

Loneliness, Poor Health Appear to be Linked

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Some people enjoy being alone. But a UA study has found that for those who are truly lonely, the issue is one of perception and could have serious health-related consequences. (Photo credit: FJ Gaylor Photography)

(PhysOrg.com) -- Two UA studies have found that hoarding friends doesn't necessarily diminish forlorn feelings and that loneliness is a matter of perception.

If attempting to stave off loneliness, having an in with the local barista, being in touch with dozens of former [classmates](#) and having hundreds of Twitter followers does not carry much clout if those relationships come without a strong connection.

Two newly published University of Arizona studies suggest that superficial relationships can not only result in feelings of detachment, but also contribute to certain health-related problems.

"There is an association between social networks and health but the precise mechanism is not understood," said Stacey Passalacqua, who recently earned her UA doctorate in interpersonal and health communication with a minor in psychology.

Passalacqua and Chris Segrin, the UA communication department head and lead author on the papers, decided to study individual perceptions of stress and social support to understand ways loneliness may be linked to health.

In their study of 265 adults ages 19 to 85, Segrin and Passalacqua found that stress serves a crucial function for those who reported being lonely.

They found that lonely people were prone to have fewer close connections, were less apt to manage daily [stressors](#) well and tended not to keep up on their health. Also, lonely people did not get adequate sleep.

Segrin noted that age did not predict whether a person would be lonely and living away from close friends and family did not have a negative effect. Also, having relationships mediated by digital modes is not necessarily problematic, though relationships well-established prior to the distance were likely the strongest.

Being partnered did not shield a person from feelings of loneliness, Segrin added. Instead, having close friends and family members appeared to be more important.

"The mere presence of a relationship is not always something that is going to lead to you feeling satisfied and supported," he said.

Another curious conclusion: The team found that, above all, loneliness is a matter of perception.

"Loneliness is the discrepancy between your achieved and desired level of social contact, and that has important implications," Segrin said. "The portrait of a lonely person is very difficult to paint because what is really important is what is in your head."

So people can experience the same stressors - maybe the car breaks down, or a checking account overdraws, or maybe a relationship is not going well and someone just needs to vent - and have entirely different responses.

It is no wonder, then, that certain people with large social networks also express feelings of loneliness. When it comes to relationships, quality, not quantity, is the decisive factor, Passalacqua said.

"There are so many people we have in our day-to-day interactions," she said. "But the absence of close family members and close [friends](#) is something that should be taken seriously. Sometimes we don't realize how important these close relationships are to our health."

The findings were published in a co-authored article, "Functions of Loneliness, Social Support, Health Behaviors, and Stress in Association With Poor Health," in a June issue of Health Communication.

Segrin also collaborated with Tricia Domschke, doctoral degree candidate in communication, on another study to look further into such details.

The co-authored article, "Social Support, [Loneliness](#), Recuperative Processes and their Direct and Indirect Effects on Health," has been accepted for publication also in [Health](#) Communication.

Segrin and Domschke found that lonely people did not enjoy leisure activities or get regenerate effects from sleep at a comparable level as

others did. So when it came to taking a vacation, getting a good night's sleep, or going for a swim, lonely people did not get as much of a recharge.

What both studies suggest is that people need not only to take better care of themselves, but learn to nurture the relationships.

"We know that chronic stressors are very damaging to the human system," Passalacqua said.

"Perceptions are all it takes, and when you experience stress, it has a physiological effect on the body," she added. "The mind has such a powerful effect on the body and, really, our perceptions are going to shape our world."

Provided by University of Arizona

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