

Loneliness Matters: A Theoretical Review of Prevalence in Adulthood

Anika Asghar¹ & Dr. Nazia Iqbal²

Abstract

In this article a new theoretical perspective Prevalence of loneliness in adulthood has been discussed which highlighted the importance of all adulthood phases i.e. early, middle and later adulthood to experience loneliness rather than only focussing on elderly population. Midlife resignation with a lot of stressors made era of midlife more precarious where they felt disconnected whereas early adulthood also considered as a transition period in which prevalence of loneliness also increased and on the part of old age loneliness has also been discussed whereas loneliness impact on physical and mental health, relationship with social media and cultural differences has been discussed in this paper. The theory suggests that the escalation of loneliness in adulthood is a big warning sign and it needs proper management and intervention plans to ward off that negative feeling which affect not only an individual but also plays a role in country's progress as well.

Keywords: loneliness, Young Adults, Middle aged, Elderly

Introduction

Loneliness is a situation experienced by an individual when there was a lack in quality of certain relationship and it also includes number of existing relationships which are smaller than permissible amount as well as there was lack of desirable intimacy in one's relationship. Thus, Loneliness considered as an approach in which an individual evaluates and experienced lack of communication with other people (Wilkinson and Pickett, 2009). Loneliness was only associated with old age and ignores other phases of adulthood i.e. early and middle adulthood. So, this theoretical paper focused on overall adulthood rather than focussed on one phase of adulthood i.e. old age so that theoretical paper specifically focussed on midlife loneliness, loneliness in early adulthood and old age as well along with an impact of cultural and social media influence in increasing loneliness in adulthood and this theoretical paper also discussed some of the impacts loneliness had on physical and mental health as well.

Loneliness considered as a very unpleasant experience and feeling which occurred due to lack of belongingness from those an individual expected to receive that bonding. Loneliness had a strong impact on psycho-physiological health of an individual so a study was conducted to find out which protective factor was considerable which reduced loneliness and it was seen both in early and middle adulthood and results indicated that social support played a significant role in reducing loneliness in both early and middle adulthood as loneliness was a problem of both early and middle adulthood phases (Mikolic and Putarek, 2013).

A study was conducted to study Relationship of loneliness with poor physical health and mental wellbeing and loneliness as a major cause of deterioration of physical health and mental wellbeing in old age. Midlife was a period when people felt lonely due to number of changes in one's life i.e. changes in family structure, work demands, shifts in occupational set up and fluctuations in health status and these demands and challenges exposed those individuals to multiple stressors in which they felt themselves to fight and end up with loneliness.

¹ MS Scholar, Clinical psychology, International Islamic University Islamabad. Corresponding Address: House 880, Street 18, Overseas 6 Phase 8 Bahria Town Rawalpindi, Pakistan. anika.asghar1@hotmail.com, 0303-5608404

² Assistant Professor, Department of Psychology, International Islamic university Islamabad, nazia.iqbal@iiu.edu.pk

A recent meta-analysis found that higher odds of all cause mortality rate increased among middle adults who were sufferers of loneliness than older adults and midlife was a period when chances of cardiovascular diseases was very high and findings suggested that loneliness had a very strong relationship with developing cardiovascular disease in middle adulthood and poor social relationships and loneliness was a cause of developing coronary heart disease and stroke (Nersesian, 2017).

Loneliness

Loneliness is a synonym of perceived social isolation whereas objective social isolation was somewhat different concept. There were people who live solitary but they didn't feel lonely at all, but they were living happy social life instead. Loneliness was considered as an experience that was felt by everyone in certain period of life so loneliness defined as distressed feeling that accompanies the believe that one's social needs were not fully met by both quantity and quality of one's societal relationships (Pinquart and Sorensen, 2001; Peplau, 1982; Wheeler, Reis and Nezlek, 1983). Loneliness was an acute feeling that constitutes a different form of self-awareness but it leads to break one's basic network of rational reality of self-world (Sadler and Johnson, 1980). Loneliness was an unpleasant experience that occurs when an individual social network is deficient in some important way (Perlman and Peplau, 1981). Loneliness defined as a subjective experience of isolation and an unpleasant subjective state of knowing difference between considerable desired amount of companionship and that which was available in one's environment (Blazer, 2002).

Prevalence of Loneliness

A survey reported that about 26 million people in Britain who belongs to middle age were sufferers of loneliness so they are living in an epidemic of loneliness and the main causal factors were increased break down in relationships, pressures of modern life, ill health and now increased involvement in social media and these were the factors that affects more men than women because as a person got married in midlife, he tends to concentrate more on family life and work pressures and busy himself to fulfil daily life demands and to maintain not only his life style but also nourish his family as well so in that race he had no time to maintain friendships and left lonely as those relationships ends and that demands left himself lonely and he became just a workaholic in the end. Women also felt loneliness, but they could overcome it by normally carries on with their family life and have much closer relationships with their mother than their father, so it considered as much easy to overcome with loneliness for women as men (Taylor, 2016).

Research report was conducted to study loneliness among middle-aged people, Research was conducted on adults belong to age group 27-53 in which women and men from Denmark city were selected to participate in the study. This study reported that people least talk about their loneliness just due to the fact that loneliness considered as a taboo and informants reported that as loneliness considered as a big stigma so it blocks their request for support as they fear other people reaction especially their piety towards them, so the findings suggested that to eradicate the concept that loneliness considered as a taboo it was very much important to confide in the relationships with whom they feel totally safe so that they could share their feelings with them in a non-judgemental environment (Christine and Swane, 2013).

In past researches Loneliness considered as an obligatory experience that was experienced in old age but a study was conducted and found that 10% of older adults reported frequent loneliness but that was due to presence of other risk factors which increased the risk to experience loneliness if those factors were eradicated then the incidence to experience loneliness also decreased and those factors were health problems, lower socio-economic status, low everyday competence and living in a nursing home considered as predicting factors to experience loneliness in old age (Pinquart and Sorensen, 2003).

Loneliness Matters for Physical and Mental Health

Loneliness also plays a major role in accelerating premature physiological aging (Hawkey and Cacioppo, 2007). A study was conducted on increasing number of cardiovascular diseases in young and middle adulthood and findings suggested that as the loneliness increased in participants the cardiovascular health risk also increased which was evident through measurements. Study also suggested that increased systolic blood pressure was strongly associated with loneliness especially in middle adulthood (Hawkey, Masi, Berry and Cacioppo, 2006). A longitudinal study was conducted to determine the effect of loneliness on mortality and results evident that loneliness significantly predicted mortality (Shiovitz and Ayalon, 2010).

There were many people in this world who experienced loneliness at one time or another in their life time but afraid to admit because it was considered as a stigma in any society and people preferred to overlook or dismissed the fact and rather preferred self-reliance. That notion was absurd and insidious that loneliness was momentary that there is a shame to accept it as a problem which needed abrupt attention. Loneliness accompanied many psychological illnesses especially depression but other than that fact loneliness had its own set of characteristics that had specific impact on mental, physical and societal health related issues. So, there was a strong need to raise awareness of loneliness and elaborating those interventions and steps that can be used to reduce loneliness (Rook, 1984).

Loneliness considered as a strong risk factor for depression and its association stabled across the lifespan but when loneliness taken as an independent factor it varies at different stages of life when there was a shift seen in social needs. During the transition period when adolescents entered early adulthood more importance was given to friendships and romantic relationships. Loneliness predominantly prevailing at young adulthood which makes it an interesting period to study loneliness and it needs to deal at this stage because loneliness had a very strong association with depressive symptoms (Matthews et al., 2016). New York Times (2009) stated Loneliness leads to poor physical and mental health and BBC news (2011) manifested loneliness as “hidden killer”.

Loneliness has been defined in different ways and most commonly it is perceived as a state of solitude or being alone, loneliness was not just being alone it is a state of mind, a perception of being alone and isolated, it considered as an inability to find a purpose in life, a feeling that is negative and unpleasant which was subjective in nature and this all happened due to deficient social relations i.e. feeling of isolation and disconnectedness (Tiwari, 2013).

Loneliness considered only as old age problem, but it was also a big problem of other phases of adulthood as well i.e. middle adulthood and young adulthood. Loneliness was a feeling, but it was much more dangerous than smoking, it leads to suicidal ideations and Para-suicide (Derbyshire, 2010; Stravynski and Boyer, 2001). Loneliness frequently leads to a decline in an individual’s wellbeing which increased the prevalence of depression, suicide, sleep disturbance, poor appetite, and personality and adaptation disorder in adults precipitated by loneliness which leads to drugs overconsumption, lack of self-esteem, uncontrollable anxiety and stress (Jones, Hobbs and Hockenbury, 1982).

Loneliness not only effects mental wellbeing it also effect physical wellbeing as well, as it predisposes a person to diseases like cardiovascular and had a great impact on immune system and endocrine system (Nerviano and Gross, 1976). Consistent and overwhelming loneliness developed stress and created ultimate changes into physical health which leads to serious physiological problems and it was also considered as a serious problem i.e. motor decline in old age (Buchman et.al, 2010).

Loneliness also is a strong predictor of functional decline and mortality. Loneliness was a great cause of developing serious memory deficits, learning difficulties and Alzheimer disease (Qiu, Kivipelto and Strauss, 2009). A study conducted on Dutch and its findings reported that participants who were more lonely were more likely to develop dementia over 3 years period than those who are less lonely or do not experience loneliness (Harison, 2013).

Solitude and Loneliness

Loneliness and solitude are often explained in similar ways but there was a definite difference between two, solitude is defined as a feeling that was enjoyed by those who experienced it and which leads to creativity, developing one’s own space and self-realization and considered as a very significant component in spirituality, self-growth and to crate healthy approach of creating ones peaceful environment and space where as loneliness is totally opposite feeling, it was a feeling of emptiness, isolation and separateness and was highly stressful which leads to physical aging and turns the situation into toxic cocktail (Tiwari, 2013).

Loneliness as a Mechanism

Loneliness or perceived social isolation was a concept in which an individual felt unsafe, implicitly hyper vigilant for apprehended social threats in the environment. There were cognitive biases which were produced by unconscious surveillance for social threat: lonely individual saw their social world much threatening, had more pessimistic approach towards life and had more expectation to have negative social interactions with others as compared to non-lonely individuals (Newall et al., 2009).

A study was conducted to investigate the role of loneliness, vulnerability to hopelessness and irrational beliefs under conditions of negative life stress events among university students and in order to measure loneliness UCLA Loneliness scale was used and to measure irrational beliefs and deficient reasons for living Rational belief inventory and reasons for living inventory were used and hopelessness and depression were also measured from same sample in this study and the results indicated that loneliness was present in the university students and the vulnerability factors would significantly interacted with loneliness and negative life stress to predict hopelessness (Bonner, Ronald, Rich & Alexander, 1991).

Impact of Loneliness on Health

Studies suggested that with the enhancement of social connectedness, social inclusion and interpersonal support feelings of loneliness could be reduced but studies also suggested that loneliness had a great impact on health as well (Louise, Hawkey & Cacioppo, 2010). Loneliness considered as very important in not only reduction of depressive symptom but it also provides benefits in good physiological mechanisms and physical health outcomes as number of studies suggested that reduced level of loneliness increased physiological health and one study evident that by conducting study on sample of adult participants and divide the study in control group and experimental group whereas experimental group has been given full care, met new people, enjoy different social activities, making new friends and participated in number of group activities whereas control group has been given usual community care and results indicated that improvement has been seen in self rated health and lower health care services needed in study time period but in order to make loneliness more effective in terms of increased physical health one should need to address the subjective feeling that a lonely person feel instead of just focussing on the objective social connectedness, it gives more benefit to physiological mechanism of person (Routasalo, Tilvis, Kautiainen, Pitkala, 2009).

Impact of Social Media

With the recent increase in Internet use and a study was conducted to explore relationship between loneliness and Internet usage and study findings indicated that Adult who were young and lonely were more likely to use internet for entertainment purpose rather than other informational searches (Matanda, Jenvey and Phillips, 2012). A study was conducted to find out the impact of posting status and updates on face book on loneliness and result findings indicated that people mostly changes status and posting updates in order to reduce loneliness as they increased its frequency they felt more connected with people (Deters and Mehl, 2012).

A study was conducted to compare text-based and picture based social media platform, so text-based include Twitter and Yik Yak and image-based include Instagram and Snap chat in order to reduce their feeling of Loneliness and findings indicated that Image based social media platforms were more preferred by individuals who scored high on loneliness than text-based platform because they found it a great source to enhance intimacy which offered by image based social media use (Pittman and Reich, 2016).

Loneliness considered as a component which has been associated with increased internet use and findings of a study indicated that social media usage increased the potentials of companionships and social interactions for lonely individuals and those who scored high on loneliness reported to involve more in social media usage and they found a relieve in their feelings of loneliness while making online friends and increased their social connections which basically modulated their negative moods (Martin and Schumacher, 2016).

Cultural Influence on Loneliness

A study was conducted on adults who studied in South –Punjab universities of Pakistan and findings indicated that Internet addiction had a strong relationship with Loneliness especially using social media websites by those adults and those who were internet addicts reported more loneliness as compared to non-addicts (Saleem, Tufail, Khan and Ismail, 2015). A study was conducted on the rising old age problems in Pakistan and reported that early 1990's considered as transition period regarding changes in the responsibilities for old age population, Pakistan as a collectivistic cultural country but due to change in cultural condition youngsters were not accepted to be responsible for the upkeep of their elders, so this responsibility had to be shouldered by states to make old home and gave old age population good care so due to change in cultural conditions and deteriorating grip of religion policy makers have to think promptly before that problem grows exponentially (Ashiq and Asad, 2017).

A study was conducted to investigate the prevalence of loneliness in Iranian adults and findings revealed that most of the participants felt loneliness so in order to reduce loneliness findings of the study make the authorities to increase number of recreational activities and promote cultural and religious events and encouraged the participants to actively participate in those activities in order to reduce loneliness as well as to promote counselling centres in their country because young adults considered as future makers of a country and eradication of negative factors like loneliness improved the mental health of youth and they were more dedicated in the progress of country (Alaviani et al., 2015).

There was a significant difference found between individualistic and collectivistic cultures on the part of examining loneliness as a study revealed that collectivistic cultures had more traditional social bonds whereas individualistic cultures had more selective with regard to interaction partners and due to more social bonds collectivistic cultures less prone to develop loneliness in their life (Lykes, Markus and Kimmelmeier, 2013).

Culture and its relationship with loneliness considered as most important issue in context of the idea of social isolation in western societies as American culture promoted individualism which was causing an increase in loneliness whereas countries with collectivistic cultures had a great sense of community which eradicated negative factors like loneliness and this study also revealed that cultures who were more industrialized and competitive reported less loneliness as compared to cultures who were less competitive and industrialized and individualistic and collectivistic cultures not only differed in experiencing loneliness but there was a difference present also in the coping strategies of individualistic and collectivistic culture if they experienced loneliness in their life (Neto and Barros, 2000).

Conclusion

Human being is a social creature and social interaction is basic need of human being. In collectivistic culture human being find comfort while connected with others and interact with them in all daily matters and middle adulthood is a time period when people mostly involved in work, busy in maintain life standards, starting family and maintain social relationships and when instead of having social interactions and relationships if midlife adults lacked the ability to harness the power of social connectedness in life then they caught up in a serious condition that is known as loneliness or perceived social isolation and it not only effects persons mental wellbeing but also disturbs ones cognition and physical health as well which in turn results in behavioural disturbances and the most dangerous of all is the fact that loneliness has a great impact on mortality.

Middle adulthood considered as most significant phase among all phases of life because it is the period when midlife adults not only worked for their progress but they also worked for their country's progress as well and it vividly high lightened the importance of focussing that phase in aspect of loneliness rather than considering loneliness just a problem of elderly people and early adulthood that was a transition period from late adolescent to early adulthood also considered as an alarming period to experience loneliness.

Loneliness became an important public health concern especially when it started to affect all adulthood instead of only elderly because midlife adults are the backbone of any nation and plays a very important role in country's progress and development. Loneliness significantly predicts pain, grief, fear and exhaustion so it easily makes a victim of loneliness sick and effects daily life functioning. The greatest disease in the Western culture was not TB or leprosy; it was being unwanted, unloved, and uncared. We could easily cure physical diseases with medicine, but the only cure for loneliness, despair, and hopelessness were love because there was no medicine to cure disease loneliness (Tiwari, 2013).

Loneliness with its epidemiological, phenomenological, etiological and adverse effects is a serious problem which day by day increased in adults so it needs to further focus on its awareness of dramatic increase in middle adulthood in both western and eastern culture and it needs proper management by implementing proper intervention plans to address that problem effectively. So, it's better to take precautionary measures before loneliness becomes chronic and one preventive approach was to developing opportunities by creating new climate in which more social gatherings and connections should promoted to stop loneliness before it becomes chronic and unable to tackled in future.

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