MedicalXpress

People not always needed to alleviate loneliness

January 18 2008

New research at the University of Chicago finds evidence for a clever way that people manage to alleviate the pain of loneliness: They create people in their surroundings to keep them company.

“Biological reproduction is not a very efficient way to alleviate one’s loneliness, but you can make up people when you’re motivated to do so,” said Nicholas Epley, Assistant Professor of Behavioral Science at the University of Chicago’s Graduate School of Business. “When people lack a sense of connection with other people, they are more likely to see their pets, gadgets or gods as human-like.”

Social scientists call this tendency “anthropomorphism.” As a research topic, the phenomenon carries important therapeutic and societal implications, Epley said. He and his co-authors will publish their findings on anthropomorphism in the February issue of the journal *Psychological Science*. Also contributing to the research were Scott Akalis of Harvard University and the University of Chicago’s Adam Waytz and John Cacioppo.

The behaviors they describe in the paper are not limited to the lonely. Nevertheless, they are well-known to casual observers, from the stereotype of the woman who lives alone surrounded by her menagerie of cats, to the movie portrayal of a tropical island castaway.

“In the movie Castaway, Tom Hanks was isolated on an island and found the social desolation to be one of the most daunting challenges with

which he had to deal," said Cacioppo, the Tiffany and Margaret Blake Distinguished Service Professor in Psychology at the University of Chicago.

"He did so, in part, by anthropomorphizing a volleyball, Wilson, who became his friend and confidant while he was on the island." Although fictional, "Castaway depicts a deep truth about the irrepressibly social nature of Homo sapiens," Cacioppo said.

The researchers designed three experiments to test their expectations that lonely people are more likely to make up for their lack of social connection by creating humanlike connections with gadgets or pets, or to increase their belief in the supernatural.

In one experiment, the team found a correlation between how lonely people felt and their tendency to describe a gadget in terms of humanlike mental states.

In another experiment, the team made people feel lonely in the laboratory by asking them to write about a time when they felt lonely or isolated. Under those circumstances, they were more likely to believe in the supernatural, whether it be God, angels or miracles, than when they were not feeling lonely.

"If we made them feel lonely, they were also more likely to describe a pet, even if it wasn't their own pet, as having humanlike mental states that were related to social connection, like being more thoughtful, considerate and compassionate," Epley said.

The research further revealed that not just any negative emotional state produces this effect. "It's something special about loneliness," Epley said. Fear, for example, doesn't increase reported belief in God, or how people describe their pets.

Loneliness is both painful to experience and potentially deadly. “It’s actually a greater risk for morbidity or mortality than cigarette smoking is. Being lonely is a bad thing for you,” he said.

But anthropomorphizing pets or God may actually confer many of the same psychological and physical benefits that come from connections with other people. The same benefits may not apply to gadgets, which were a component of Epley’s studies.

“Non-human connections can be very powerful,” Epley said. “A brain’s not so sensitive to whether it’s a person or not. If it’s something that has a lot of traits associated with what it means to be a human, then all the better for us, it seems.”

The study also provides insight into the flip side of anthropomorphism: dehumanization. People who enjoy a strong sense of social connection are less likely to perceive humanlike mental states in people who seem different from them. Classic examples occur during times of war, during which a strong sense of nationalism or group identity tend to emerge.

“It may be that strong in-group identity is one of the things that facilitates dehumanizing the opposing side,” Epley said.

Source: University of Chicago