Examining Social Isolation and Loneliness using Canadian Longitudinal Study on Aging Data

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Loneliness May Be The Biggest Threat To Mental Health Today

Loneliness is a problem we can only tackle together.
Defining social isolation and loneliness

• Social isolation
  – the objective state of a person not having many social relationships and contacts.

• Loneliness
  – the unpleasant subjective experience resulting from the perceived mismatch between the (quantity or quality) of relationships we want compared to what we have.
Lonely in a crowd

Socially isolated but not lonely
Social isolation and loneliness are health risks

- Decreased immune system
- Worse sleep quality
- Increased risk of heart disease and stroke
- Increased risk of dementia
- Increased risk of depression
- Poor quality of life
- Increased risk of mortality
- Increased health care use
- Etc., etc., etc.
Why might social isolation/loneliness impact physical and mental health?

**Individual Characteristics/Experiences**
- Gender
- Age
- Life transitions

**Structural Conditions/Environment**
- Cultural
- Socioeconomic
- Geographic Resources

**Social Relationships**
- Social networks
- Social contact
- Perceptions of social contacts

**Behavioral/Affective Mechanisms**
- Social support
- Health behaviors
- Cognitive-affective processes

**Physiological Pathways**
- Immune system
- Neuroendocrine system
- Cardiovascular reactivity

Social isolation
Loneliness

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**Social isolation**
**Loneliness**
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- **Social Relationships**
  - Social isolation
  - Loneliness

- **Behavioral/Affective Mechanisms**
  - Social support

- **Health-related Outcomes**
  - Depression
  - Psychological Distress
  - Hospitalization
  - ED Use

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Measures – Social network structure in the CLSA

**Social network size.** Number of: 1) biological children, adopted children, as well as stepchildren; 2) living siblings; 3) relatives; 4) close friends; and 5) neighbors.

**Frequency of contact with network members.**
“More than 1 year ago” to “Within the last day or two”.

**Social participation.** Frequency of participation in eight activities in the past 12 months.
Measures – Social support

19-item Medical Outcomes Study (MOS) – Social Support Survey.

- Affectionate support (e.g., “someone who hugs you”);
- Emotional support (e.g., “someone you can count on to listen to you when you need to talk”);
- Positive social interaction (e.g., “some to get together with for relaxation”);
- Tangible support (e.g., “someone to help you if you were confined to bed”).
Social isolation and depression: The mediating role of social support

Affectionate Support

Indirect effect statistically significant

Restricted (socially isolated) social network group vs. diverse social network group

Tangible Support

Indirect effect not statistically significant

Depressive Symptoms

Figure adapted from Harasemiw O, Newall N, Mackenzie C, Shooshtari S, Menec V. Aging & Mental Health (in press).
Our approach to measuring social isolation and loneliness using the CLSA

• Social isolation index

1. living alone and not married or in a common law relationship = 1 point
2. less than monthly visits with friends or neighbours
3. less than monthly visits with relatives/siblings
4. less than monthly visits with children
5. being retired and less than monthly participation in 0 or 1 of 8 social activities.

Total score = 0-5; dichotomized: 3-5=socially isolated.

• Loneliness

“How often did you feel lonely?”; dichotomized: “all of the time” [5-7 days] and “occasionally” [3-4 days] = lonely.
Data source - CLSA
Comprehensive cohort

• Baseline data
  – to derive main predictor variables - social isolation and loneliness variables (and covariates)

• Maintaining contact questionnaire (MCQ)
  conducted about 18 months after the baseline data collection
  – to derive outcome variable - psychological distress (Kessler K10 scale)
Social isolation and loneliness and psychological distress

Prevalence of Distress

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Condition</th>
<th>Prevalence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Not socially isolated</td>
<td>12.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Socially isolated</td>
<td>21.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not lonely</td>
<td>10.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lonely</td>
<td>34.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The relationship between loneliness and social isolation and psychological distress (Adjusted odds ratios)

Controlled for baseline depression

Controlled for baseline depression and social support
Conclusions

- Social support may mediate the relationship between social isolation and loneliness and mental health to some extent, but
  - there appear to be gender differences
  - results may differ depending on the type of support
  - we need to test a mediational model

- We need to look at other possible mediators.