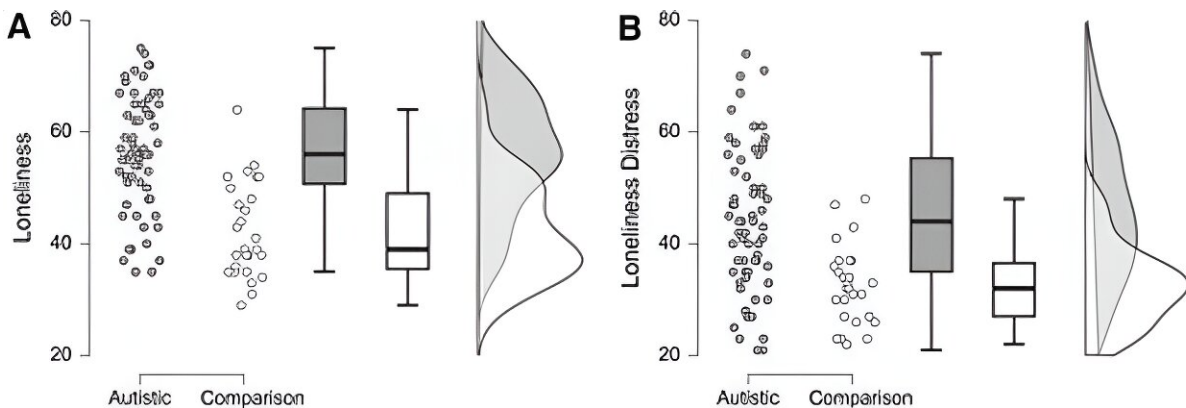


Study examines the devastating impact of loneliness on autistic people

November 2 2023, by Kathy Thomas



Loneliness (A) and loneliness distress (B) group differences between autistic and nonautistic participants. Credit: *Autism in Adulthood* (2023). DOI: 10.1089/aut.2022.0062

New research has revealed just how acutely autistic people experience loneliness contradicting the stereotype that they avoid seeking meaningful social relationships.

Loneliness negatively affects physical and [mental health](#) in both neurotypical and neurodivergent individuals and rates of loneliness are up to four times higher in [autistic individuals](#) than their peers. Autistic people also have a greater vulnerability to the negative physical and psychological consequences of loneliness.

However, [social environments](#) often act as barriers, making it more difficult for people with higher levels of sensory differences to interact with others.

A [new study](#), which has just been published by journal *Autism in Adulthood*, investigated [autistic people](#)'s experiences and sought to not only quantify the level of distress associated with loneliness but also to provide a qualitative insight into autistic adults' loneliness.

The authors include Dr. Gemma Williams, a public [health](#) research officer in the School of Health and Social Care. She said, "In the quantitative part of the study, our results indicate that sensory differences are related with higher loneliness and associated poor mental health in both autistic and non-autistic adults. This effect was exacerbated in autistic adults due to a greater presence of sensory processing differences."

For the qualitative part of the study, she collated first-hand reports from autistic adults on intense loneliness and the obstructive role of sensory environments which refute stereotypes about autistic adults lacking social motivation.

For example, one of the participants explained that where people live can have a big impact on their [social interaction](#). She said, "The cost of transport in the city, it's really quite expensive and prohibitive for some people. So, especially if people are out of work or in transient work or zero-hour contracts where they don't know how much or how many hours they're gonna get from one month to the next."

During a cost-of-living crisis, meeting up for activities may be out of reach for many individuals, but autistic people are especially vulnerable as they frequent experience financial inequalities relating not only to a lack of employment opportunities and support but also access to

benefits.

Taken together, the research team's two studies confirm that loneliness is significantly related to feelings of distress and poor mental health in both autistic and non-autistic adults.

Moreover, experiencing sensory differences in a world that does not accommodate for variant sensory profiles may drive people to become increasingly isolated, contributing to feelings of loneliness.

One participant described the difficulties she had experienced in making friends: "Sometimes I have trouble having a conversation or to be understood because I don't have the same thought process. Which makes it weird sometimes and people are wondering 'what are you saying?' or 'I can't understand what do you mean?'"

Another added, "I'm trying to reach out, I'm trying to find my people, but it all still feels a bit hopeless."

As sensory differences are especially prevalent in the autistic community, they may compound other societal, social, and affective factors, ultimately giving rise to higher numbers of loneliness and associated distress.

Dr. Williams added, "Our research highlighted how painfully [loneliness](#) is often experienced by autistic adults. We conclude that to enable meaningful and inclusive social interaction, a real societal effort is needed to create spaces that consider the sensory needs of all neurotypes."

More information: Lisa Quadt et al, "I'm Trying to Reach Out, I'm Trying to Find My People": A Mixed-Methods Investigation of the Link Between Sensory Differences, Loneliness, and Mental Health in Autistic

and Nonautistic Adults, *Autism in Adulthood* (2023). DOI: [10.1089/aut.2022.0062](https://doi.org/10.1089/aut.2022.0062)

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