



Naomi Ruth Cohen
Institute for Mental Health Education



TheChicagoSchool®



Alone Together

Confronting Loneliness
Across the Lifespan





American Foundation *for* Suicide Prevention

Illinois



Sponsor - Pillar





**Ascension
St. Joseph**

TRILOGY

Mental Wellbeing



Sponsors - Benefactors





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Family Health Centers®

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HEALING THE BRAIN, TRANSFORMING LIVES®

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Behavioral Health



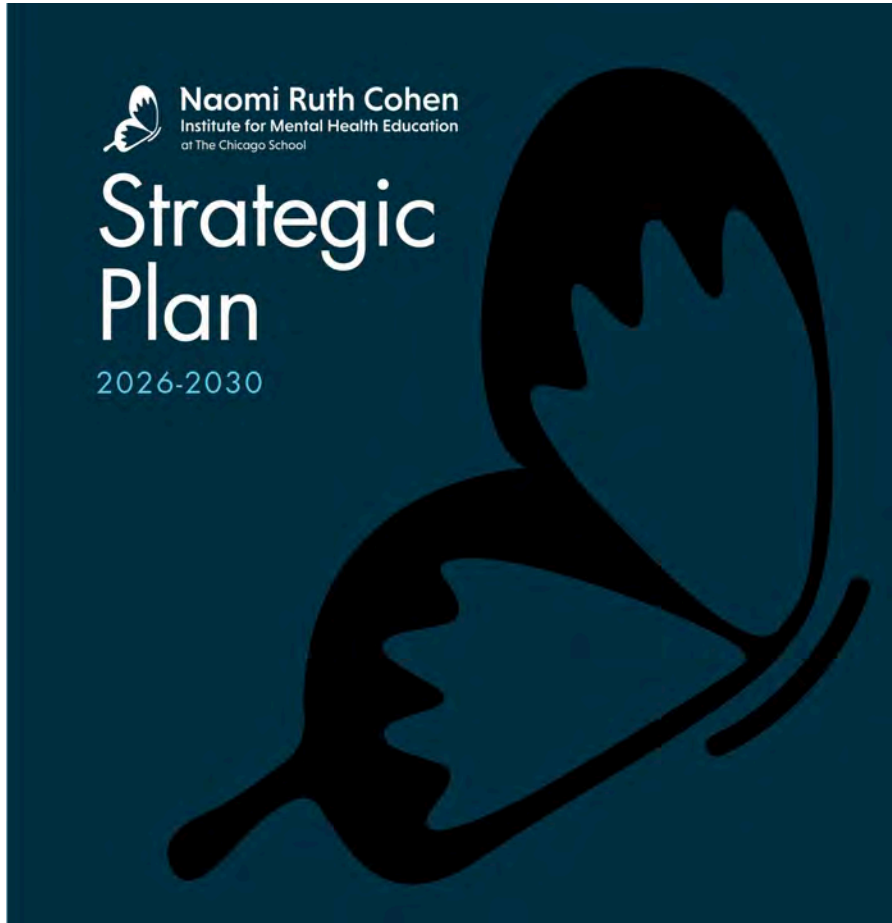
Sponsors – Patrons/Advocates



NRCI Impact

- 60 events, almost 1200 participants in the past year
- City of Evanston Mental Health First Aid
 - 19 training sessions
 - Over 300 participants
- Ongoing partnerships
 - Colleges and Universities
 - Schools
 - Community Organizations





Focus Areas:

- **Building Community Capacity to Reduce Stigma and Prevent Suicide**
- **Strengthening the Financial Foundation that Funds the Future**
- **Advancing Regional Leadership in Mental Health Education**





ILLINOIS COLLEGE
OF OSTEOPATHIC MEDICINE
at The Chicago School



Panel Presentation



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Introducing Our 2026 Panel



Dr. Nell Compernolle



Sarah Bier



Erin Arnheim

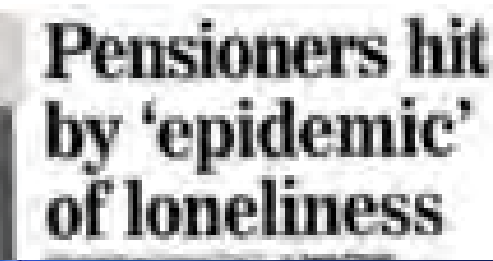


The Science of Loneliness

Nell Compennolle, PhD

NORC at The University of Chicago





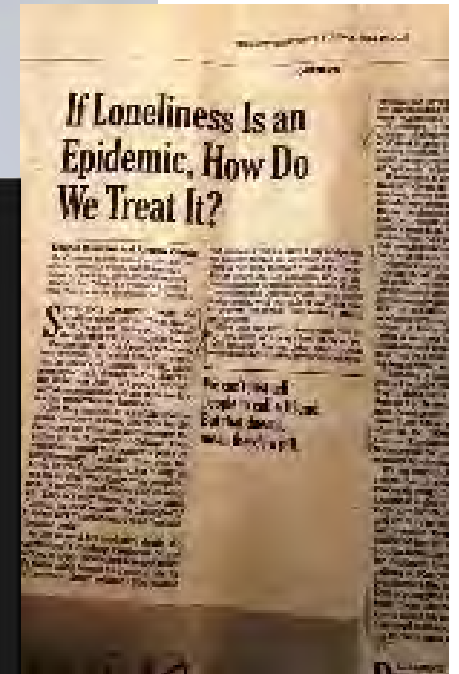
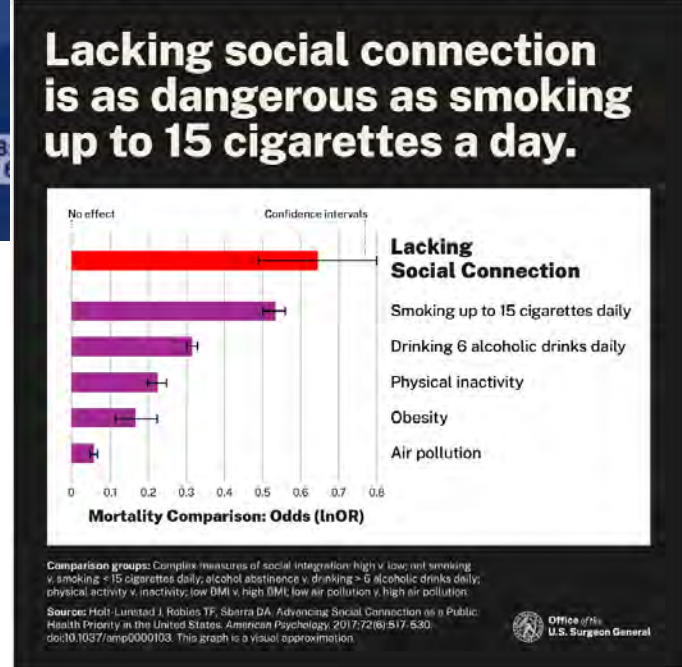
SOCIAL ISOLATION AND LONELINESS HAVE SERIOUS IMPACTS:

- Harm physical and mental health
- Reduces life expectancy
Loneliness causes **870 000 DEATHS A YEAR**
- Costs society **billions** in terms of health care, education and employment



HEALTH RISKS OF LONELINESS

- Heart Disease
- Stroke
- Anxiety
- Depression



What is loneliness?

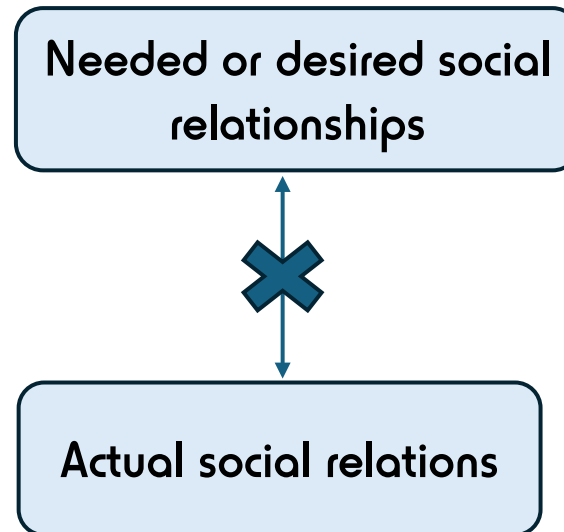
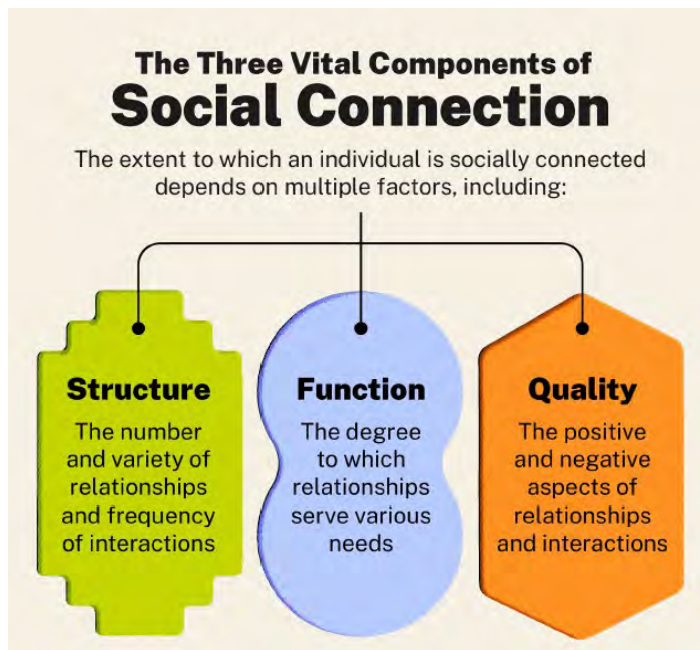


What *is* loneliness? Conceptual framework: Context

Loneliness is part of the continuum of social connection

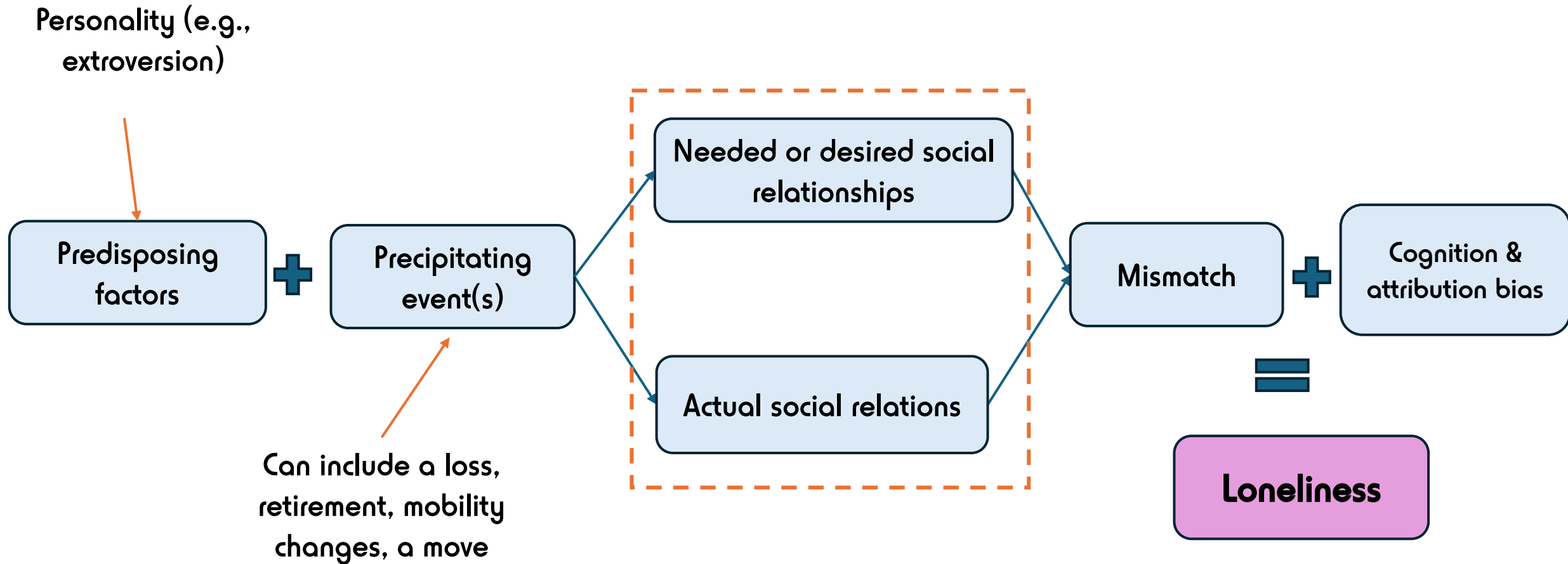
Loneliness: the perceived discrepancy between one's desired and actual social relationships

Loneliness is distinct from social isolation

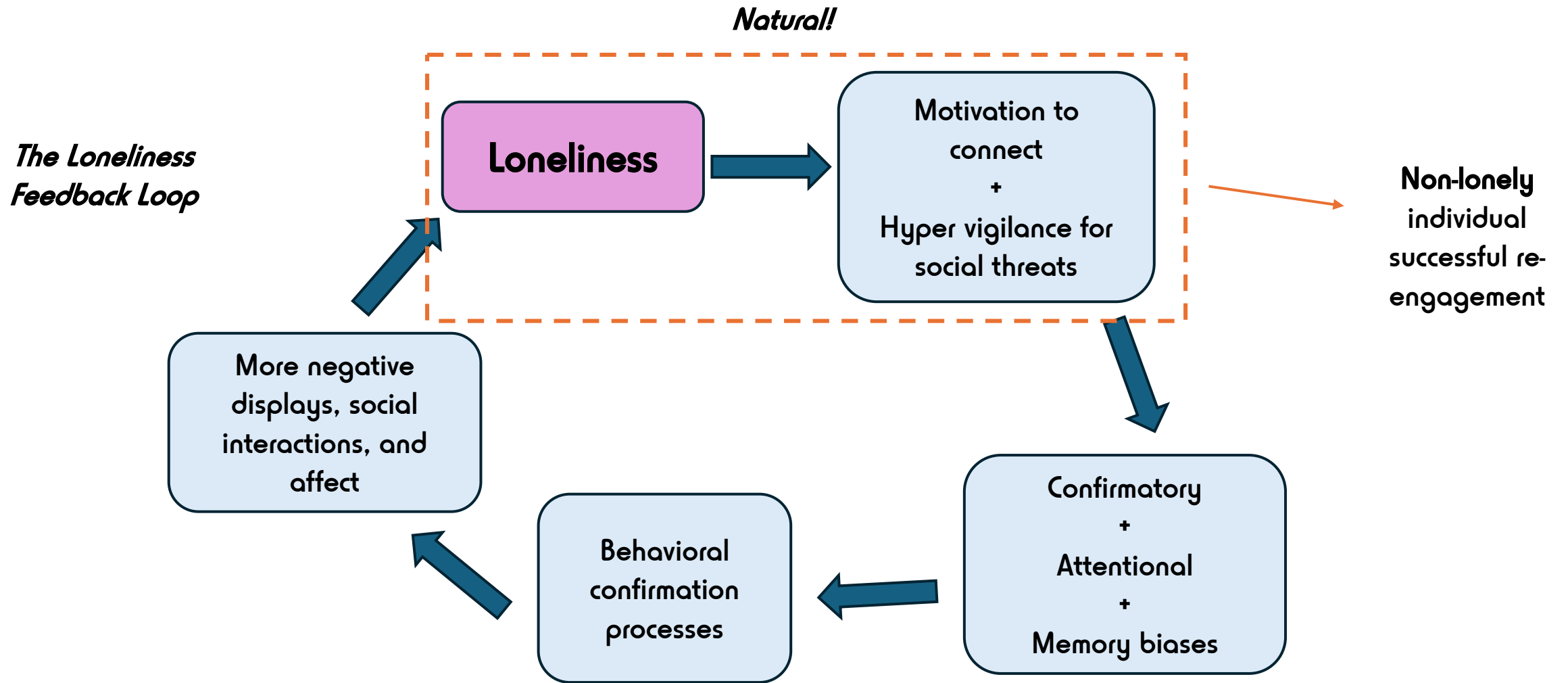


What *is* loneliness? Conceptual framework: Context

The cognitive discrepancy model



What *is* loneliness? Conceptual framework: Context



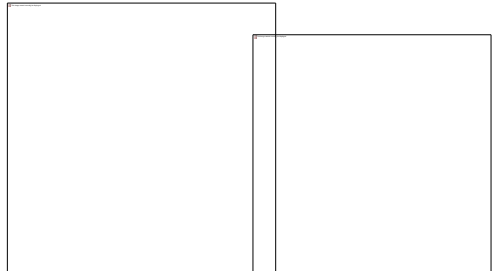
What *is* loneliness? Methodological approaches: Measures

Loneliness

Emotional

Social

Collective



UCLA Loneliness Scale

How often do you feel you that you lack companionship?

How often do you feel left out?

How often do you feel isolated from others?

Never, hardly ever, some of the time, often

De Jong Gierveld Loneliness Scale

I experience a general sense of emptiness

I miss having people around

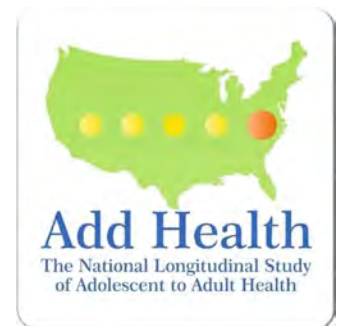
I often feel rejected

There are plenty of people I can rely on when I have problems

There are many people I can trust completely

There are enough people I feel close to

Yes! Yes, More or less, No, No!



What *is* loneliness? Methodological approaches: Measures

Loneliness

Emotional

Social

Collective

End of day

How lonely did you feel today?

How much social interaction did you have today?

Momentary

At the time of the ping, how lonely did you feel?

At the time of the ping, who were you with?

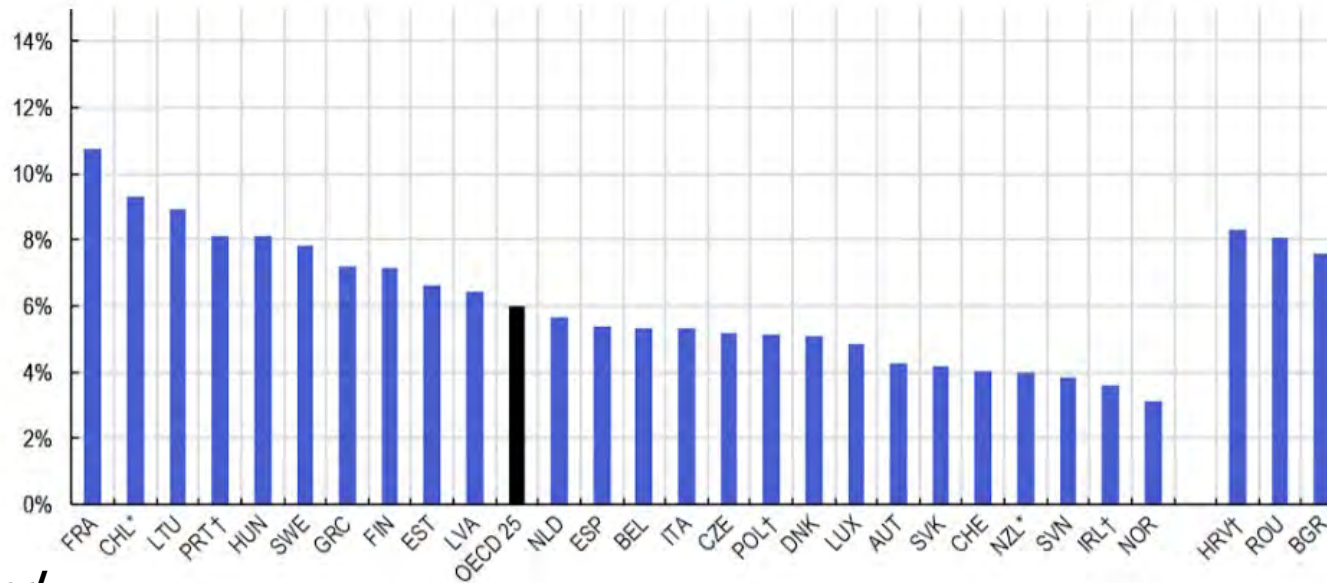

NORC



What *is* loneliness? Key trends

Figure 2.11. Across OECD countries, the share of people who felt lonely most or all of the time over the past four weeks ranges from 3% to 13%

Share of respondents who felt lonely most or all of the time over the past 4 weeks, OECD 25, 2022-2023



The US is higher!

Global

Life course

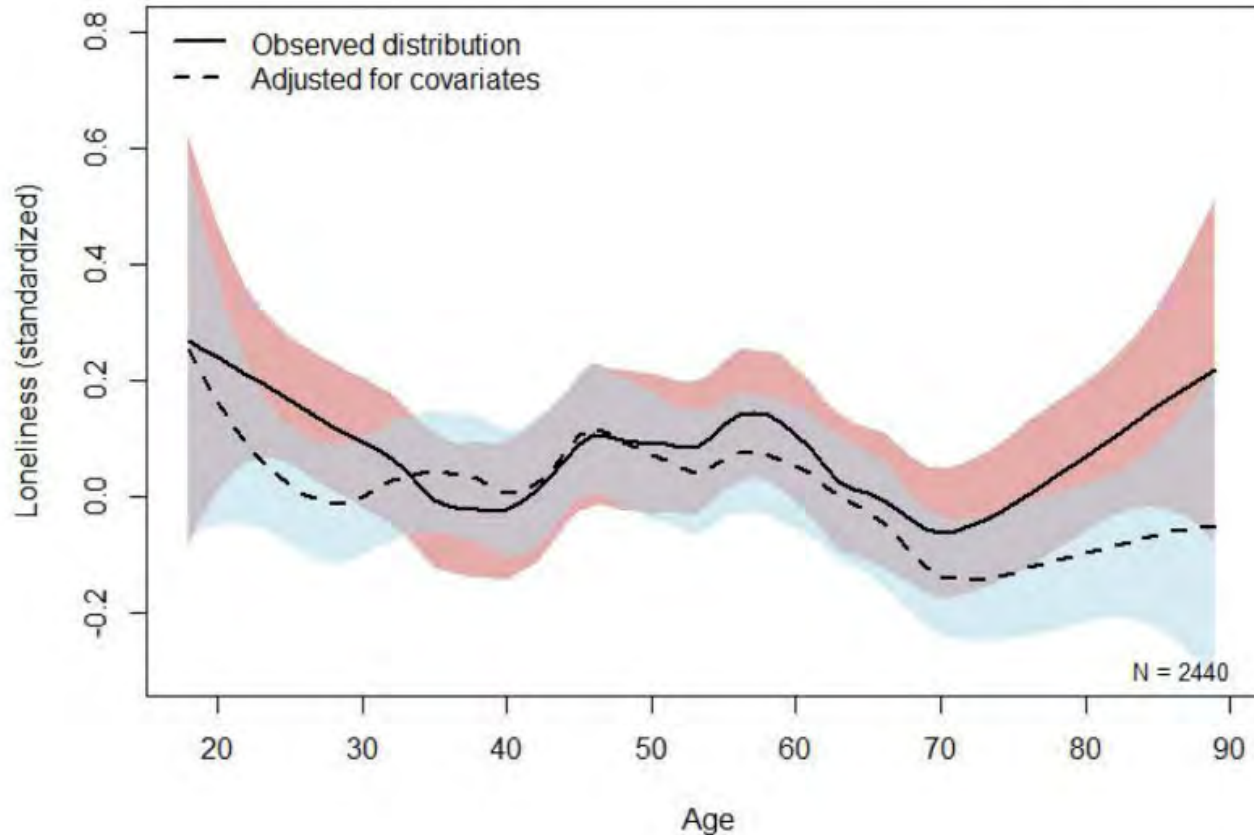
Young adults

Older adults



What *is* loneliness? Key trends

Loneliness Distribution Across Both Waves



A U-shaped curve

Global

Life course

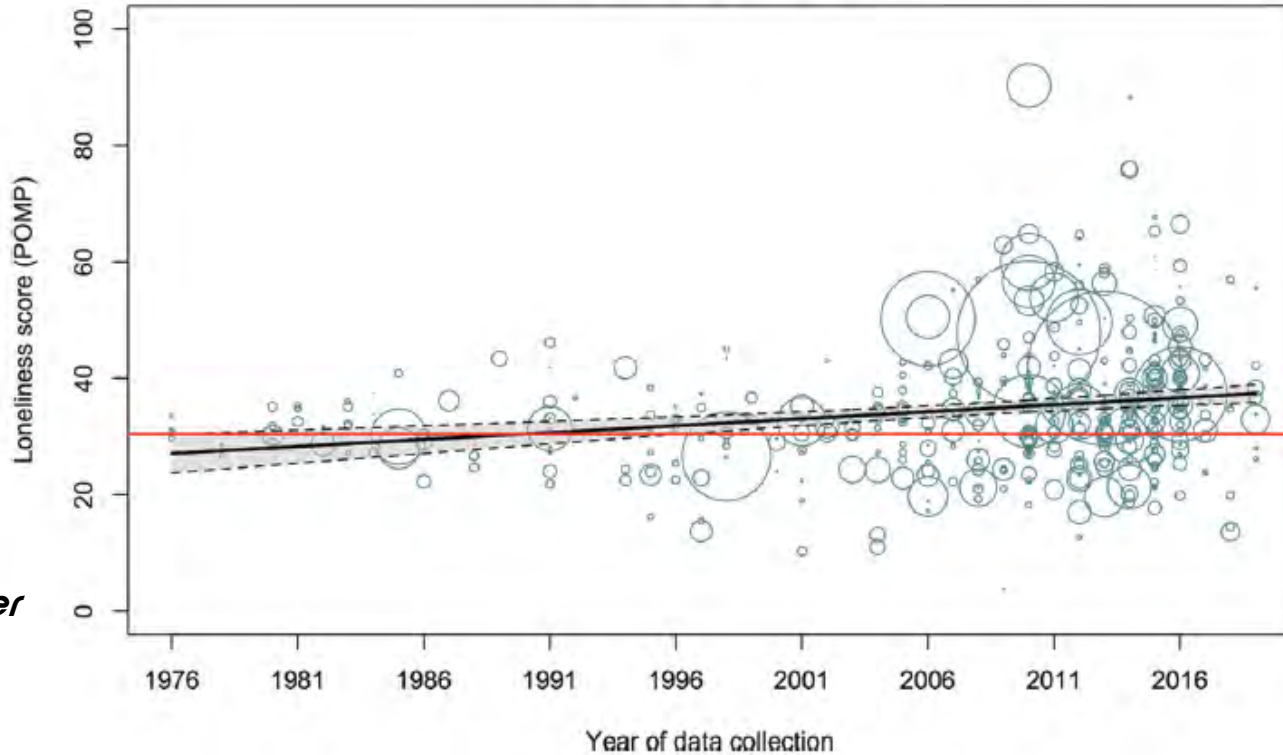
Young adults

Older adults



What *is* loneliness? Key trends

Changes in loneliness in emerging adults
from 1976 - 2019



Getting lonelier

Global

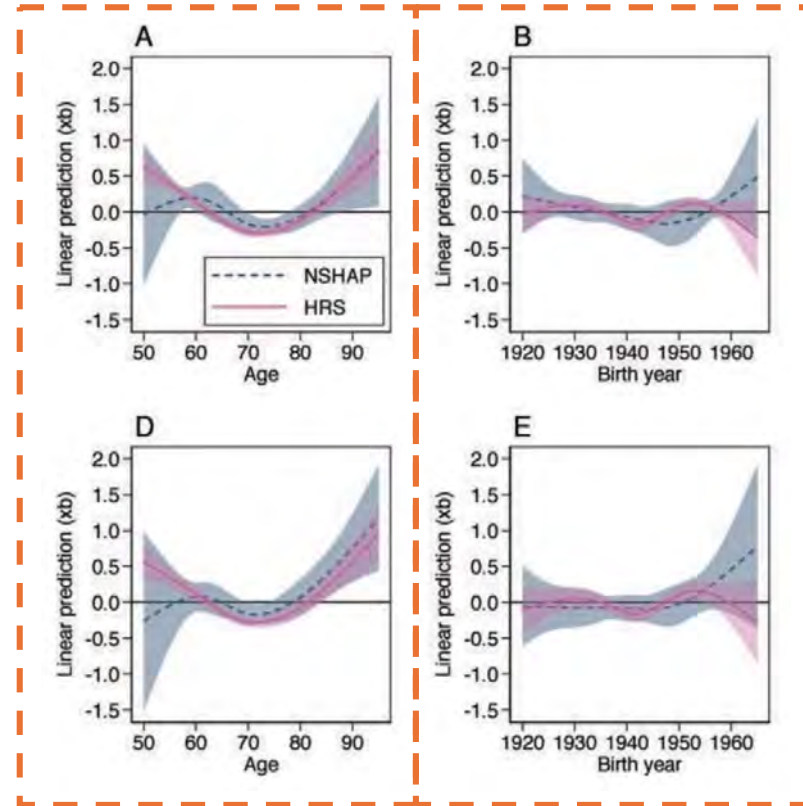
Life course

Young adults

Older adults



What *is* loneliness? Key trends



*Not lonelier, but
an increasing
proportion of
population*

Global

Life course

Young adults

Older adults

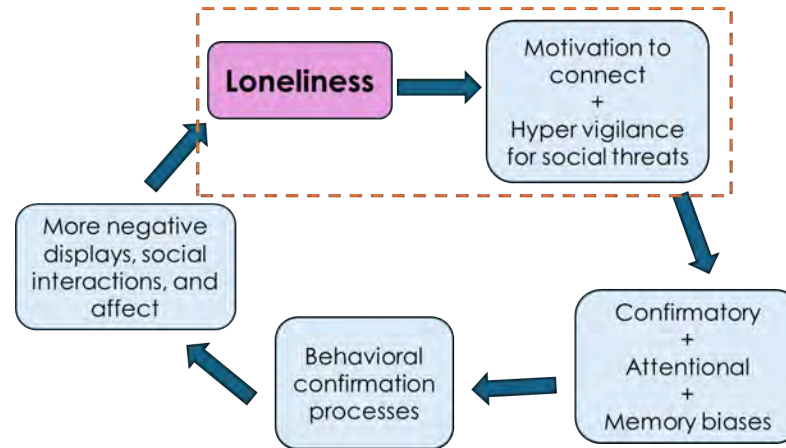


What *is* loneliness? Consequences

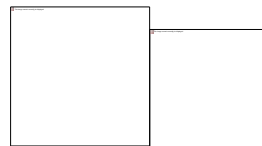
➔ Higher blood pressure and increased inflammatory processes

➔ Impaired immune system function, more susceptible to infections and slowed physical healing

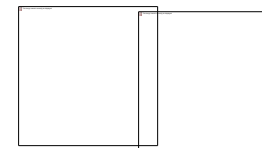
➔ Increases the risk of heart disease, stroke, diabetes, depression, anxiety, dementia, and pain perception



Chronic



Shorter term

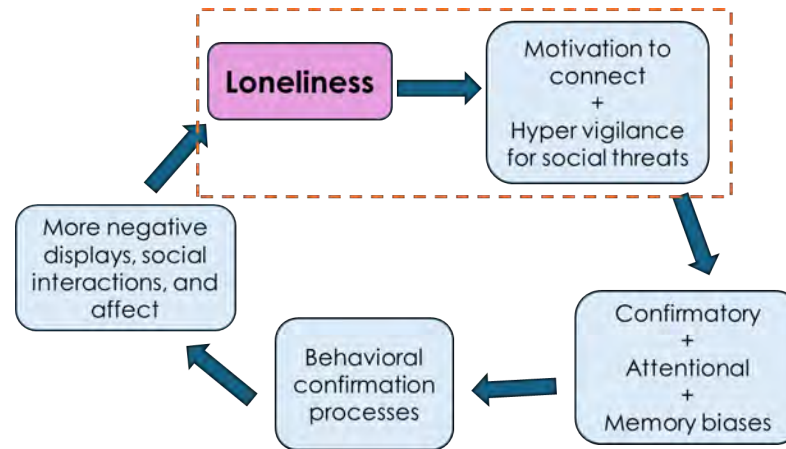


What *is* loneliness? Consequences

Higher blood pressure and increased inflammatory processes

Impaired immune system function, more susceptible to infections and slowed physical healing

Increases the risk of heart disease, stroke, diabetes, depression, anxiety, dementia, and pain perception



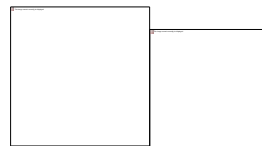
Higher levels of **intrusive thoughts** (maladaptive response)

Hampers **sleep** benefits: duration, quality, fatigue

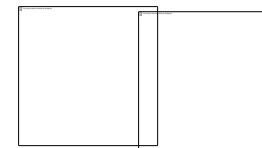
Increased **cortisol** next morning, higher levels of C-reactive protein (inflammation)

Poorer **cognitive** performance, anxiety, sadness, stress, depression

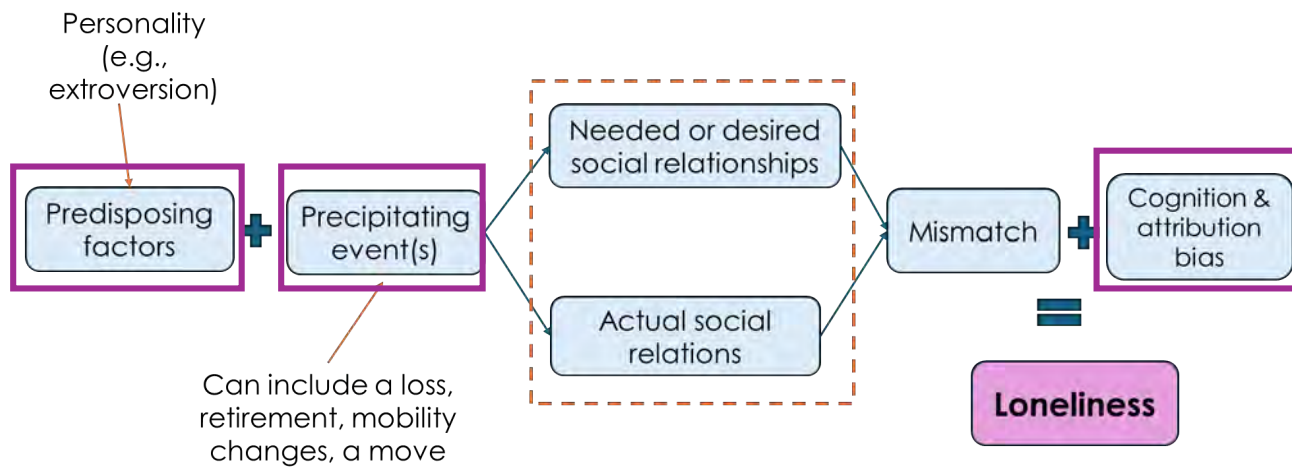
Chronic



Shorter term



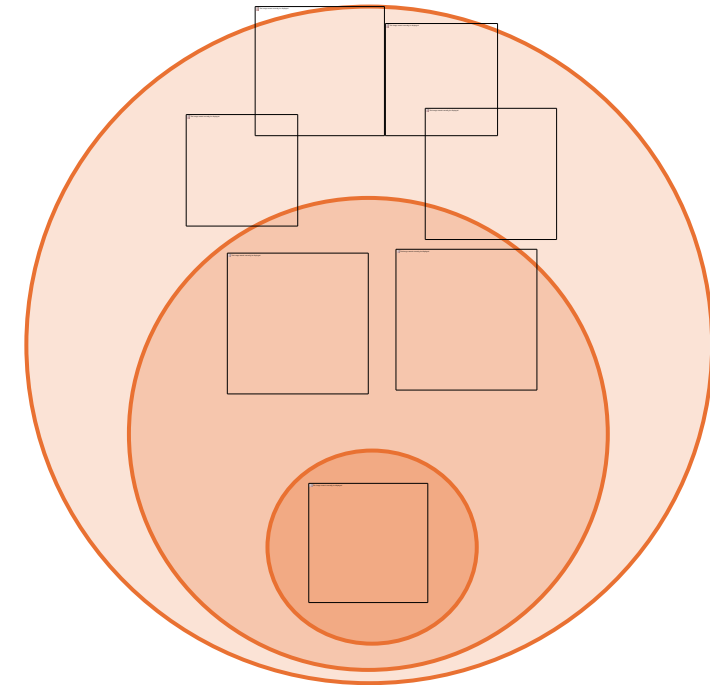
What *is* loneliness? Risk factors & antecedents



Broader context

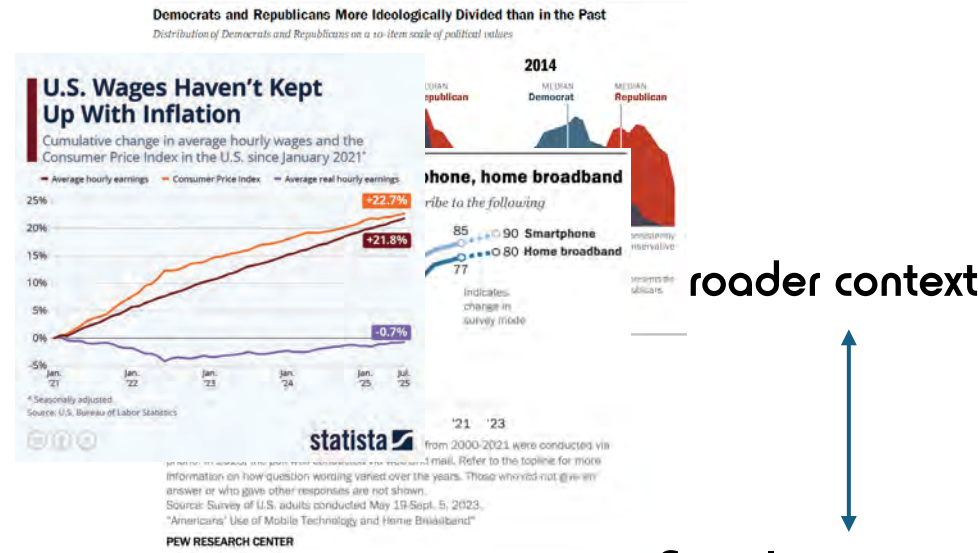
Social context

Individual



What *is* loneliness? Linking broader shifts with trends

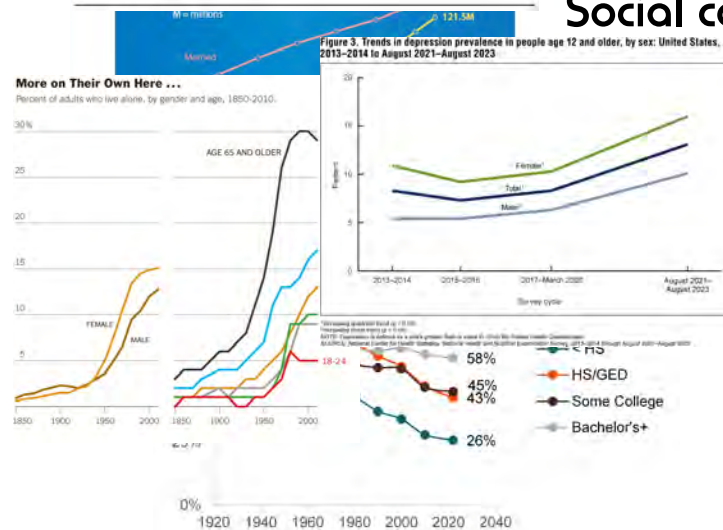
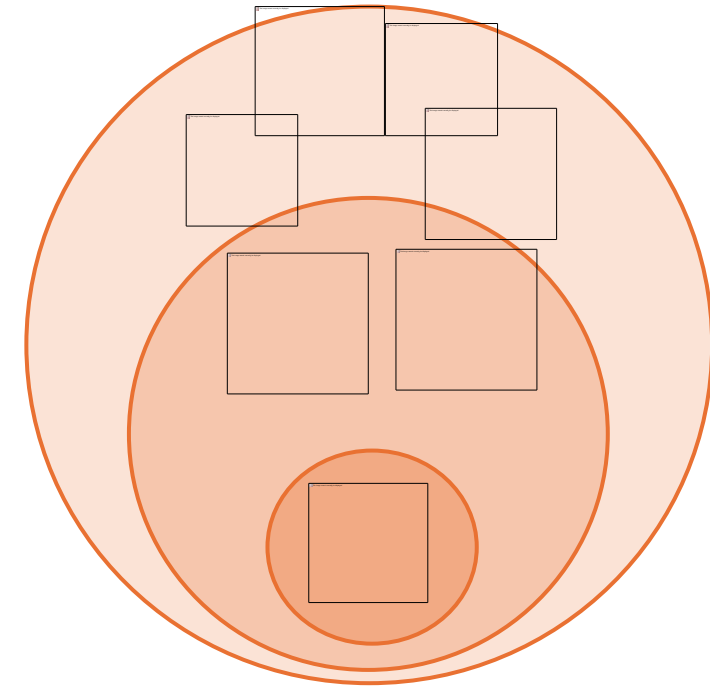
- More politically polarized
- Rise in digital connection
- Cost of living increase
- Marriage rates have declined
- Singlehood has increased
- Living alone has increased
- Depression has increased



broader context

Social context

Individual

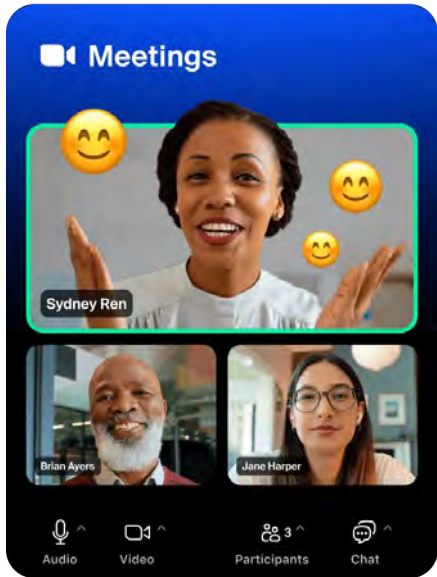


What *is* loneliness? Technology & connection

Text



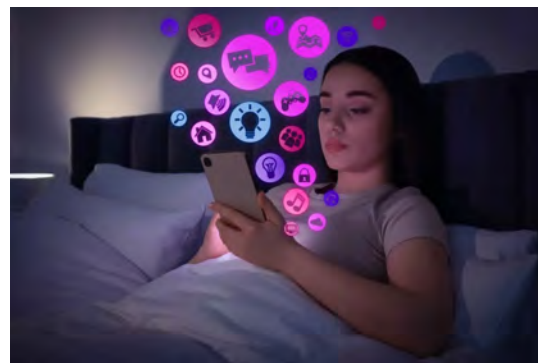
Zoom



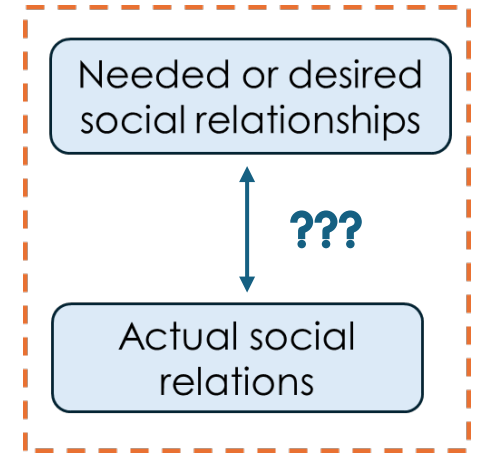
Robots



AI



Social media



Expressions of Loneliness

Sarah Bier, PMHNP-BC, CNM-FPA, APN

Psychiatry Studio





Loneliness isn't just a fleeting feeling; it's a personal journey that hits each of us differently.



Loneliness is Universal

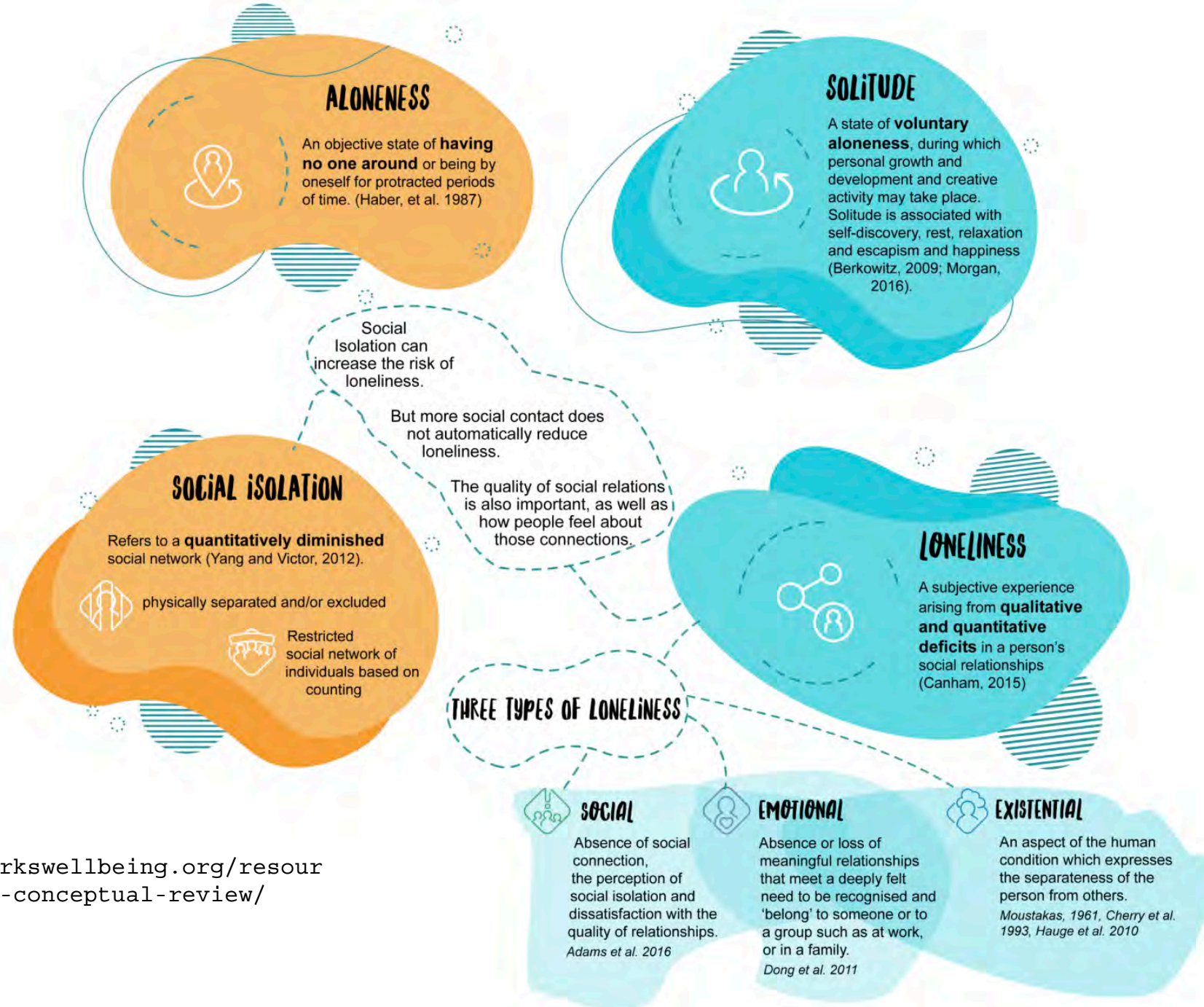
Everyone experiences loneliness.

However, everyone's experience of loneliness is unique.

Factors that influence one's experience of loneliness, include:

- Age
- Culture or Religious Identity
- Gender
- Race/Ethnicity
- Sexual Orientation





<https://whatworkswellbeing.org/resources/loneliness-conceptual-review/>



Rates of Loneliness

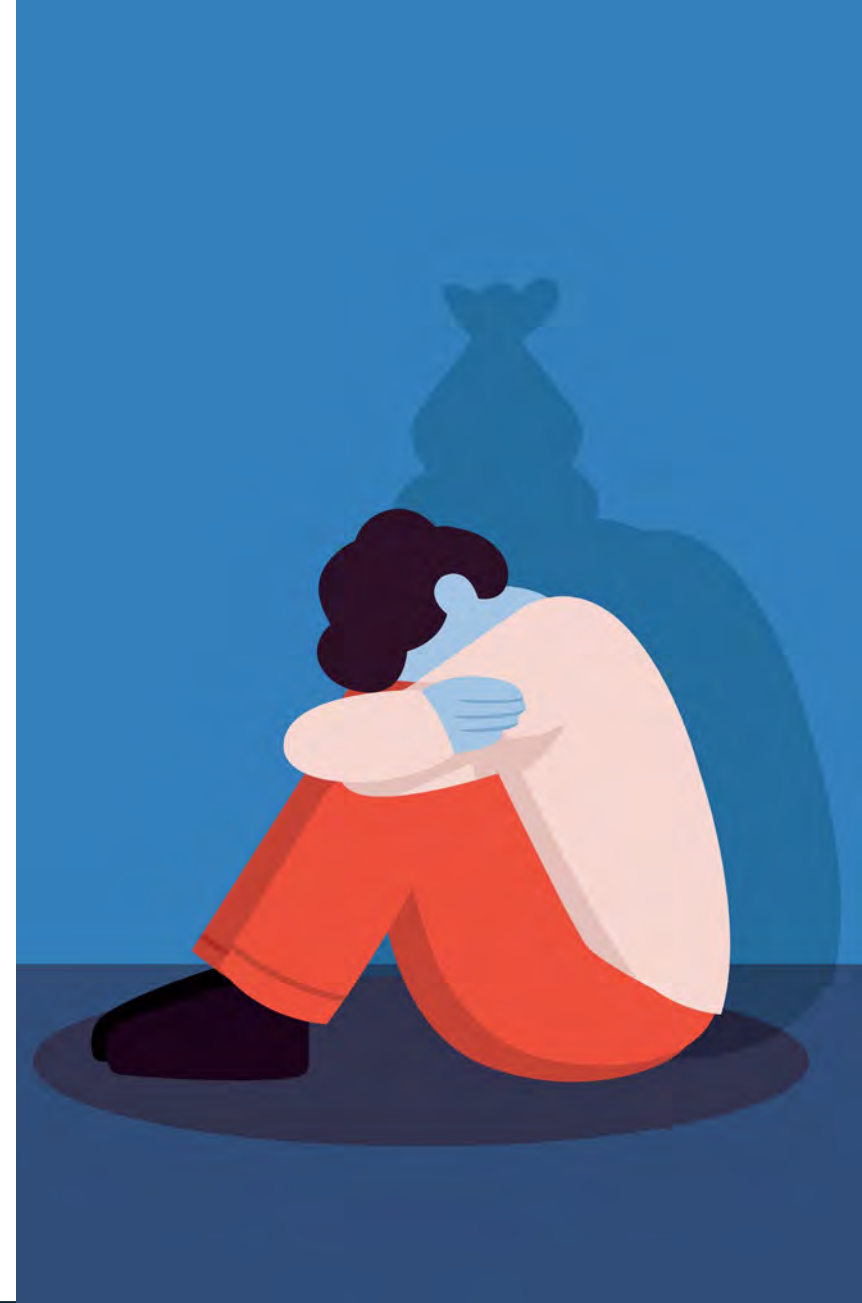
- 21% of teens 13-17 years old
- 15% of adults report always or often feeling lonely in the past year
- Some adults are even more likely to report always or often feeling lonely, including:
 - 33% of LGBTQ+ adults;
 - 31% of adults under 30-years old;
 - 23% of those with household incomes under \$40,000;
 - 22% of Black women



Marginalized Populations

Loneliness in minority communities is a public health issue, often driven by:

- Chronic stress
- Discrimination
- Financial stressors
- Lack of social support
- Stigma
- Systemic oppression



(Illustration by Studio Humi on Unsplash)

Life Transitions Associated With Loneliness

- Changes in careers status (e.g., job transitions / retirement)
- Changes in community
- Different family dynamics and family life stages
- Moving
- Religious affiliation
- Retirement
- Sickness
- Sociopolitical challenges



Emotional Symptoms of Loneliness

- Anxiety
- Crying
- Changes in concentration and focus
- Impulsivity or risky decision making
- Low mood
- Low self-esteem
- Mood swings or irritability



Physical Symptoms of Loneliness

- Changes in eating habits
- Changes in sleeping habits
- Difficulty sleeping
- Fatigue / feeling run down
- Headaches
- Stomach aches



(Photo by Matteo Vistocco on Unsplash)

Social Aspects of Loneliness

- Feeling isolated from friends and/or family
- Distrusting of others or feeling insecure in relationships
- Feeling lonely even when you're with other people
- Feeling disconnected and distant from others



(Photo by Zhivko Minkov on Unsplash)

Protective Factors

- Appropriate sleep
- Community participation
- Culturally affirming environments
- Intergenerational relationships
- Physical activity
- Purposeful or meaningful activities and work
- Resilience
- Social support



Ways to Ease Loneliness

- Acknowledge it - without judgement
- Call or text people you care about
- Find groups that match your interests, including online communities or virtual activities (e.g., MeetUp)
- Make concrete plans with others or with yourself (e.g., attending a reading, show, etc.)
- Talk with a mental health professional
- Take a class or sign up for an interactive workshop
- Volunteer either alone or with colleagues/religious community members



Strategies for Older Adults

- Adopt a pet, if feasible
- Eat right & exercise
- Get enough sleep
- Manage stress
- Pursue activities that you enjoy
- Schedule time (daily or weekly) to stay in touch with family, friends, etc.
- Use video chat to connect with those who live far away
- Visit your library & community/senior centers





Strategies for Adults

- Ask your HR Team about employee resource groups
- If working remotely, try finding new setting(s)
- Find common ground with colleagues
- Find or organize small group activities, such as volunteer events
- Get (or be!) a mentor
- Join a networking community
- Switch teams/projects when possible



Lived Experience Journey

Erin Arnheim, BBA, M.Ed
Lense Advisory



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Thank you!



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