

Loneliness in youth could impact mental health over the long term

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The COVID-19 pandemic has necessitated widespread social isolation, affecting all ages of global society. A new rapid review in the *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry (JAACAP)*, reports on the available evidence about children and young people specifically, stating that loneliness is associated with mental health problems, including depression and anxiety-potentially affecting them years later.

The review, which synthesizes over 60 pre-existing, peer-reviewed studies on topics spanning isolation, loneliness and [mental health](#) for [young people](#) aged between 4 and 21 years of age, found extensive evidence of an association between loneliness and an increased risk of [mental health problems](#) for children and young people.

"As [school closures](#) continue, indoor play facilities remain closed and at best, young people can meet outdoors in [small groups](#) only, chances are that many are lonely (and continue to be so over time)," said lead author, Maria Loades, DClinPsy, Senior Lecturer in Clinical Psychology at the University of Bath, UK.

"This rapid review of what is known about loneliness and its impact on mental health in children and young people found that loneliness is associated with both depression and anxiety. This occurs when studies measured both loneliness and mental health at the same point in time; when loneliness was measured separately; and when depression and anxiety were measured subsequently, up to 9 years later," Dr. Loades added. "Of relevance to the COVID-19 context, we found some evidence that it is the duration of loneliness that is more strongly associated with later mental health problems."

From the selected studies there was evidence that children and young people who are lonely might be as much as three times more likely to develop depression in the future, and that the impact of loneliness on mental health outcomes like depressive symptoms could last for years. There was also evidence that the duration of loneliness may be more important, than the intensity of loneliness, in increasing the risk of future depression among young people.

For many young people, loneliness will decrease as they re-establish social contacts and connections as lockdown eases (e.g., as they return to school or college). For some a sense of loneliness may persist as they struggle to resume social life, particularly for those who were more vulnerable to being socially isolated before lockdown.

"It's key that children and young people are allowed to return to activities such as playing together, even if outdoors, as soon as possible, and that they are able to resume attending school, which gives them a structure for their day, and provides them with opportunities to see peers and to get support from adults outside of the nuclear family," said Dr. Loades. Furthermore, she added "children need more in their strategy for easing lockdown. Alongside this, the government could target children's wellbeing in public health messaging. And meanwhile, we should also continue to

embrace technology as a way to keep in touch."

So whilst we do what we can to mitigate the effects of loneliness and re-establish social connections, we also need to prepare for an increase in mental [health](#) problems, in part due to loneliness, and also due to the other unintended consequences of lockdown, such as a lack of structure, physical inactivity and social and/separation anxiety that might be triggered when resuming social interactions outside of the home.

There are several levels at which we can prepare for the heightened demand:

- Take a universal approach to promoting wellbeing through public messaging, and by schools doing activities to promote wellbeing in [children](#) and young people as they resume normal activities.
- Seek to identify those who are struggling with [loneliness](#) as early as possible and do so by targeted interventions to help them overcome their struggles. This may be through the provision of extra support in schools, helping them overcome anxieties about returning to school, or giving them an extra hand with reconnecting socially with peers.

For those who continue to struggle over time, and can't get back to doing the things they normally do as a result of their struggles, we need to ensure that they are made aware that services are open, and can provide specialist help, and to make sure that they know how to access this help and are supported to do so.

More information: Maria Elizabeth Loades et al, Rapid Systematic Review: The Impact of Social Isolation and Loneliness on the Mental Health of Children and Adolescents in the Context of COVID-19, *Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry* (2020). [DOI: 10.1016/j.jaac.2020.05.009](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jaac.2020.05.009)

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