

Lonely teenagers at greater risk of poor educational outcomes

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New research from the Institute of Psychiatry, Psychology, & Neuroscience (IoPPN) at King's College London has found that young people who experience loneliness during early adolescence (age 12) are at greater risk of leaving school with lower grades than their non-lonely

counterparts, even if they stop being lonely later on.

The study, published in *Development and Psychopathology*, finds that [loneliness](#) (whether temporary or ongoing) during someone's [teenage years](#) increases their risk of a number of negative outcomes, including poor mental health, self-harm, compulsive mobile phone use, and unhealthy lifestyle choices such as smoking. The findings suggest that, without the right support, the negative effects of loneliness could act as a force for downwards social mobility—a negative change in social position relative to where they started.

2232 participants from England and Wales were recruited from the Environmental Risk (E-Risk) Longitudinal Twin Study and assessed for a variety of outcomes at age 18; including levels of perceived loneliness, educational outcomes, and mental wellbeing.

The study established that participants who experienced loneliness were at greater risk of negative outcomes compared to those that never experienced it. By 18, those who had undergone periods loneliness in the last six years were the most likely to experience problems such as depression and anxiety, as well lower levels of life satisfaction and quality of sleep.

The researchers also drew distinction between the stages at which a child experiences loneliness. While those participants that were lonely at age 12 but subsequently 'recovered' were generally found to be at lower risk of poor mental health outcomes later on, they were still more likely to finish school with low qualifications. The researchers suggest that this could be due to early loneliness causing significant disruption, resulting in lost ground that can't be regained without support.

Dr. Timothy Matthews, the study's first lead author from King's IoPPN said, "Our study demonstrates that loneliness during someone's teenage

years can have serious impact on their later life. In 2018, nearly half of 10-12 year olds reported feeling lonely at least some of the time, with as many as 15% saying that they often felt that way.

"Loneliness, however temporary, can be an extremely distressing experience, and we should make every effort to support those that need it so that they can overcome it."

While the study did find that there were certain genetic factors that may put some people at greater risk than others of experiencing loneliness persistently, environmental factors like a loving home and supportive parents were found to have a greater influence on whether a person moved in or out of loneliness.

Professor Louise Arseneault, the study's senior author from King's IoPPN said, "This study attests to the importance of early interventions to ensure that lonely [young people](#), particularly those in the first couple of years of secondary school, are identified and given the support that they need to ensure they don't start on the back foot."

More information: Timothy Matthews et al, The developmental course of loneliness in adolescence: Implications for mental health, educational attainment, and psychosocial functioning, *Development and Psychopathology* (2022). [DOI: 10.1017/S0954579421001632](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0954579421001632)

Provided by King's College London

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