

# What are students' social health needs?

## Background

As individuals transition from youth to adulthood and enter post-secondary education, they face a myriad of challenges, situations, and decisions that shape their lifelong health and future success. Healthy social relationships are resources that can contribute to success in navigating this period of life. As such, it is important to understand what young people's social health needs are and how they can best be supported through what can be a challenging phase of development.

## Purpose

The purpose of this evidence brief is to present **(a)** the most pertinent research describing the prevalence and severity of loneliness in post-secondary students, **(b)** the causes of this loneliness, **(c)** what individual risk factors contribute to it, and **(d)** actions that can be taken to improve the social health of young adults and students.

## Evidence from Existing Studies

### The Prevalence and Severity of Loneliness in Young Adults and Postsecondary Students

Research suggests that young adults are one of the loneliest demographics (Manoli et al., [2022](#)) and that the association between age and loneliness tends to be U-shaped (meaning it is most severe for young and old). For example, a global survey indicated that 40% of 16-24 year olds feel lonely often or very often (compared to only 27% of those over the age of 75; University of Manchester, [2018](#); Barreto et al., [2020](#)). This long-standing tendency has been compounded by a decade's long reduction in the amount of time youth spend socializing with friends (Twenge, Spitzberg & Campbell, [2019](#)), which has been compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic (Bu, Steptoe & Fancourt, [2020](#)).

In addition to the well-documented health and social effects of loneliness experienced by the general population, young adults and post-secondary students are uniquely impacted by loneliness in a variety of respects. For example, loneliness is predicative of suicide (Hatcher & Stubbersfield, [2013](#); Kleiman & Liu, [2013](#)) and suicide is one of the leading causes of death in university students (Turner, Leno & Keller, [2013](#)). Similarly, loneliness is associated with poor academic performance (Bek, [2017](#)), along with a diminished sense of belonging – factors which are predictive of intentions to abandon one's studies (Höhne & Zander, [2019](#); Suhlmann et al., [2018](#)). Projecting forward from students' formative years, social connectedness has been identified as an important predictor of job security (Wu et al., [2013](#)) and social mobility (Chetty et al., [2022](#)). Deficits in these factors can then feedback in to loneliness, compounding its consequences on health (Caspi et al., [2006](#); Pressman et al., [2005](#)).

### Risk Factors for Loneliness in Young Adults and Postsecondary Students

Loneliness in young adults, students, and the general population is predicted by a range of states and traits, including psychological factors (e.g. social anxiety and depression; Maes et al., [2019](#); Bruce et al., [2019](#); Wei, Russell & Zakalik, [2005](#)) personality (i.e. introversion; Saklofske & Yackulic, [1989](#)), social competency deficits (e.g. social skills and social self-efficacy; Lodder et al., [2016](#); Moeller & Seehus, [2019](#); Newall et al., [2009](#); Wei, Russell & Zakalik, [2005](#)), social perception factors (sense of belonging and social support), and socioeconomic factors (e.g. income; Page & Cole, [1991](#)). In addition to these primary drivers, young people and post-secondary students have unique vulnerabilities to loneliness:

First, upon beginning their studies, students must navigate unfamiliar social environments (Baklashova & Kazakov, [2016](#); Glenn et al., [2019](#); Tung, [2011](#); Moeller & Seehuus, [2021](#)), with many experiencing both physical and social disconnection from their established social networks (friends, families etc.; Lyer et al., [2009](#); Praharsu, [2017](#)). These changes typically occur at a stage of cognitive and emotional development where young adults are already at an increased risk for mental health morbidities (Cooke et al., [2006](#); Glenn et al., [2019](#); Zsido, Varadi-Borbas & Arato, [2021](#)).

During their studies, students are typically surrounded by an abundance of potential high-value friendships (Anders, [2012](#); Chetty et al., [2022](#); Frenette, [2007](#)), which presents a unique opportunity to form the type of strong social connections that can be predictive of one's long-term social, psychological, economic, and physical wellbeing (Chetty et al., [2022](#); Umberson, Crosnoe & Reczek, [2010](#)). However, for students who are persistently unable realize their desired social connections, loneliness can be exacerbated by this abundance of possibility: loneliness is formally conceptualized as the gap between one's desired social connections and one's actual social connections (Peplau & Perlman, [1982](#)), and the most detrimental loneliness-related outcomes are observed in individuals who come to view their state as inescapable. Therefore, the frequent exposure to desirable but seemingly inaccessible peers, observing others succeed in developing desirable connections, and comparisons with peers' interpersonal highlights through social media likely contribute to the development and maintenance of large gaps between one's desired and actual social connectedness (Keles, McCrae & Grealish, [2020](#); Seabrook, Kern & Rickard, [2016](#); Whillans et al., [2017](#)), with potentially tragic consequences (Hatcher & Stubbersfield, [2013](#); Kleiman & Liu, [2013](#)).

Given the potential for substantial chronic loneliness-related harm, it is concerning that social deficits and consequences are becoming increasingly prevalent. The trend for reduced social interaction with friends and increased loneliness constitutes a moderate effect, which coincided with the rise of social media and increases in internet use. Technology use including social media has been prominently named as a likely primary driver of this trend (Twenge, [2020](#)), however, associations between individual social media use have often been found to be small or non-significant (Orben, Dienlin & Przybylski, [2019](#); Sewall et al., [2022](#)). And though alternative explanations for the downward trend in student social wellbeing (including the 2008 financial crisis, increasingly poor job prospects for youth and political polarization), a comprehensive accounting of this trend has yet to be performed.

Based on these factors outlined above, a large proportion of the variation in post-secondary students' loneliness can be predicted (e.g. Wei, Russell & Zakalik, [2005](#)), and effective interventions have been shown to help address these risk factors.



## In focus: Social Marginalization in Post-Secondary Settings

While individuals from any demographic group can be affected by one or more of the aforementioned factors, loneliness and related outcomes can be especially high in many historically marginalized and/or minority groups. Social health inequities have been identified in individuals identifying as LGBTQ+ (Hatcher & Stubbersfield, [2013](#); Miranda-Mendizábal et al., [2017](#)), international students (Taliaferro et al., [2020](#)), neurodiverse people (Whitehouse et al., [2009](#)), and BIPOC students. With black students in university settings for example, these social health disparities have been found to contribute to an 'achievement gap' in degree completion rates (Brown et al., [2022](#); Ciocca Eller et al., [2018](#); Greene et al., [2008](#); Sotardi et al., [2022](#); Hausmann, Schofield & Woods, [2009](#); Walton & Cohen, [2007](#); Walton & Cohen, [2011](#); Walton et al., [2023](#)). A pervasive 'belonging uncertainty' can arise from conspicuous under-representation, forms of prejudice both overt and subtle, experiencing lower grades and salaries, feeling alienated on college campuses, missing out on the "insider" contacts and social capital enjoyed more frequently by e.g. white students. The consequences of this can be pernicious, and compound experiences of stigmatization (Walton & Cohen, [2007](#); Janke et al., [2023](#)). This uncertainty affects perception, interpretation and behaviour, making evidence consistent with the hypothesis "I do not belong" stand out, likely due in part to raising the salience threatening cues that might otherwise be overlooked (Mendoza-Denton et al., [2002](#); Kleck & Strenta, [1980](#)). In evaluative contexts, negative stereotypes can manifest as stereotype threat (Aronson, Fried & Good, [2002](#); Steele, [1997](#)), and in social contexts, can create an anticipation of race-based rejection (Mendoza-Denton et al., [2002](#); Shelton & Richeson, [2005](#)). Together, these effects can further entrench socioeconomic disparities, upending the promise of a post-secondary education being an engine of upward social mobility.

### Strategies for Improving Social Connectedness Among

To produce a meaningful improvement in the social health of students and young adults, a solution or suite of solutions would need to be both demonstrably effective and widely used - unfortunately, no such resources have been identified for student and youth populations (Ellard et al., [2022](#)). That said, a spectrum of efficacious loneliness reduction approaches for the wider population have been identified (Masi et al., [2011](#)), and many of these generalize to student and youth populations. A common feature across these approaches is the promotion of prosocial behaviour, which can enrich both individual and communal experiences (Ellard et al., [2022](#); Epley & Schroeder, [2014](#); Haslam et al., [2019](#); Käll et al., [2020](#); Y. Lee & Chen, 2022). Furthermore, the most demonstrably effective interventions (tested via randomized controlled trials) highlight five underlying mechanisms of action: **(a)** The development of strong group affiliation (Haslam et al., 2019), **(b)** Changing one's attentional focus from an inward orientation to an outward one (Huppert et al., 2003) and/or behaving altruistically (Lee & Chen, 2022; Trew & Alden, [2015](#)) **(c)** Developing healthy cognitive and behavioural patterns (Ledley, [2009](#); Käll et al., [2020](#)), **(d)** The effortful adoption of extrovert-like behaviour (Zelenski, Santoro & Whelan, [2012](#); Zelenski et al., [2013](#)), and **(e)** for those who struggle with socialization, social skills training (Huppert, Roth & Foa, [2003](#)). Interventions with these components may be particularly useful for post-secondary students who fall below clinical thresholds for treatment (McManus, Bebbington & Jenkins, [2016](#)) or who are otherwise not able to access strained student mental



health resources (Prince, [2015](#)). However, even when such resources are available, the stigma of loneliness and poor mental health (which can vary by culture, Hansen et al., [2021](#)) likely results in their underutilization (Cage et al., [2020](#); Ebert et al., [2019](#)).

## Analyses from the Canadian Social Connection Survey

Using data from the Canadian Social Connection Survey (N = 5,171, we examined levels of emotional and social loneliness and social interaction anxiety among student (16.1%) and non-students (83.9%). These analyses indicated that students had higher emotional loneliness (Mean: 2.35 vs. 1.87,  $p < 0.001$ ), though this effect was not significant when controlling for age ( $p = 0.062$ ). Conversely, there was no difference in social loneliness scores for students and non-students (Mean: 1.88 vs. 1.93,  $p = 0.256$ ) including when age was controlled-for ( $p = 0.782$ ). Students exhibited significantly higher levels of social interaction anxiety (Mean: 9.14 vs. 5.87,  $p < 0.001$ ) and which was also true when controlling for age ( $p < 0.001$ ), which is a potential causal factor for the social wellbeing deficits that students often experience.

## Discussion

Based on the evidence summarized above, it is clear that post-secondary students and young people generally experience a disproportionate burden of loneliness – driven at least in part by situational and life course factors, including some specific to their post-secondary studies. In particular, post-secondary students (and young people), appear to be disproportionately burdened by emotional loneliness and social anxieties. This may suggest that psychological and emotional challenges during this life stage, rather than lack of social opportunity, is a key challenge for post-secondary students.

Addressing these issues is timely and of critical importance – particularly given the potential social challenges that could accompany the rise of generative AI and the dominance of digitally-mediated communication (e.g., social media use). Further research will be needed to identify which intervention approaches are most effective and how to best implement them in this population. This will require research specifically focused on young people, including but not limited to post-secondary students.

## Conclusion

While the outlook for loneliness in young adults and students presents many reasons for concern, researchers have succeeded in identifying many of its antecedents, providing promising methods and targets for treatment. With a combined effort from public health initiatives, academic institutions, communities, and the young adults themselves, we can slow and possibly reverse this trend. As such, we recommend continued research and targeted interventions for this population.

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