ADVANCING PSYCHOLOGY

Loneliness and the College Student

LETITIA ANNE PEPLAU

LETITIA ANNE PEPLAU is professor of psychology and director of the graduate program in social psychology at the University of California, Los Angeles. She has conducted many studies of social relationships and of loneliness. Or. Peplau is coeditor (with Daniel Perlman) of Loneliness: A *Sourcebook* of Current Theory, Research, and Therapy.

What was your worst experience of loneliness? For me, it was the junior year in college that I spent studying abroad in Paris. I left for France with high hopes, eager to use the French I'd studied for six years, to experience life in another culture, and, most important, to make French friends. I had arranged in advance to live with a French family and to enroll in courses at the Sorbonne. But things did not go as I expected. The Parisian couple I boarded with were teetering on the brink of divorce and used me to complain about each other. I found Parisians to be cold and impatient with strangers. Since all the university classes I took were large impersonal lectures, there were few opportunities to meet French students, or even to see the same face twice. Although I tried to tell myself that I was having a valuable "learning experience," I was painfully lonely. Letters from friends and family at home helped, but could not substitute for daily companionship.

Life finally started to improve when I began to spend more time with other American students. We gossiped about our French families, shared information about cheap restaurants, and planned sightseeing trips. As our friendships deepened, my spirits lifted. Over the years, my closest college ties are still with the American friends I made in Paris.

Loneliness occurs when a person lacks either an emotional attachment to one special person or a network of friends and companions. One does not have to be physically isolated in order to be lonely. Indeed, it is quite possible to feel lonely in the midst of a crowd. Rather, loneliness stems from the lack of social relationships.
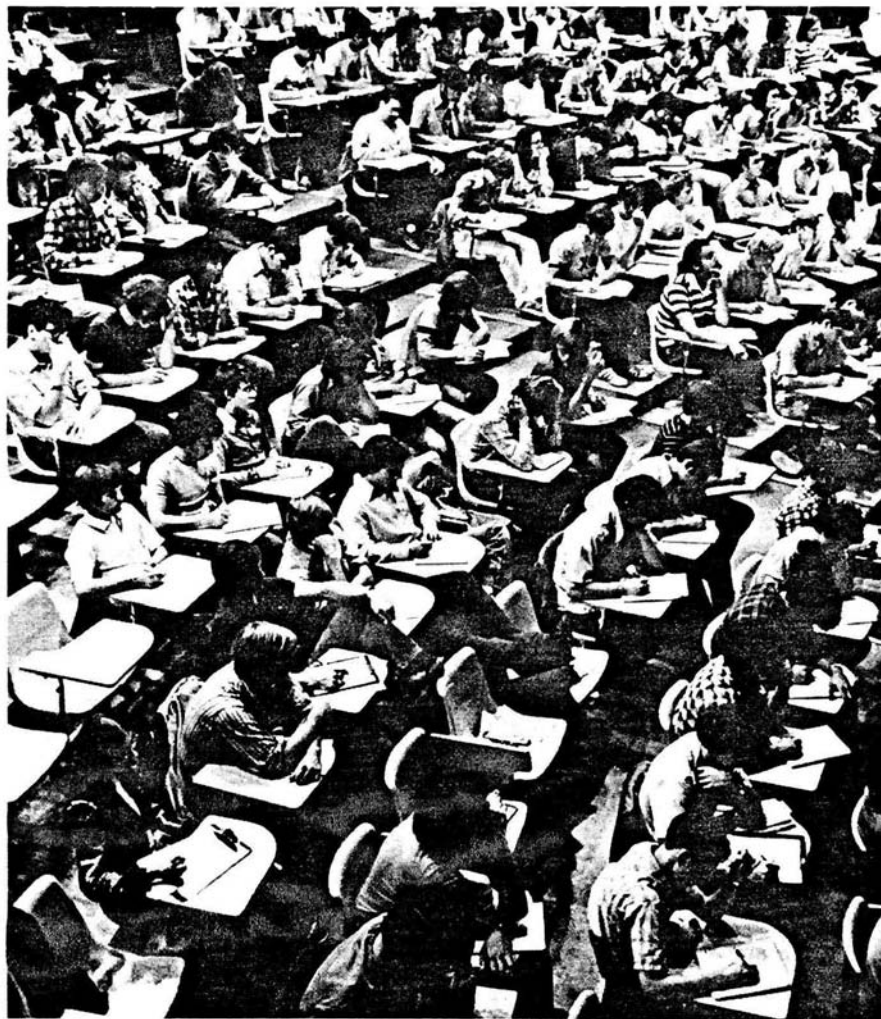
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In its mildest forms, loneliness can be no more than a momentary desire for companionship. Christie, a young woman I interviewed, said that she often felt lonely when her husband worked late at the office, but she explained that this didn't really bother her much because she knew that he would eventually come home. At the other extreme, loneliness can be a chronic problem that persists for years. Psychiatrist David Burns (1985) recalls that he was lonely for the first twenty-six years of his life: "From the time I was a child, I felt ugly and awkward. . . . I was rarely invited to parties. . . . In high school, people respected me for my seriousness and intelligence—but I was lonely and didn't feel close to very many people" (pages 17–18).

Although most people suffer from loneliness at some time in their life, psychologists have been slow to study this everyday problem. Systematic research on loneliness began only about ten years ago, but in that time loneliness has become a major area of research.

An important step in learning about loneliness was the creation of reliable paper-and-pencil tests to measure loneliness. One measure is the UCLA Loneliness Scale that Dan Russell, Carolyn Cutrona, and I developed. The UCLA Scale asks you to rate how often you have had the experience described in each of

twenty statements. Half the statements describe negative feelings and thoughts that people may have when they are lonely. Half describe positive aspects of a satisfying social life; these are scored in reverse so that a low score indicates greater loneliness. How would you answer the sample questions given in Box 1?

We have found that most non-lonely college students say they "rarely" experience the negative feelings described in the UCLA Scale; the average score on questions is about 2. In contrast, lonely students who signed up for a three-week "loneliness clinic" reported having these negative experiences "sometimes" or "often"; their average score was 3 or higher. New college students who were tested shortly after arriving on campus for their freshman year reported moderate feelings of loneliness; their scores were between 2 and 3.

Research using the UCLA Loneliness Scale and other loneliness measures has begun to show that severe and persistent loneliness can have serious consequences for people's mental health (Peplau and Goldston, 1984). Lonely people are more likely to suffer from depression and anxiety. They are more likely to abuse alcohol or drugs and are more likely to contemplate or attempt suicide.

The most recent studies suggest that loneliness may also affect phys-

ical health. Lonely people report more symptoms of upset such as headaches, poor appetite, and sleep problems. In studies using physiological measures to assess the body's immune response system, Janice Kiecolt-Glaser (1984a, b) has found that lonely people may be less able to fight off infections effectively. We don't yet understand why loneliness is linked to the immune system. Perhaps loneliness itself has an effect, or perhaps there are some behaviors engaged in by lonely people, such as greater use of alcohol or drugs, that in turn affect the immune system.

In a longitudinal study, following the same people over a two-year period, Dan Russell and Carolyn Cutrona (1985) studied the health of people over age 65. Those individuals who were the loneliest at the initial testing were more likely to be institutionalized and to die during the subsequent two years. Among the least lonely old people, only 4 percent moved from their own homes into a nursing home; among the loneliest group, 22 percent moved to an institution. And the loneliest people were four times as likely to die during the two-year period as were the least lonely. Several factors may combine to make these lonely old people more vulnerable to illness. Feelings of loneliness may themselves be detrimental to health. In addition, loneliness may be associated with other risk factors, such as a poorer immune response system or the absence of friends who can provide care and encouragement.

One of the first theorists to call attention to loneliness was Robert Weiss. In an influential book published in 1973, Weiss identified two distinct kinds of loneliness, each linked to the absence of one of the basic provisions of social relationships discussed in Chapter 14 (pages 450–451). The loneliness of emotional isolation results from the loss or absence of an intimate emotional attachment, such as might be

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BOX 1 Sample Questions from the UCLA Loneliness Scale

Directions: .Indicate how often you feel the way described in each of the following statements. Circle one number for each.

Statement	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often
1. I lack companionship	1	2	3	4
*2. I have a lot in common with the people around me	1	2	3	4
3. No one really knows me well	1	2	3	4
*4. I feel in tune with the people around me	1	2	3	4
5. I am no longer close to anyone	1	2	3	4

Questions 2 and 4 should be scored in reverse, that is $1 = 4$, $2 = 3$, $3 = 2$, $4 = 1$.
Source: Russell, Peplau, and Cutrona (1980).

Loneliness results from the lack of an emotional attachment or a network of friends.

provided by a dating partner or spouse. The loneliness of social *isolation* results from the loss or absence of a network of social ties. The socially lonely person feels cut off from companionship and the meaningful, identity-enhancing activities provided by friends and coworkers.

Weiss has found that one type of relationship cannot readily substitute for another in alleviating loneliness. Thus, a person suffering from a loss of a love relationship is likely to feel painfully lonely, even though she may have children at home or friends to spend time with. One divorced mother described her experience of emotional isolation in these terms:

Your house is so noisy all day long, phones, people, kids, all kinds of action going on and come eight o'clock everybody's in bed, and there's this dead silence. Like the whole world has just come to an end. All of a sudden you get this feeling that you're completely alone, that there is no one else in the world. You look out the window, you walk back and forth from room to room, you watch television, and you're dead. (Weiss, 1973, page 136)

And people who have close emotional attachments may still feel great loneliness if they lack a network of friends. Consider the newlywed couple from Ohio who set out for Alaska to seek their fortune in a new community. Until they make friends with neighbors or coworkers and form ties to their new social world, they are likely to experience social loneliness.

Millions of Americans suffer from loneliness. National surveys have found that as many as one quarter of adults—over 50 million people—have recently felt severely lonely (Revenson and Johnson,1984). Although loneliness occurs among all groups in our society, it is especially prevalent among those who are recently widowed or divorced (Peplau and Perlman, 1982). The loss of a significant love relationship is a major cause of loneliness. Another research finding is that loneliness is linked to age. Folk wisdom has it that youth is a time of great sociability and old age is a time of loneliness. Yet most surveys have found the opposite: loneliness is most common among teenagers and young adults and appears to decrease in older age groups. College students are one of the groups most likely to suffer from loneliness.

Perhaps the main reason that young adults are so vulnerable to loneliness is that they confront many social transitions. Moving away from home, going to college, starting a new job—all involve readjustments in social relations that can lead to loneliness. Young adults often leave behind the familiar worlds of high school, home town, and family to venture into new social worlds on their own. One college student commented that "After being voted in junior and senior high 'Best Personality' and 'Most Popular,' 1 had to start over."

In a recent study, Phillip Shaver and his colleagues at the University of Denver (1985) investigated the social changes experienced by 400 students during their first year in college. During the summer before college, the students were contacted by mail and asked to complete detailed questionnaires about themselves and their relationships. They were then recontacted early in the fall, during the winter, and finally in the spring of their freshman year to fill out additional questionnaires. Most students reported that the transition to college was the most difficult move or transition they had ever experienced. The researchers also concluded that these students' social lives underwent a significant upheaval.

During freshman year, old friendships and love affairs tended to wither. More than half of the precollege romances ended, and those that continued were rated as less satisfying in the spring than they had been during the previous summer. Although the average student quickly found a new group of casual acquaintances, he or she felt

Going to college involves changes in social relationships that can lead to loneliness.

less popular now than during high school. Many of the new friendships and romances started during freshman year were short-lived. And although many students continued to have contact with precollege friends, they found these friendships less satisfying as the year progressed. On the bright side, loneliness peaked in severity during the fall and then declined steadily through the year as satisfaction with new social relations increased. By spring, most students had reestablished a circle of friends, although they did not yet feel as close to these friends as they had to their high-school friends.

What advice can researchers offer to lonely people? First, far from being a sign of weakness, loneliness is a manifestation of basic human needs for intimacy and social connectedness—needs we all share. Like physical pain, loneliness is a useful warning that something is amiss—in this case that we should pay more attention to our social life. Second, studies show that, given a little time, most people successfully overcome loneliness. Moving to a new city, suffering the

end of a love affair, or being housebound due to illness can all produce loneliness. But most people rise to these challenges and reestablish satisfying social lives. Carolyn Cutrona (1982) found, for instance, that although 75 percent of UCLA freshmen were lonely at the start of fall term, only 25 percent were still lonely by spring. Similar patterns have been found for those experiencing divorce, bereavement, or a move to a new town. Patience and persistence pay off for most people most of the time.

Beyond these broad generalizations, specific suggestions must be tailored to the needs of particular individuals. What might help a lonely freshman might be of little use to an elderly widow or a divorced business executive. Let's consider a few issues relevant to college students.

Research has identified some of the personal characteristics that may prevent people from creating rewarding social lives and, as a result, increase the likelihood of being lonely (Peplau and Goldston, 1984). Some lonely people need to improve their social skills so that they

can interact more comfortably and competently with others. Sometimes shyness is a problem. People who are terribly shy get anxious in social situations, find it hard to initiate social relations, and fear taking social risks. Some lonely people appear to have a style of interacting that makes it hard for others to get to know them.

Warren Jones (1985) and his colleagues at the University of Tulsa have carefully observed the way that lonely college students act when they meet a new person. In a typical study, students first complete a loneliness questionnaire. Then, as part of another study, apparently unrelated to loneliness, they are asked to spend five minutes "getting acquainted" with another college student. Unbeknownst to the students, Jones matches each pair so that one person is high in loneliness and the other is not lonely. As the students converse, their interaction is videotaped and later coded.

In these brief interactions, lonely students typically behave quite differently from students who are not lonely. In general, lonely students act in a more self-focused and unre-

sponsive way. For instance, lonely students asked fewer questions of their partner, talked more about themselves, and arbitrarily changed the topic of conversation more often. In another study, Jones found that lonely students made more negative evaluations of their partner, were less accurate in describing the partner's personality, and liked the partner less. Other researchers have found that lonely students disclose less intimate information about themselves to others and are perceived by others as "difficult to get to know" (Solano, Batten and Parish, 1982). Taken together, these findings portray at least some lonely people as self-focused, unresponsive, and insensitive to new social situations.

In some cases these self-defeating behavioral styles may be an original cause of loneliness; in other cases they may be a reaction to the experience of being lonely. In either case, these styles can prevent lonely people from establishing new relationships and so cause loneliness to persist over time. To try to improve these faulty social styles, Jones and his colleagues (1982) developed a short training program that taught students such skills as how to ask questions and how to continue the topic of conversation begun by a partner. In a follow-up, Jones found that students who received the skills training behaved in less self-focused ways and reported significant reductions in both loneliness and shyness compared to a control group that received no instruction. At some colleges, student counseling centers npw offer programs to help students polish their social skills.

Another factor in loneliness is low self-esteem (Peplau and Goldston, 1984). Especially when loneliness persists for a long time, people tend to think badly of themselves—to feel uninteresting, unattractive, and unlovable. If this self-criticism points to specific behaviors that can be improved, such as bet-

ter grooming or listening more attentively to others, it can be useful. But when self-criticism turns to general feelings of inadequacy, incompetence and self-pity, it can be extremely harmful. Psychiatrist David Burns (1985) believes that the first step in overcoming loneliness is learning to like yourself. Lonely people who feel that they have little to offer are hardly likely to attract new friends. So Burns advises lonely people to develop a talent, skill, or hobby, to get involved in a worthwhile cause, and to treat themselves kindly. Learning to enjoy your own company when you are alone can be an important prerequisite for overcoming loneliness.

So far, our discussion has focused on personal characteristics that contribute to loneliness. It is equally important, however, to consider how situational factors can influence loneliness. Although less research has been done on this topic, we can consider some illustrations.

The story of my problems as an American trying to make friends in Paris suggests that when a person is significantly "different" from others in the social environment, it is

When a person is different from others in his social environment, it may be harder to make friends.

harder to make friends. A general principle in love and friendship is that similarity attracts. As a result, we may have a harder time making friends if we are the only young person in our apartment building, the only woman majoring in chemistry, or the only Hispanic on the volleyball team.

Situations can also limit the opportunities that people have for companionship. It is undoubtedly easier to get to know people in a small seminar than in a lecture class of 300. A student who has to work 30 hours a week while taking a full courseload in college may have little time for sleep, let alone socializing. Recognizing how situational factors can affect loneliness may help lonely people to cope more effectively.

Finally, loneliness research suggests that putting all your energies into any one relationship or assuming that one person can satisfy all your social needs is a risky strategy. Unfortunately, the myth that true love solves all our social problems is widely accepted. Hence, young adults may tend to neglect friendship in search of romance. Rather than developing a close relationship with a best friend or nurturing close ties with companions at work or school, people may focus on "falling in love." In her study of college freshmen at UCLA, Cutrona (1982) found that students who remained lonely throughout the year were likely to say that they were still seeking a boyfriend or girlfriend as the "solution" to their problem. In contrast, those students who were successful in overcoming loneliness said that their success was due to "gradually making friends with the people around me." If there is any key to social success, it may be to develop a wide range of social relations with friends, family, teachers, neighbors, and coworkers. Problems with one part of your social network may be easier to handle when other relationships provide social support and encouragement.