

Loneliness highest in the 20s and lowest in the 60s, study says

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Loneliness is a prevalent and serious public health problem impacting health, well-being and longevity. Seeking to develop effective interventions, researchers at University of California San Diego School of Medicine examined the psychological and environmental factors that lead to patterns of loneliness in different age groups.

Researchers used a web-based survey of 2,843 participants, ages 20 to 69 years, from across the United States.

The study, published in the November 10, 2020 online edition of the *Journal of Clinical Psychiatry*, found that levels of [loneliness](#) were highest in the 20s and lowest in the 60s, with another peak in the mid-40s.

"What we found was a range of predictors of loneliness across the lifespan," said corresponding senior author Dilip V. Jeste, MD, senior associate dean for Healthy Aging and Distinguished Professor of Psychiatry and Neurosciences at UC San Diego School of Medicine.

The researchers noted that lower levels of empathy and compassion, smaller social networks, not having a spouse or a partner and greater sleep disturbances were consistent predictors of loneliness across all decades. Lower social self-efficacy—or the ability to reflect confidence in exerting control over one's own motivation, behavior and [social environment](#)—and higher anxiety were associated with worse loneliness in all age decades, except the 60s.

Loneliness was also associated with a lower level of decisiveness in the 50s.

The study confirmed previous reports of a strong inverse association between loneliness and wisdom, especially the pro-social behaviors component (empathy and compassion).

"Compassion seems to reduce the level of loneliness at all ages, probably by enabling individuals to accurately perceive and interpret others' emotions along with helpful behavior toward others, and thereby increasing their own social self-efficacy and social networks," said Jeste.

The survey suggested that people in their 20s were dealing with high stress and pressure while trying to establish a career and find a life partner.

"A lot of people in this decade are also constantly comparing themselves on social media and are concerned about how many likes and followers they have," said Tanya Nguyen, Ph.D., first author of the study and assistant clinical professor in the Department of Psychiatry at UC San Diego School of Medicine. "The lower level of self-efficacy may lead to greater loneliness."

People in their 40s start to experience physical challenges and health issues, such as high blood pressure and diabetes.

"Individuals may start to lose loved ones close to

them and their children are growing up and are becoming more independent. This greatly impacts self-purpose and may cause a shift in self-identify, resulting in increased loneliness," said Nguyen.

Jeste said the findings are especially relevant during the COVID-19 global pandemic.

"We want to understand what strategies may be effective in reducing loneliness during this challenging time," said Jeste. "Loneliness is worsened by the physical distancing that is necessary to stop the spread of the pandemic."

Nguyen said intervention and prevention efforts should consider stage-of-life issues. "There is a need for a personalized and nuanced prioritizing of prevention targets in different groups of people," said Jeste.

More information: Tanya T. Nguyen et al, Predictors of Loneliness by Age Decade, *The Journal of Clinical Psychiatry* (2020). DOI: [10.4088/JCP.20m13378](https://doi.org/10.4088/JCP.20m13378)

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