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# What Do We Mean By “Loneliness”?

(and why it matters)

Symposium Loneliness and Social Isolation in Mental Health

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## UCLA Loneliness Scale (Version 3)<sup>1</sup>

Statement	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often
*1. How often do you feel that you are "in tune" with the people around you?	1	2	3	4
2. How often do you feel that you lack companionship?	1	2	3	4
3. How often do you feel that there is no one you can turn to?	1	2	3	4
4. How often do you feel alone?	1	2	3	4
*5. How often do you feel part of a group of friends?	1	2	3	4
*6. How often do you feel that you have a lot in common with the people around you?	1	2	3	4
7. How often do you feel that you are no longer close to anyone?	1	2	3	4
8. How often do you feel that your interests and ideas are not shared by those around you?	1	2	3	4
*9. How often do you feel outgoing and friendly?	1	2	3	4
*10. How often do you feel close to people?	1	2	3	4
11. How often do you feel left out?	1	2	3	4
12. How often do you feel that your relationships with others are not meaningful?	1	2	3	4
13. How often do you feel that no one really knows you well?	1	2	3	4
14. How often do you feel isolated from others?	1	2	3	4
*15. How often do you feel you can find companionship when you want it?	1	2	3	4
*16. How often do you feel that there are people who really understand you?	1	2	3	4
17. How often do you feel shy?	1	2	3	4
18. How often do you feel that people are around you but not with you?	1	2	3	4
*19. How often do you feel that there are people you can talk to?	1	2	3	4
*20. How often do you feel that there are people you can turn to?	1	2	3	4

<sup>1</sup>[https://fetzer.org/sites/default/files/images/stories/pdf/selfmeasures/Self\\_Measures\\_for\\_Loneliness\\_and\\_Interpersonal\\_Problems\\_VERSION\\_3\\_UCLA\\_LONELINESS.pdf](https://fetzer.org/sites/default/files/images/stories/pdf/selfmeasures/Self_Measures_for_Loneliness_and_Interpersonal_Problems_VERSION_3_UCLA_LONELINESS.pdf)

# Descriptions of Loneliness

## ENCYCLOPEDIA BRITANNICA:

**Loneliness**, distressing experience that occurs when a person's social relationships are perceived by that person to be less in quantity, and especially in quality, than desired. The experience of loneliness is highly subjective; an individual can be alone without feeling lonely and can feel lonely even when with other people.<sup>2</sup>

## MIND:

One common description of loneliness is the feeling we get when our need for rewarding social contact and relationships is not met. But loneliness is not always the same as being alone.<sup>3</sup>

## WIKIPEDIA:

**Loneliness** is a complex and usually unpleasant emotional response to isolation. Loneliness typically includes anxious feelings about a lack of connection or communication with other beings, both in the present and extending into the future. As such, loneliness can be felt even when surrounded by other people and one who feels lonely, is lonely. The causes of loneliness are varied and include social, mental, emotional, and physical factors.<sup>4</sup>

## COMMON DENOMINATOR:

Loneliness is a felt response to perceived social isolation. It is not reliably correlated to its perceived causes.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.britannica.com/science/loneliness>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.mind.org.uk/media/34882109/loneliness-2019-pdf-version.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Loneliness>

# Conceptualising Loneliness (1)

## 1. Loneliness as a Report on Physiological Change

The James-Lange Theory of Emotions: Emotion is a felt report on physiological arousal that is the result of information from the nervous system.

Cacioppo: Loneliness as "Social Pain"<sup>5</sup>

Contemporary accounts often argue that emotions report on a variety of factors that include physiological arousal but also environmental factors (e.g. a perceived threat). They can be construed as a kind of perception.<sup>6</sup>

Along those lines, you could construe loneliness as an emotional response to physiological and/or environmental factors.

If it is a perception: what is its perceptual object apart from the perceiver's physiological state? Is it the absence of other people? If so, is it the absence of *particular* other people? Or is it the *relation* between oneself and other people? (this is a very different thing: compare the difference between the perception of an object and the perception of the spatial relation between oneself and that object)

One **advantage** of this view is that social isolation is not seen as a necessary cause of loneliness: the felt physiological arousal need not be the result of the absence of (relevant) others.

One **disadvantage** of the view is that it postulates a kind of physiological arousal that is unique to the experience of loneliness (as opposed to e.g. various forms of depression).

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<sup>5</sup> Cacioppo, J. & W. Patrick. 2008. *Loneliness: Human Nature and the Need for Social Connection*, New York: W. W. Norton

<sup>6</sup> Prinz, J. 2004. *Gut Reactions: A Perceptual Theory of Emotion*, Oxford: Oxford University Press

# Conceptualising Loneliness (2)

## 2. Loneliness as an Evaluative Feeling

### a) Feelings and Intentional Objects

Goldie<sup>7</sup>: Feelings are world-directed and have their own intentional objects  
Feeling fear about slipping on the ice is to “feel *towards*” the ice as being dangerous.

Then the feeling of loneliness would be directed at particular worldly situations that are felt as isolating

One **advantage** of this view is that it can explain the sense of loneliness generated by particular occasions: the party might be experienced as socially isolating.

One **disadvantage** of the view is that it cannot easily explain why loneliness can be experienced in the absence of any relevant perception (I can feel lonely without perceiving any particular relevant situation, while just going about my ordinary day).

### b) Emotions as Hedonic Feelings

On this view, emotions are not in themselves directed at anything; their apparent intentionality derives from the composite (perceptual *and* felt) character of relevant experiences.

One **advantage** of the view is that it can explain why loneliness really can seem to not be directed at anything: it is an all-pervasive colouring of one’s existence.

One **disadvantage** is that we often feel lonely in particular situations, and on the composite view this would have to be explained in terms of a separate judgement that we are not appropriately socially connected in that situation. But the judgement would in many cases not be accurate.

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<sup>7</sup> Goldie, P. 2000. *The Emotions: A Philosophical Exploration*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

# Conceptualising Loneliness (3)

## 3. Loneliness as an Attention-Guiding Pattern

Emotions can be understood as patterns of salience: they structure what attracts our attention and thus help select relevant information.<sup>8</sup>

Then loneliness structures our perception of and attention to aspects of the environment in relevant ways

It then presents the environment so as to highlight the absence of appropriate social connection in it

One **advantage** of the view is that loneliness can really seem to direct one's focus of attention: for the lonely person, those aspects in which the felt absence of social connection comes to the fore are often presented as being at the centre of her conscious life.

One **problem** is that as stated, the view tells us nothing about the cause of loneliness: why can apparently well-connected people feel lonely?

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<sup>8</sup> De Sousa, R. 1987. *The Rationality of Emotion*. Cambridge MA: MIT Press.

# A Taxonomy

Some of the takes on loneliness I have sketched may well be mutually compatible, others less so.

They all explain some aspects of the experience of loneliness well and some others less well. It is not obvious that there is any "correct theory" here: much will depend on the particular sufferer, her circumstances and experience.

If so, an extended debate about which this theory is may not be very useful.

But we can helpfully group the proposals along the lines of their *explanatory focus*:

## 1. OBJECTIVIST VIEWS

These views seek to explain loneliness in terms of objective facts about the physical and social world in which the sufferer operates, which include facts about the subject's physiology and facts about the perceived environment

## 2. SUBJECTIVIST VIEWS

These views seek to explain loneliness in terms of the sufferer's felt experience and thus in terms of considerations about her inner life.

## 3. RELATIONAL VIEWS

These views seek to explain loneliness in terms of a relation (of a perceptual or, on e.g. Goldie's view, an emotional nature) between the sufferer and their environment.

# Why Bother?

Each of the three kinds of view has different implications for how to improve a sufferer's mental health:

- (1) On the objectivist view, we need to address the physiological and/or environmental causes of loneliness.
- (2) On the subjectivist view, we need to address the sufferer's self-perception
- (3) On the relational view, we need to address the sufferer's way of perceiving her environment

Each of these three views thus has quite distinct practical implications. While it appears that there is no obviously correct theory of loneliness (possibly because there is no single one phenomenon of "loneliness"), some theories may be more useful than others to describe *particular* cases. If so, a careful description of individual sufferers' (or groups of sufferers') cases, and consideration of the theoretical frameworks that are useful in devising that description, is vital for the development of appropriate strategies to alleviate loneliness: there is then no "one-size-fits-all" solution.

To end on a selfish note: if anyone is interested in working with me to put together a proposal for a symposium on loneliness at the next meeting of the European Society for Philosophy and Psychology (Leipzig 31 August – 3 September 2020), please get in touch!