying hard to combat loneliness in their citizens through conducting various surveys and encouraging campaigns to reduce these feelings. The wealth of a country and its citizens does not necessarily protect it from the 'loneliness epidemic'. In fact, richer countries have found higher rates of loneliness as a result of divorces or simply out of the desire to be independent. In countries where the digital world is continuously developing, fewer people tend to attend real-life events, therefore propagating the sense of social isolation or separation from their fellow citizens.

Current Situation

The reasons for people experiencing loneliness today

Age group

The most obvious age group that may be impacted by feelings of loneliness are the elderly. Countries with ageing populations are at a high risk of experiencing this 'loneliness epidemic' as more seniors live alone, away from their families (such as in old care homes). Additionally, many elderly folk face illnesses or loss of senses (vision, hearing, etc.) which can impede their ability to form meaningful connections in society and could even inhibit their ability to stay connected with their family members. Elderly people who may have retired from their jobs may experience a lack of motivation to be engaged and enthusiastic in everyday activities (or may even face ageism which prevents them from doing so), and this lack of drive propagates feelings of loneliness.

COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in various unprecedented lockdowns and extended periods of strict regulations around the world. Many people have been unable to visit their loved ones for years due to the ever-changing travel restrictions or the fear of falling ill. This has led to significant increases in rates of loneliness internationally. Mentalhealth.org.uk is an organisation that has conducted surveys in the UK since March 2020. They have discovered that loneliness rates tend to be *"higher in young people, people who are unemployed, [full-time]*

students and single parents”, which is a large part of the population. This could be due to the limited opportunities for social interaction, as friends are a vital part of any adolescent’s life. Forming these new relationships allow them to discover more about their identity and develop better as an individual. Although these feelings of loneliness may have been short-term initially, the lockdowns continued to extend in several nations, possibly making these emotions more long-term in nature.

As a result, our reliance on technology has increased when maintaining connections with our friends and family. However, this has the potential to be harmful to developing teenagers, since such extensive use of social media may influence their mental health. In fact, it may even *increase* feelings of loneliness when people see other countries open up again while still being under restrictions in their places of residence.

Digital era

As mentioned above, the growing digital era has definitely contributed to easing the pressures of the pandemic on individuals, as well as reducing their loneliness, in most cases. However, there is a growing phenomenon of social media ostracism; being excluded online. This can be highly detrimental to the mental health of teenagers and young adults in particular, who are generally more well-versed in digital interactions than people in other age groups.

There also seems to be more of a growing disconnect from the real world as a result of the developing digital age. Although online interactions may be more convenient than meeting up in person, they are primarily focused on *networking* rather than building meaningful relationships with people. This can create a sense of isolation for many, contributing to the issue of loneliness worldwide.

Actions that are being taken to combat loneliness

Several organisations are putting together surveys for national populations to gain an understanding of the current situation regarding feelings of loneliness. These survey results have allowed them to pinpoint exactly which sections of the population are most impacted by loneliness, and allow them to observe any trends that have formed. Despite the fact that this

action doesn't directly combat loneliness, it helps raise awareness about the situation and provides empirical evidence that loneliness is an urgent issue that must be dealt with.

Some countries have also taken the option to combat loneliness with online solutions, such as helplines. These specific solutions will be discussed further in the next section.

Major Parties Involved and Their Views

Japan

Japan has been tackling social isolation, especially amongst the elderly, after seeing a remarkable increase in the proportion of the elderly population living alone. They are redesigning communities to have more "social hubs," community residents, etc. The government has also appointed Japan's first "minister of loneliness," Tetushi Sakamoto, to implement measures to prevent social isolation.

Finland

Finland has one of the lowest shares (4%) of lonely people. Red Cross Finland helps alleviate loneliness by doing research on the Finland population and then adapting and creating solutions based on the data. What's interesting is though that loneliness is still a huge problem in Finland despite their top position in global happiness rankings. A reason for this is that due to high independence within the youth population, many become isolated from their grandparents or parents, and lose contact with them.

Canada

Canada has a ton of programs such as the "Friends of the Elderly," "Friendly Phone Program," and "Alberta Seniors' Centre Without Walls," which aim to better connect and integrate the elderly population into society.

United Kingdom

In 2016, the UK parliament made the topic of reducing loneliness a national priority. Prime Minister Theresa May appointed a "minister of loneliness" to design and implement a national

strategy to combat social isolation. A nongovernmental Commission of Loneliness was also established to study the problem and make recommendations

European commission

This is a project of the European Commission and the WHO Regional Office to step up work with cities and communities towards policies for age-friendly environments in Europe, and will be implemented in 2022. The age-friendly environments will be created by dedicating telephone numbers, community building projects and robots to assist lonely people.

Can MEDCs learn from LEDCS? (Costa Rica)

Contrary to popular belief, Less Economically Developed Countries aren't the only nations that must improve the happiness of their populations. On the contrary, there are some LEDCs that have significantly higher rates of happiness than richer countries. An excellent example is Costa Rica. It has one of the lowest GDPs in the world, yet, Costa Rica has consistently been found to be one of the happiest countries in the world. This could be due to various reasons, but the primary causes are found to be their strong sense of community and efforts to create comprehensive educational systems in the country. Their strong connection to nature can also be something that more developed cities lack due to the development of technology (mentioned in greater detail above).

UN Involvement, Relevant Resolutions, Treaties and Events

Whilst previous awareness-raising and resolutions regarding loneliness revolved around the elderly population, recently, with the pandemic, a greater proportion of the population has become alienated, and so the UN has adapted to that.

Along with the Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA), International Telecommunication Union (ITU) and United National Women (UN WOMEN), WHO, launched an advocacy brief on social isolation and loneliness.

- International Day of Friendship, 3 May 2011 (A/RES/65/275)

Other key events/campaigns are:

- Advocacy brief on social isolation and loneliness by WHO, DESA, ITU, and UN Women, 29 July 2021
 - This proposes a three-point strategy for addressing the UN Decade of Healthy Ageing 2021-2030
- UN Decade of Healthy Ageing, 2021-2030
 - This is a recent initiative started by WHO which will consist of 10 years of concerted, catalytic, and sustained collaboration with the older generation being the centre of the plan.

Possible Solutions

1. Collaboration between digitally advanced countries and less digitally advanced countries to share information and strategies to combat loneliness.
2. Incorporating education into school curriculums about the prevalence of loneliness in order to raise awareness among younger age groups.
3. Research into populations to find trends and solutions and countries to adopt solutions to their data
4. Promoting age-friendly environments which foster health and well-being and the participation of people as they age. They should be accessible, equitable, safe and secure for all.
5. Mobilisation of volunteers which have succeeded in Europe. This includes having organised telephone support services to help connect older adults.
6. Having volunteers to teach the elderly how to use social media (may allow them to feel more connected with the rest of the world).
7. Appointing a Minister of Loneliness (this has shown success in countries such as the UK and Japan).
8. Developing a platform, such as an app, for volunteers to deliver food, drive, and visit socially isolated elderly during the pandemic.

Bibliography

Useful Links

- https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n3Xv_g3g-mA&ab_channel=Kurzesagt%E2%80%993InaNutshell (Great introduction video)
- <https://www.who.int/teams/social-determinants-of-health/demographic-change-and-health-aging/social-isolation-and-loneliness> (Published by The World Health Organisation)
- <https://www.campaigntoendloneliness.org/the-facts-on-loneliness/> (Useful facts)
- <https://www.commonwealthfund.org/blog/2020/solutions-around-world-tackling-loneliness-and-social-isolation-during-covid-19> (Examples of international solutions)

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