WHAT IS LONELINESS?

Loneliness is a painful feeling that acts as an “alarm bell” signaling that our fundamental need for connection and belonging isn't being adequately met. It tells us that there is a gap between the social connections we want and the social connections we have.

Hopelab, a social innovation lab focused on designing science-based technologies to improve the health and well-being of teens and young adults, is making a solution to measurably improve the emotional health of young people. In doing so, we set out to deeply understand the experience of young people who are lonely in the United States today. Loneliness is a widespread and significant problem on college campuses. We've prepared a synthesis of our human-centered design research as well as a thorough review of the scientific literature examining the landscape of loneliness affecting young people today.
WHY WE SHOULD CARE ABOUT THIS

Loneliness is a big deal. While it’s not a disease or diagnosis, per se, prolonged loneliness has a substantial impact on mental health. Lonely young people report greater anxiety, higher depressive symptoms, poorer sleep quality, and greater susceptibility to illness than their less lonely peers. Loneliness has also been linked to alcohol and drug use among young people. Finally, loneliness in adolescents heightens the risk of depression, suicide attempts, and self-harm behavior measured up to 15 years into the future.

Loneliness and depression are important predictors of college dropout. Mental health problems that are exacerbated by loneliness, such as clinical depression, are associated with a two-fold increase in the risk of early student departure from their university. Likewise, in a retention survey conducted by the University of Washington, 41% of students who dropped or transferred out reported “feeling socially alone” as a major contributor to their decision to leave.

The bottom line is that loneliness is more than just an unpleasant feeling; prolonged loneliness can erode college students’ mental health, undermine their academic success, and negatively impact institutes of higher education.

WHAT’S CONTRIBUTING TO LONELINESS IN COLLEGE STUDENTS?

Insights from the Field

Our work took us directly to college campuses, where we interviewed students about their experiences of loneliness. College students today are facing strong academic pressures. A college degree is increasingly a prerequisite for future career success and steadily growing in expense — placing greater demands on students to make it “worth the cost.” While college students are facing high academic pressure, they may also potentially be less prepared for the stressful social transition to college. Freshman are entering college today with less in-person social experience than previous generations. For example, the percentage of 8th, 10th, and 12th graders who reported getting together with friends everyday decreased by 50% from 2000 to 2015.

When college students arrive on a college campus, they are surrounded by people, constantly — in class, in extracurricular activities, and in their residence halls. The college students drew their expectations of friendship from unhelpful and unrealistic (albeit common) beliefs that friending should happen effortlessly.

We don’t know definitively that these high academic and social pressures and expectations are directly causing college students to feel lonely. However, we know that too many college students are feeling lonely. And we know enough about the psychology of loneliness to know what happens when this “social alarm bell” goes off too often.

WHO IS LONELY?

Loneliness is often discussed as a problem of old age, but did you know:

01 Young adults are the loneliest generation. In a recent survey of more than 20,000 United-States-based adults aged 18 or older, Gen Z adults (those aged 18–22) reported greater loneliness than any other adult generation surveyed, including older adults like the Greatest Generation. See Figure A.

02 Loneliness is a major problem on college campuses, with close to 30% of students reporting loneliness in the past two weeks and more than 60% reporting being very lonely in the past year. See Figure B.

03 Loneliness is not the same as being alone. Instead, it’s the distress from not feeling enough connection with others. This surprises people because we tend to think of lonely individuals as being isolated — and college is a time in life where you are surrounded by people.

DESTROYING THE MYTH

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“People are not trying to be close and talk to me. I want to reach out, but I want them to reach out to me... I feel like a shell because no one here knows that I’m outgoing.”
—Megan, 19

“It’s hard, but I thought friends had to go immediately deep. Now I know that you have to have the small talk. For me, small talk is like treading water, like wasting time. I need to be ok with the impatience.”
—Liz, 19
60% of college students reported feeling very lonely in the past year.

30% of college students reported feeling very lonely in the past two weeks.

Fig. A Source: Cigna
Fig. B Source: American College Health Association
For some students, feelings of loneliness are transitory — they are able to put them into context and they eventually “find their tribe” — a student or group of students that they really connect with. But too many college students believe that they are the only ones who are struggling to form satisfying friendships in college. They blame themselves for their social difficulties and grow increasingly socially stuck.

From our review of the literature, and speaking with academic experts, we learned that students experiencing prolonged loneliness can get stuck in a vicious cycle of disconnection. See Figure C. They are more likely to interpret ambiguous social cues, like someone declining an invitation to get coffee, as a sign that there’s something wrong with them — something that’s beyond their power to change. They are also more likely to perceive other students as judgmental and untrustworthy. These biases encourage lonely college students to engage in social behaviors that serve to maintain loneliness, including avoiding social situations, engaging in less self-disclosure, and feeling more self-conscious and self-critical of their social performance. These reactions can lead to a self-reinforcing loop, whereby lonely students become lonelier and more isolated over time.

FIG. C — CYCLE OF DISCONNECTION AMONG LONELY COLLEGE STUDENTS

In Response to Ambiguous Social Cues...

- Criticize My Stuck State
- Take A Guarded Approach
- DISCONNECTION

- Reflect With Compassion
- Try An Open Approach
- Yes, I Can Do Something
- CONNECTION

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF LONELINESS
WHAT CAN WE DO ABOUT IT?

DESTROY THE MYTH OF MAGICAL FRIENDSHIP

Holding a growth mindset, that is, believing that one’s social abilities can be improved with effort, has been shown to support students’ academic and social growth. While college students are aware of the importance of academic growth mindsets, many students still believe that friendships should happen naturally and effortlessly, and that their social abilities are fixed. We’re setting out to destroy this harmful myth, and instill social growth mindsets at the individual and campus levels.

EMPOWER WITH TOOLS TO TRY

Forming new friendships involves pushing outside of our comfort zones and being vulnerable. However, taking these risks can be intimidating, especially for lonely college students who are more sensitive to social rejection than other students. We’re designing ways to equip students with the tools they need to push through their anxiety and take the small, structured risks that will build stronger social bonds — risks like self-disclosure, active listening, expressing gratitude and performing acts of kindness for others.

PROCESS SETBACKS WITH COMPASSION

Most people tend to be their own worst critic — and this is especially true for young people who are feeling lonely. Dwelling on social shortcomings reduces students’ motivation to build stronger social connections. Our team is drawing upon evidence-based strategies that encourage students to process setbacks with compassion for themselves and others, including cognitive behavioral therapy and mindfulness-based compassion techniques.

BUILD THE MUSCLE OVER TIME

Forming new social habits, especially effortful and difficult ones, is like building a muscle. It takes time and perseverance to develop, and you’re likely to feel sore and uncomfortable before you get stronger. Our team is creating tools to nudge students to strengthen this muscle by regularly pushing themselves just beyond their social comfort zone.

LEVERAGE THE ENVIRONMENT FOR CHANGE

Social norms have a powerful influence on our behavior. And colleges are social environments that have strong individual cultures and norms. Our team is exploring how to leverage the power of campus norms to create safer spaces for positive social risk-taking.

JOIN US ON OUR JOURNEY

Given the health risks and high prevalence of loneliness in young adults, our mission is to reduce loneliness in young people to prevent adverse health effects both now and in the future. We’re focusing our efforts on college campuses, meeting students where they are exploring new identities, new relationships, new habits, and where they might be open to new ways of behaving at this point in their lives. Learn more about our journey to measurably improve the health and well-being of young people, create new social norms, and promote a culture of belonging at Hopelab.org/DestroyTheMyth.
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