Silent Struggles: The Impact of Loneliness on Gen Z's College Experience and Future Readiness

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What qualifies me to address the topic of loneliness?

- Assistant Teaching Professor in Sociology
- Affiliate Faculty in Gerontology, Criminal Justice and Social Work
- Teach courses and mentor Honors projects on loneliness
- Student centered, community focused and research attentive
- Personal experience with loneliness as a graduate student
- The key takeaway for all attendees: "You are not alone"
- Welcome every opportunity to talk about loneliness in any setting
- Set the career goal of being an expert on loneliness

Defining Terms

- **Loneliness** is the mismatch between the number of quality relationships one believes one possesses versus the number of quality relationships one would like to have.
  - Loneliness (or social disconnection) is subjective and dynamic.
  - The absence of loneliness does not equate with feeling socially connected to others.
  - Loneliness is a continuum or gradient.
  - In a society, variations in social and individual thresholds of loneliness exist.
- **Solitude** is the luxury of feeling socially connected, but self selecting to spend time alone.

Our Epidemic of Loneliness, 2023

Multidisciplinary Approach to Loneliness

- Concepts of loneliness were the domain of philosophical, religious, and spiritual studies for centuries, particularly *existential* loneliness.
- In the U.S., loneliness has consistently risen for decades.
- Loneliness is mainly in the purview of gerontology, public health, medicine, psychology, humanities, evolutionary biology and sociology.
- During the pandemic, loneliness gained popularity in the public discourse.
  - This inaccurately signaled societies and individuals to think that loneliness is somehow "novel" or "new".
- In 2023, the loneliness declared a public health crisis and "Our Epidemic of Loneliness" was published.

Types of Loneliness

- Social
- Emotional
- Existential
- Transient
- Situational
- Chronic

Campaign to End Loneliness (2025)

Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation

2023

The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory on the Healing Effects of Social Connection and Community

Who is Gen Z?

- Gen Z includes folx born between 1997-2012; most **diverse** generation
  - Forty eight percent of the Gen Z population is non white.
  - About 59% are pursuing a college degree.
  - Those living with a college educated parent is 43%.
  - Most likely to live in cities, less likely to dropout of high school and less workforce experience than previous generations
- Gen Z self report loneliness multiple days within the most recent week at from 24%
- *Gen Z is the loneliest generation...Why?*

Social Causes of Loneliness

- Unmet essential needs (e.g., food, shelter, safety)
- Mental health challenges
- Lack of strong social connections or support systems
- Experiences of discrimination based on identity or status
- Extended time spent using technology or digital media
- Fewer face-to-face shared experiences and meaningful memories
- Living in isolation or without companionship
- Navigating multiple life transitions during this period
- Reduced participation in civic or community groups
- Declining attendance in religious or spiritual gatherings

Putnam, 2001; Foundation for Social Connection Action Network, 2025

Signs and Symptoms of Loneliness

- Abnormal anxiety and increase of demanding and/or critical behavior
- Decreased confidence and self esteem
- Missed classes, submitting late work
- Disengagement in a variety of contexts
- Changes in appetite and sleep patterns
- Difficulting concentrating
- Not attending events they are invited to even though they have no other plans

Cacioppo & Patrick, 2008; Durlofsky 2020

Individual Actions

- Seeking psychiatric and/or psychological assistance for co-occurring issues and increased risk for depression
- Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT): the modification of everyday thoughts and behaviors
- Implementing the **EASE Model**
  - **E** for Extend Yourself
  - **A** for Action Plan
  - **S** for Selection
  - **E** for Expect the Best

Cacioppo & Patrick, 2008

Individual Actions (con't)

- Limit distractions during conversations to enhance the quality of your time with others.
- Seek out ways to serve and support those around you.
- Be attentive, encouraging, and express gratitude regularly.
- Avoid habits that contribute to disconnection or isolation.

Our Epidemic of Loneliness, 2023

Suggested Steps for Educational Institutions

- Integrate social connection into curricula by including current, age-appropriate content on how relationships affect physical and mental health, along with key risk and protective factors and practical strategies for strengthening social bonds.
- Use socially driven teaching methods—such as cooperative and collaborative learning projects—to enhance both academic performance and peer relationships.
- Foster a supportive environment that promotes a sense of belonging through classroom practices, mentoring programs, and peer support groups.

Future Readiness Concerns

- Stunted development of soft skills
  - **Soft skills** encompass a range of personal attributes, communicative competencies, and interpersonal proficiencies that facilitate effective collaboration, adaptability, and amicable interaction within professional and social contexts.
  - Examples of soft skills include, but are not limited to [communication](#), [team work](#), [problem solving](#), adaptability, work ethic, networking, conflict resolution, [leadership](#), and emotional intelligence.

Charlotte Career Center

Addressing Future Challenges

- Suggested classroom activities
  - "Service is the antidote to loneliness" -Dr. Vivek Murthy
  - Reserve some in class time for "freewrites."
  - Utilize the career skills page after certain class activities and make connections to the skills involved in the activity
  - Create group assignments/class activities
  - Creatively develop collaboration activities in online classes
  - Designate time for small group discussions during class time (i.e., practice talking to each other)
- Encourage networking at campus events
  - Sometimes students simply need a confidence boost!

Service to others

The List of Ideas is Endless!

- Invite students to participate in community work
  - Encourage participation on a panel or an invited talk
  - Connect students with community internships
  - Extend professional development opportunities
- Conference Attendance
  - Mentor students on professionalism pre-conference
  - Recommend ways to interact and network
  - Send a follow up email after with career resources for major and how to include their participation in their resume
  - Offer to role play small talk with students

Q&A
Thank you for your engagement!

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