

A review of loneliness in Indian youth

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ABSTRACT

The spread and increase in loneliness have raised an alarm globally. Various countries have initiated strong preventive measures to check loneliness and ensure good mental health of its citizen. Many researches have been conducted on this issue and various factors responsible have been identified. Old age is found to most dominant factor but loneliness is substantially growing in younger ages too. The purpose of this research work is to define loneliness and to identify factors contributing to increase of loneliness in Indian youth (including teenager and adolescents). Not much researches have been conducted in India, still migration, mobile internet addiction, low self-esteem, personality traits and other mental health issues are some of the key factors found related with loneliness in youth. This research concludes that apart from established factors, there are some more factors which promotes loneliness like body shaming, bullying, self-invited loneliness for the sack of growth and personal improvement, relationship failures and increased work timing. Further, more research is recommended for establishing these factors, to determine the level of loneliness affecting Indian youth and preventive measures.

Keywords: *Loneliness, Factors Affecting Loneliness, Loneliness in Youth, Loneliness in Adolescents, Loneliness in India*

Loneliness has emerged as a mental health threat all over the world. Government and psychologists are conducting various studies to find out the cause of this problem and to design strategies to cope-up with this big challenge. Earlier, it was thought that loneliness will affect only ‘old age’ people or those who are ‘alone’ due to natural situations like divorce or death of spouse. But what is more surprising and challenging about loneliness is that it can happen to anyone and of any age. It can happen to someone who is ‘alone’ and also to someone who is living with family, have a normal work life and even have ‘friends’ and another social circle. Loneliness is spreading fast in young-aged people and has trickled down to teenagers as well. In India too, it is not limited to old age people. This research paper is focused on finding out the factors responsible for increase in loneliness in Indian youth.

Defining Loneliness

As defined by American Psychology Association, “Loneliness is an affective and cognitive discomfort or uneasiness from being or perceiving oneself to be alone or otherwise solitary.”

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(1) Similarly, Perlman and Peplau (2,3) defined loneliness as ‘the unpleasant experience that occurs when a person’s network of social relationships is deficient in some important way, either quantitatively or qualitatively.’ It can also be defined as “A perceived state of social isolation resulting in a sad emotional state”. Loneliness brings a feeling of emptiness, like there is something important missing from life. The Dutch researcher De Jong-Gierveld defined loneliness as ‘a situation experienced by the individual as one where there is an unpleasant or inadmissible lack of (quality of) certain relationships.’ (4) This includes situations in which a number of existing relationships is smaller than considered desirable or admissible or situations where the intimacy one wishes for has not been realised. So, the basic difference between being alone and loneliness is the deep feeling of ‘not having’ a desired set of relationships so as to fulfil social or affection needs of an individual. Those who are suffering from loneliness may (or may not) have ‘n’ number of people around them; they may have various relationships too (including blood relation, i.e. mother-father and sibling), but still they feel lonely as no one seems to ‘understand’ them. Loneliness refers to a feeling of disconnectedness. Lonelier people have suppressed emotional desired.

Arnett defined loneliness as “a common psychological problem caused by a lack of socialization competence”. People having extremely shy nature or difficulty making new relations due to hesitant nature are more prone to develop loneliness.

These definitions underlines three aspects: One, it is an unpleasant feeling. Loneliness makes a person sad and gloomy. A lonely person may lose interest in day to day activities. He becomes lethargic. It is different to ‘positive loneliness’, which is a concept promoted by various philosopher and spiritual leaders, especially in ancient India. That ‘loneliness’ was designed so that an individual may cut himself from the society or family members for a while and introspect. This ‘loneliness’ will help him to develop insight which in turn will help in improvising the quality of life, find the deeper meaning of life and thereby discovering mental peace and happiness. Apart from this, person who is alone might ‘enjoy’ this ‘self-time’ and do lots of things he/she wish to do as nobody is there to interfere or disturb. Even today, those who practice meditation can easily understand the importance and power of ‘positive loneliness’. Although, positive loneliness is not the subject matter of this paper.

Second, it is a perception of being alone, i.e., in reality, one may have people around him/her. Even people living with family or those who having a social circle may also feel lonely. A lonely person does not feel ‘connected’ with people around. They do not have relations which fulfil their emotional/affection needs.

Third, there is a discrepancy between the desired and the existing relationships, in quality, quantity or both. This is the outcome of cognitive evaluation of existing relations. A lonely person might have lesser number of social relationships than expected. He may have relations, even good ones yet he might feel people around him does not understand him, or they do not make him feel good. There is ‘no one’ with whom he can share his true feelings or with whom he can celebrate small victories or share personal as well as professional failures. At chronic level, a lonely person may develop a sense of relationship failure, that there are very few relationships he has and those are ‘good for nothing’. What is worth noticing here is that lonely person is actually seeking for healthier and satisfying relations. Yet, he refrains to meet and strengthen the bonds with existing people, forget about creating or finding new relationships.

Loneliness around the world

Loneliness is going to be a great psychological challenge of coming times. It has drawn attention of various mental health professionals and psychology researchers throughout the world. The seriousness of this issue can be understood by UK government's step of establishing a separate ministry of 'loneliness', so that effective measures could be taken to control this growing threat for mental health. As observed round the globe, old age people are key victim of this mental health problem. Usually, the reason why old aged people go through loneliness is divorce or death of spouse/friends and/or social isolation due to retirement and poor physical health. Even if the old-aged person whose spouse is no more, is living with his/her children, they felt lonely as the children are busy in their lives and seldom gets time to sit with them and spend some quality time. Most of the old aged people have some or the other physical health issue, which makes the situation even worse.

It is not difficult to understand 'loneliness' in old age people. But what is even a bigger matter of concern is that this mental health threat is not limited to old aged people only. It has covered adolescents, young and middle adulthood in its dark shadow too. As a matter of fact, as per the survey conducted by Ministry of loneliness in UK through BBC reveals that the lonelier age is 16 to 24 as compared to old age of 75 or more. The survey consists of 55,000 individuals (5)

In USA also, as reported by New York Post, Loneliness, which was earlier thought as a problem related with baby boomers, has now trickled down to teenagers and young adults. (6) A 2018 study by the insurance company, Aetna, stated, "nearly half of Americans report sometimes or always feeling alone." The group that reported the highest rates of loneliness were those between the ages of 18 and 22. (7)

A study conducted by 'Victorian Health Promotion Foundation' Australia, found 55% of young people (12 to 25 years old) felt lonely 'sometimes or always'. (8)

According to a survey conducted by Ipsos on predictions for global issues in 2020, 47 percent of Chinese believed it was likely that they would be feeling lonely most of the time in 2020 (9). China is growing towards a "loneliness economy" as the reports indicated that there are approximately 200 million singles in 2018 out of which some 77 million are living alone. (10)

Loneliness in India

In India too, the trend is dangerously picking up. Although, proper statistics is not available as not many researches has been conducted in our country on this area. Still, there are inputs which provides a glimpse of existing situation and also raise an alarm for near future. A study suggests that Loneliness is in India, Loneliness has majorly affected old age population due to demographical changes in living situations. (11). Another study which includes researchers from different parts of the world suggests loneliness is higher in older people as compared with younger people. (12). Although, various other researches and articles published in media indicates a different story. A study conducted at Chandigarh suggests that as many as 62% adolescents reported feeling of loneliness. (13) Another research indicates adolescents have moderate level of loneliness. (14) An e-paper quoted the WHO's statement that in India, one out of four children between 13to 15 years of age faces loneliness. (15) As reported by the famous daily newspaper 'The Hindu' in an e-article, Indian urban youth of age bracket 20 and 30 are increasingly feeling friendless, isolated, and

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depressed (16). Another media giant “India today” declared ‘Loneliness’ as next mental health challenge, after stress. (17)

Factors responsible for loneliness in Indian youth

Earlier, India has a strong social structure at its place. Joint families, strong bonding with neighbours and relatives, Leisure time activities which strengthen the bond even stronger, grand and joint celebration of various festivals, visiting relatives in vacations and living there for a week or two, and many other practices were at place which creates an environment where ‘loneliness’ could hardly be thinkable. Sadly, the things have changed in last few decades. Forget about social structure, even family unit has collapsed. Nuclear family is the new reality. People are intentionally getting socially isolated and then gradually developing ‘loneliness’ as an output.

Following are the key factors which are responsible for increased level of loneliness in India, especially in youth:

Migration and related issues: A large portion of young population migrate from their native places for the purpose of getting quality education or to get a better earning job. As the place they have migrated is a new social set-up, with different culture, values, way of living and emotional expression, it is often challenging to adjust in the new environment. Most of the migrated people adjust in new place, but they miss their native place and their loved ones. They do develop relationships at this new place too, but these relations, not necessarily, are equivalent in quality and quantity with earlier relationships. These people often feel lonely, as there is no one in this new place who understands them or treat them equal like the near ones at their native place. Specially in case of those who migrated for employment purpose, it is difficult to develop and maintain close relationships as the ‘local’ people have their own social circle. Migrated people usually became their good colleagues, but not necessarily a good friend.

A study conducted by a psychologist on restaurant workers at Madurai suggested that living away from their loved ones, language barrier, social and cultural discrepancies, leading to an unfriendly environment increases the cases of loneliness, thereby leading to other mental health challenges. (18) Another research indicates a significant correlation between the economic and sociocultural changes experienced by migrants and poor mental health, including feeling lonely. (19)

Urge for self-improvement: People became ‘career oriented’ and are continuously thriving for self-improvement. Competition had made people follow the old principle of ‘survival of the fittest’ and hence, it may not be the willingness, but a compulsion to invest time on ‘self-improvement’. This urge for continuous self-improvement had made people self-isolated from the social circle. People prefer spending time in activities like reading, viewing knowledge-based content, or following a fitness routine, rather than socializing and spending some leisure time with closed ones. Even if they are active in professional network, the purpose is to get professional advantages, not emotional satisfaction. Though, not many researchers have counted this factor responsible for loneliness, there are some views presented by national and international media proposing it’s possibility. On the contrary, some researcher’s consider such loneliness as positive loneliness and consider it important for self-improvement.

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Professional failures: This is a highly competitive age. Comparison and continuous evaluation have become a norm in existing society. Professional world is no different. Everyone is constantly observed, compared and evaluated very frequently. Everyone's performance fluctuates and cannot remain constant. Everyone goes through a low phase, where efficiency is at low level. Subsequent failures bring humiliation, which in turn result in low self-esteem. Failures makes people feel unworthy. A lower self-esteem leads to social isolation and thus, develops loneliness in the individual.

Personal failures: Broken relationships, failure of self-commitment, deviation from personal goals due to external pressure, etc also lowers one's self-esteem. This is specifically being observed in people going through a break up or a divorce. As the key relation which contributes to major part of emotional fulfilment ends, it creates a vacuum in an individual's life. Lower self-esteem results in feeling of unworthiness, which eventually results in social isolation and feeling lonely.

Indian researches had also found a negative correlation between self esteem and loneliness. A similar study suggests that Indian adolescents have high level of loneliness as a result of low self-esteem.

Body shaming and bullying: This factor effects teenagers and adolescents a lot. In the modern age, where physical appearance is at the centre-stage of so called 'personality development', those with average looks, dark complexion, short height or not-normal body weight, are often bullied by classmates, colleagues and society, in general. They are often targeted in public and faces humiliation and insult many times in a day. As suggested by a study on female adolescents, Poor physical appearance is a key factor responsible for low self-esteem (24). These daily attacks lower their self-esteem to the level where social isolation feels rewarding, as there is no one to 'insult' them. They reduce their social circle intentionally and create a 'wall' which is hard to bypass, even if anyone wants to enter into their personal space with good intentions find it difficult to do so. Loneliness is often invited by such youngsters, but gradually becomes a major concern for their mental health.

Personality Types: Various studies have indicated that there are few personality types which are more prone to loneliness. As a study conducted in China suggests that conscientiousness and neuroticism are linked with loneliness. As compared with low level, individuals with middle and high levels of neuroticism were 1.51 and 3.59 times more likely to feel lonely. (20)

Poor physical health: It has been observed in various studies that loneliness poses a great risk on physical health of an individual. The opposite to that is equally correct. Those with poor physical health feel lonelier as compared to the healthier ones. (21) Poor health directly effects one's social life and lead to a situation where one loses interests in participating in any social activity. Poor physical health leads to social isolation and hence creates an environment which makes a person sink into loneliness. Specially in older people, it is a key factor which results in developing loneliness, as a person feels handicapped and can't move out or actively maintain healthy relationship. Not much researches have been conducted in India on this area.

Internet/Mobile phone/Social media addiction and other mental health issue: Loneliness and mental health are inter-connected. If loneliness increases, mental health deteriorates. Vice-versa is equally applicable. If mental health deteriorate, loneliness may

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develop as a by-product of other mental health problem. The reason remains similar to poor physical health, as here too, a person loose interest or feels handicapped in active participation in various social activities. Addiction reduces the social circle. An addict, due to disturbed mental health, find it difficult to maintain harmonious relationships and often feel emotionally deprived. This increases lonely feeling in an addict or other mental health patient.

In various studies, it has been found that addiction is significantly associated with loneliness (22)(23).

Personalized entertainment: Entertainment and leisure time is redefined in present times. Earlier, it meant to spent time in social activities. Even after television entered into households and a substantial part of leisure time is invested on viewing t.v shows, it was a ‘family activity’ as all the members of family sit together to watch the shows. Now-a-days, it has been shifted to personal entertainment like gaming, watching videos or viewing OTT content on mobile phones or a personal computer. A family living together loses connection within themselves as a consequence of investing time to ‘socialize’ through electronic media. As reported in an e-article by a psychologist, the youth of our country is ‘intentionally’ seeking social isolation so as to spend more time ‘socialising electronically’ i.e, through various social media platforms. Online media is so powerful and manipulating that initially it gives a very ‘happy’ feeling, and hence attract audience. But gradually it leads to feeling alone as real relations and leisure activities have been traded for virtual relations

Extended working and limited leisure time: As today’s corporate world faces tough competition, it always thrives to be a step ahead from its competitors. This calls for a highly dedicated and devoted manpower. 10 to 5 Job is now buried in books only. People have to work extra hours to fulfil the targets and meet the deadlines. In such scenario, some prefer to remain ‘alone’ for whatever free time they get, as it helps them to ‘unwind’. Although, such loneliness (quoted as positive loneliness mentioned earlier in this paper) is beneficial, yet gradually it results in social isolation, which in turn leads to ‘loneliness’ (the negative one).

CONCLUSION

In India, not many researches have been conducted so far on this subject. The existing research, media articles, opinions of psychologists and close observation suggests that loneliness has already started taken youth and older people in its grip. Among other factors, migration, poor physical and mental health, low self-esteem and internet addiction are the key factors responsible for increasing loneliness amongst Indian youth. More research is suggested to attain an increased understanding on the subject matter.

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Conflict of Interest

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