

How lonely you are may impact how well you sleep, research shows

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Loneliness is not only heartbreaking, it breaks up a normal night's sleep, a new study shows. Researchers say compromised sleep may be one pathway by which feelings of loneliness adversely affect our health.

"It's not just a product of very lonely individuals having poor [sleep](#). The relationship between loneliness and restless sleep appears to operate across the range of perceived connectedness," said lead author Lianne Kurina, PhD, of the Department of Health Studies at the University of Chicago.

Kurina and her co-authors compared the degree of loneliness reported by a close-knit population of 95 adults in rural South Dakota with measurements of their sleep cycles. None of the individuals were socially isolated, yet their perceptions of loneliness varied. Higher loneliness scores were linked to significantly higher levels of fragmented sleep. The total amount of sleep and the degree of [daytime sleepiness](#) were not impacted.

"Loneliness has been associated with [adverse effects](#) on health," Kurina said. "We wanted to explore one potential [pathway](#) for this, the theory that sleep – a key behavior to staying healthy – could be compromised by [feelings](#) of loneliness. What we found was that loneliness does not appear to change the total amount of sleep in individuals, but awakens them more times during the night."

These findings, appearing in the Nov. 1 issue of the journal *Sleep*, were

similar to a 2002 study published by the American Psychological Society that compared the loneliness reported by college students with their measured quality of sleep. The lonelier the students felt, the more their sleep was broken-up during the night.

The similarities among the studies help point out that loneliness and social isolation are two distinct concepts, Kurina said. [Loneliness](#) reflects perceived social isolation or feelings of being an outcast, the often-painful discrepancy between a person's desired and actual social relationships.

"Whether you're a young student at a major university or an older adult living in a rural community, we may all be dependent on feeling secure in our social environment in order to sleep soundly," Kurina said. "The results from these studies could further our understanding of how social and psychological factors 'get under the skin' and affect health."

More information: "Loneliness Is Associated with Sleep Fragmentation in a Communal Society," *Sleep* (2011)

A reprint of the 2002 study, "Do Lonely Days Invade the Nights? Potential Social Modulation of Sleep Efficiency," published by the American Psychological Society, can be downloaded at [psychology.uchicago.edu/people ... prints/chbegsh02.pdf](https://psychology.uchicago.edu/people...prints/chbegsh02.pdf)

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