Loneliness : Causes and Interventions in Adolescence

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Abstract : *Loneliness is becoming a fast growing problem among the youth nowadays. Loneliness can lead to severe psychological and physical health problems in adolescence which make them fall behind on their courses, causing study delay or even drop out of education. Not addressing or solving experiences of loneliness in a satisfactory way, leads to several detrimental outcomes. All the mentioned problems make loneliness among adolescents a concern for families and society as well. The most important reason for loneliness during adolescence is failure to maintain closed relationships. There are many other factors also that cause loneliness which are discussed in this paper. In order to establish effective interventions for reducing loneliness among adolescents, a better understanding of the mechanisms of loneliness is required. Therefore, this study also describes some coping strategies and interventions to reduce feelings of loneliness among adolescents.*

Keywords : *loneliness, adolescence, causes, interventions*

Introduction

Loneliness is a common experience during adolescence (McWhirter et al. 2002).Statistics reveal that 79% of adolescents younger than 18 years report feelings of loneliness. By contrast, 53% of adults between the ages of 45 and 54 report loneliness, while only 37% of people older than 55 report feelings of loneliness (Taylor et al. 2003). Thus Loneliness is generally reported more among adolescents and young children, contrary to the myth that it occurs more in elderly. The reason for this is that elder people have definite copying skills and can adjust accordingly to solitude, while as adolescents lack definite copying skills and adolescent period is the time of life when being accepted and loved is of such major importance to the formation of one's identity.

The need to belong is a universal phenomenon, representing the fundamental desire of all humans to form social attachments (Baumeister& Leary, 1995). When something is missing in these social attachments, people experience a form of social pain, that is, they experience loneliness (Cacioppo, Cacioppo, et al., 2015).Loneliness is a subjective experience. That means if one thinks that they are lonely then they will feel lonely. It is possible for individuals to be lonely, but not isolated, or isolated, but not lonely.Researchers generally define loneliness as the unpleasant feeling that occurs when people perceive their network of social relationships to be deficient in a quantitative or qualitative way (Perlman &Peplau, 1981). Another definition has been developed by de Jong Gierveld: Loneliness is a situation experienced by the individual as one where there is an unpleasant or inadmissible lack of (quality of) certain relationships. This includes situations in which the number of existing relationships is smaller than is considered desirable or admissible, as well as situations where the intimacy one wishes for has not been realized. Thus loneliness is seen to involve the manner, in which the person perceives, experiences, and evaluates lack of communication with other people.

Types

Loneliness is often divided into two elements in the literature according to the theories of Weiss (1973): *Emotional loneliness*, which is felt when we miss the companionship of one particular person; often a spouse, parent, sibling or best friend. *Social loneliness*, which is experienced when we lack of wider social contacts or group of friends. Young (1982) also distinguished among three types of loneliness: transient, situational, and chronic loneliness. Transient or everyday loneliness includes brief and occasional lonely moods that comes and goes. Situational

loneliness involves people who have satisfying relationship until some specific change occurs, such as divorce, bereavement or moving to a new town. Situational loneliness can be a severely distressing experience. Situational loneliness often follows major life stress events, such as the death of a spouse or parents. Chronic loneliness evolves when, over a period of years, the person is not able to develop satisfying social relations means he or she feels lonely most of the time.

Causes of Loneliness

Loneliness is a complex experience. Factors associated with loneliness overlap, and loneliness may be caused by a combination of these factors as well as by other factors entirely. Here are a few of the mains ones:

Poor Social Skills

Weiss (1973) and others have suggested that a lack of social skills, perhaps stemming from childhood, may be associated with loneliness. Lonely students report problems making friends, introducing themselves, participating in groups, enjoying parties, making phone calls to initiate social activities, and the like. Thus people with poor social skills have fewer or less satisfying social relationships,and so experience loneliness.

Physical Separation

In a mobile society, separation from family and friends is a common occurrence. Sometimes we're in a situation where there's just no one around. This can be as a result of moving to a new place, living alone, family moving away or someone dying. These events reduce the frequency of interaction, makes the satisfactions provided by a relationship less available, and may raise fears that the relationship will be weakened by absence.Gursoy and Bicakci (2006)also found that family and friend relationships cause a significant difference in the loneliness levels of adolescents.

Shyness

Shyness, defined asa "tendency to avoid social interactions and to fail to participate appropriately in social situations" (Pilkonis, 1977), may be an important contributor to loneliness. Research suggests that people who are shy, introverted or lacking in assertiveness are at risk for loneliness. Shy people are not invariably lonely, however; in a familiar situation with friends, their introversion may not be a problem. But confronted with the need to make new friends, shy people aremore

vulnerable to loneliness than their more outgoing peers.

Unpleasant Childhood Experiences

The cause of loneliness may be found in unpleasant childhood experiences that lead to unfulfilled needs for intimacy, such as the loss of a parent through divorce or death (Le Roux, 2009). Children of divorced parents are at a greater risk of developing loneliness as adults, compared to the children of intact families (Taylor et al., 2003). Brennan and Auslander (1979) sum up their evidence by saying that lonely adolescents come from families manifesting "an absence of emotional nurturance, guidance or support. The climate is cold, violent, undisciplined, and irrational".

Physical Illness or Disability

People with physical illness or disability are at risk of experiencing loneliness for a number of reasons. First, physical impairment may increase the individual's need for social support in the form of assistance. Second, physical illness and disability may make it more difficult for the individual to maintain existing social relations at a satisfactory level or make it harder to form new social relations.

Experiencing Discrimination

Being treated as different from others can often make people feel lonely or isolated. Being discriminated against because of ethnicity, gender, sexuality or any other cause can not only result in physical isolation but also a feeling of being separate from those around you.

Culture

Rokachand Neto (2000) have shown in a study with adolescents from different cultures (Canada and Portugal) that culture level has a role in the loneliness levels of adolescents.Nkyi(2014) also find that varying degrees of loneliness is felt in different cultures because the way people live and approach problem solving in their social context are different.Triandis (1989) notes that desire to remain with parents and extended family is stronger in collectivist than individualist cultures. Correspondingly, collectivists will tend to suffer more deeply the absence of such relationships.

Technology

Though the internet and mobile phones are awesome; they can sometimes make people feel detached from the world around them. Seeing other people online

who seem to have loads of comments or heaps of followers can sometimes make them feel unpopular or lonely.Musarrat et al. (2017) find thatuse of social networking site are more common among in younger ages, and also use of these sites leads to increase in perceived loneliness. A study conducted by Kraut et al. (1998)also revealed that use of the internet might significantly increase loneliness.

Maladaptive Cognition

Maladaptive cognition alsoplays a role in loneliness. Once loneliness occurs, the intensity of the loneliness experience depends in part on thought processes. There is growing evidence to suggest that the way people think about their own situation can affect the experience of loneliness. In essence, it is the reason that the lonely cannot simply 'make more friends'.

Coping Strategies or Interventions

Several researchers recommend that loneliness intervention programs need to teach individuals how to adapt more effective coping strategies to deal with loneliness. Loneliness has serious consequences mental and physical well being of people. Therefore it is important to intervene at the right time to prevent loneliness.The availability of a diversity of relationships, weakly and strongly supportive, proves to be important in reducing the likelihood of loneliness. More supportive relationships indicate less loneliness. Here are some interventions described that overcome loneliness:

Enhancing Social Skills

Students who experience feelings of loneliness often have less well-developed social skills than their peers who do not experience feelings of loneliness (Moron, 2014; Masi et. al., 2011). Therefore, a way to decrease feelings of loneliness is training students who are lonely in verbal and non-verbal communication, in making contact with others, in giving and receiving compliments and in overcoming problems with physical intimacy (Masi et. al., 2011). One study (Jones et. al., 1982) investigated a loneliness reduction intervention of improving social skills among college students and showed that after the intervention students were less lonely, less self-conscious in social interactions and more assertive.

Social Connection or Interactions

Find ways of making social interactionor connections may be a good way of dealing with loneliness. Lonely people hunger for acceptance and friendship.

Sometimes feeling accepted and liked comes more easily when people do something for others rather than waiting for them to make them feel better. So consider becoming a volunteer. Tutor children; teach elders how to use computers, read to the blind, and take notes for a disabled classmate. People might be surprised at the connections they make after reaching out in these ways. Even "small talk" about sports or the weather, when it is welcomed and shared, can be a calming device and cando wonders. Parker and Asher (1993) also found that highly accepted children have good friends, and that factors such as having close friends, the quality of these friendships and peer group acceptance lessen loneliness.

Addressing and Adaptive Maladaptive Social Cognition

According to Rokach and Sha'ked (2015), transforming maladaptive social cognition is the most successful intervention to reduce loneliness. Maladaptive social cognition can be seen as automatic negative thoughts a person has regarding social relationships and negative thoughts about themselves (e.g. 'I have nothing to say to people.. people won't like talking to me') (Hawkley et. al, 2010). These maladaptive social behaviors are addressed through cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) that involves identifying and adapting these negative thoughts (Hawkley et. al., 2010). Interventions that address maladaptive social cognition are recognized as the most important interventions for reducing loneliness feelings (Masi et. al, 2011).

Social Support Groups

Social support exists of several elements that provide someone the help they need in specific situations. For example: advice, information, financial support or companionship (Mattanah et. al., 2010; Masi et. al., 2011).Mattanah et al. (2010) found in their study that participants in the intervention group experienced significantly less feelings of loneliness, perceived higher social support and increased college adjustment in comparison to the control group.

Expectations and Attitudes

You get what you expect, so expect the best. The simple realizations that someone can change their situation by changing their thoughts, expectations, and behaviors toward others can have a surprisingly empowering effect and make all the difference.

Connecting to Religion

Another coping strategy is connecting to religion and faith, gaining strength

and inner peace(Rokach& Brock, 1998). Kirkpatrick and Shaver (1992) find that among participants who believed in God, those describing their relationship with God as a secure attachment are less lonely and depressed than those for whom it is insecure. Pergament (1990) suggests that God can be viewed as another member of the social network who, like other network members, can help in coping. Religious life also provides community and a sense of belongingness.

Conclusion

In conclusion, loneliness is a complex subjective phenomenon that is hard to measure since it is highly determined by the way someone evaluates his or her social network. For most young people, Hawkley says, loneliness is only temporary. It goes away as adolescents learn how "to navigate their social world" and connect with others. So, loneliness is a treatable, rather than an irreversible, condition of life. The availability of a diversity of relationships, weakly andstrongly supportive, proves to be important in reducing the likelihood of loneliness. More supportive relationships indicate less loneliness. In order to reduce feelings of loneliness adolescents should be given training in social, communication and problem solution skills, whose lack may cause loneliness. Families need to listen to and connect with adolescents and accept them as individuals. Moreover, they should plan collective and individual activities for adolescents, while educators should increase the counselling hours at schools and encourage adolescents to participate in cultural, artistic and sports activities in order to make good use of their spare time.

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