

Depressed, inactive and out of work—study reveals lives of lonely young adults

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Lonely young adults in the UK are more likely to experience mental health problems and more likely to be out of work than their peers. Credit: Brian Niles

New research from King's College London shows that lonely young adults are more likely to experience mental health problems and more likely to be out of work than their peers. The study, published today in *Psychological Medicine*, gives a detailed snapshot of the lives of lonely 18-year-olds and shows how loneliness goes hand-in-hand with a wide range of problems in health and wellbeing.

Loneliness is strongly linked with premature death in old age, to a similar degree as smoking or obesity. With increasing attention on loneliness as a major public health issue, the study highlights the importance of early intervention to prevent young adults being trapped in loneliness as they age.

Over 2000 British 18-year-olds were asked questions such as 'how often do you feel you lack companionship?' and 'how often do you feel left out?', and were interviewed about their mental and physical health, lifestyle habits, education and employment.

Loneliness was common among young adults: the researchers found a quarter of study participants reported feeling lonely some of the time and approximately 7% reported feeling lonely often. These findings mirror a recent ONS survey which found that loneliness was more common among 16 to 24-year-olds than any other age group.

'It's often assumed that loneliness is an affliction of old age, but it is also very common among younger people,' said lead author Dr Timothy Matthews from the Institute of Psychiatry, Psychology & Neuroscience (IoPPN) at King's College London. 'Unlike many other risk factors, loneliness does not discriminate: it affects people from all walks of life; men and women, rich and poor.'

Lonely young adults were more than twice as likely to have mental health problems such as anxiety and depression, and to have self-harmed or attempted suicide. They were also more likely to have seen their GP or a counsellor for [mental health problems](#) in the past year.

In addition, lonelier [young adults](#) were more likely to be out of work and education and were less confident about their career prospects. One in five people in the loneliest 10% of the sample were not in education, employment or training, compared to one in ten non-lonely young people.

Lonelier young people were also less likely to be physically active, more likely to smoke, and more likely to use technology compulsively (at the expense of other activities and obligations).

Dr Matthews said: 'Our findings suggest that if someone tells their GP or a friend that they feel lonely, that could be a red flag that they're struggling in a range of other areas in life.'

'There are lots of community initiatives to try and encourage people to get together and take part in shared activities. However, it's important to

remember that some [people](#) can feel lonely in a crowd, and the most effective interventions to reduce loneliness involve counselling to help individuals tackle negative patterns of thinking.'

The study does not show whether loneliness is the cause of problems in [health](#) and wellbeing, but it does show how loneliness cuts across a wide range of important social issues.

Senior author Professor Louise Arseneault from the IoPPN said: 'It's important that we become comfortable talking about [loneliness](#) as a society. People are often reluctant to admit that they feel lonely, because there is still a stigma attached to it. That in itself can be profoundly isolating.'

Provided by King's College London

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