

## Loneliness

Loneliness can range from fleeting moods to severe and chronic states; it is the more extreme forms of loneliness that concern **social scientists** and the general public. A distinction can be made between emotional loneliness that occurs when an individual lacks an intimate relationship with one special person such as a spouse or parent, and social loneliness that occurs when an individual lacks friends or has no sense of belonging to a community (Rubenstein and Shaver, 1982; Weiss, 1973).

It is useful to distinguish loneliness from other, related, concepts. Loneliness is a subjective experience **that is** not identical to objective social isolation. Solitude is not invariably accompanied by loneliness. Although lonely people often report having fewer social ties than the non-lonely, many exceptions to this pattern occur. It is also useful to distinguish the psychological loneliness studied by most researchers from the philosophical concept of existential loneliness. From the existential view, loneliness refers to an individual's awareness that we are ultimately separate from others and must confront life challenges on our own (Moustakas, 1972).

In the past decade, research on loneliness has expanded rapidly, spurred in part by the development of reliable **paper-and-pencil** instruments to assess **loneliness** (see review by Russell, 1982). Studies in the United States, Europe and Britain (reviewed by Peplau and Perlman, 1982) indicate that loneliness is quite common, with perhaps 20 per cent of adults having felt at least moderately lonely in the past, few weeks. Although no social **group** is immune to loneliness, some people are at greater risk than others. Loneliness is most common among adolescents and young adults, and is less often reported by people in older age groups. Married people report less loneliness than the **unmarried**. The newly divorced and widowed are at high risk, although this tends to diminish over time. Like other forms of psychological distress, loneliness is more common among lower socioeconomic groups. Possible gender differences in loneliness have not been firmly established.

Several personal characteristics increase the risk of loneliness. These include shyness and introversion, low self-esteem and inadequate social skills. There is some evidence that parental rejection **and/or** divorce may dispose individuals to loneliness. Features of the social environment can also foster loneliness by limiting opportunities for satisfying social relations.

The immediate cause of loneliness is typically some event that produces a significant deficit in a person's social relations. Common precipitating factors include moving to a new school or community, ending a relationship through death or divorce, or being physically separated from loved ones. Although social transitions such as these can be very distressing, **most** people appear to cope with them effectively by re-establishing satisfactory social relations. In a minority of cases, however, severe loneliness persists over time and can have disturbing consequences. In adults, chronic loneliness has been linked to depression and suicidal tendencies. In adolescents, loneliness has been associated with school problems, delinquency and running away from home. Therapeutic approaches to helping the severely lonely are currently being developed (Rook and Peplau, 1982; Young, 1982).

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- See also: *friendship*.