

# Study on social interactions could improve understanding of mental health risks

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McLean Hospital study linked social anhedonia, a low or loss of social motivation, with a number of psychiatric illnesses. Credit: McLean Hospital

McLean Hospital investigators have released the results of a study that outlines how age, socioeconomic status, and other factors might

contribute to social isolation and poorer mental health. In a paper published in the online version of *Clinical Psychological Science*, the researchers examine how individuals of all ages and walks of life seek and enjoy social interactions. Because studies have linked low social motivation or loss of social motivation with a number of psychiatric illnesses, including depression and schizophrenia spectrum disorders, the study's co-author, McLean Hospital's Laura Germine, Ph.D., believes that data presented in the study could increase our understanding of contributing factors that negatively impact a person's mental health.

"Lack of social drive has been linked to [social isolation](#) and poorer mental [health](#), including risk of psychosis in adolescence and early adulthood," said Germine, technical director of the McLean Institute for Technology in Psychiatry. With this in mind, Germine and her co-author, David Dodell-Feder, Ph.D., of the University of Rochester decided to investigate how the experience of social pleasure and social drive is different over the lifespan and different demographic groups.

In "Epidemiological Dimensions of Social Anhedonia," Germine and Dodell-Feder present results from a study conducted over a three-year period through the online research platform [TestMyBrain.org](#). In all, some 20,000 individuals from around the world took part in the study, which was designed to examine the factors that might underlie "social anhedonia," a clinical term that describes a lack in social motivation, a reduced drive to engage in social interactions, or difficulty deriving pleasure from social interactions. Participants ranged widely in age, [socioeconomic status](#), and ethnicity.

Engaging in what Germine called "a large-scale citizen science project," the researchers compared the study data with existing literature on social anhedonia and risk factors for mental health disorders. They found several ways that people differ from one another in basic aspects of social motivation that mirror differences in risk for certain mental

disorders. For example, Germine said, the results indicated that "social motivation and social drive are lower among men than women" and in "people from more disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds."

In addition, the researchers found that social motivation and social pleasure go down from early adolescence until about ages 40-50, before increasing again into older age. Germine said that low social [motivation](#) in middle adulthood could lead to lower social support and consequently contribute to poorer health outcomes and that interventions that increase social support might be a key way of addressing mental health difficulties in middle adulthood.

Germine believes that understanding how factors like [social motivation](#) differ in the population can help us "see patterns and understand who's at risk and why they might be at risk." She said that investigating "social behavior in the population and linking that to differences in [mental health](#) could ultimately lead to better methods of assessing, diagnosing, and treating mental disorders."

**More information:** David Dodell-Feder et al, Epidemiological Dimensions of Social Anhedonia, *Clinical Psychological Science* (2018). [DOI: 10.1177/2167702618773740](https://doi.org/10.1177/2167702618773740)

Provided by McLean Hospital

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