

## Protective Factors for Loneliness Among Youth: A Review

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### ABSTRACT

Loneliness refers to a deeply subjective experience stemming from a perceived gap between desired and actual social connections. In recent years, it has emerged as a pressing public health concern worldwide. This review paper examines the diverse protective factors of loneliness among adolescents and young adults by synthesising findings from recent research studies. Key psychological factors linked with loneliness include Self-esteem, locus of control, emotional maturity, and life satisfaction. A scoping review was conducted using Google Scholar and PubMed, selecting only open-access articles. Many research studies were reviewed and analysed to find gaps in the possible protective factors of loneliness. Research studies highlight distinct trajectories of loneliness over time, which predict adverse psychosocial outcomes such as increased risk of mental health disorders and impaired social adjustment. Findings highlight that self-esteem, locus of control, emotional maturity and life satisfaction were related to loneliness. The complex interplay among these psycho-social factors suggests that loneliness in youth is multidimensional and context-dependent. The phenomenon of understanding these correlates is crucial for developing targeted interventions that aim to enhance social connectedness and psychological resilience.

**Keywords:** *Loneliness, Self-Esteem, Locus of Control and Life-Satisfaction*

India's population trajectory makes it one of the youngest countries globally. According to the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation (MoSPI) *Youth in India 2022* report, individuals aged 15–29 years constitute 27.3% of the total population. This immense demographic dividend, which is often positioned by policymakers as the engine of India's future economic growth, is simultaneously carrying an unprecedented psychological burden. A 2023 survey by the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) revealed that 55% of Indian adults under the age of 35 report frequent feelings of loneliness, reflecting a stark paradox of "connectivity without connection" in an era defined by digital hyper-availability (Leroi, 2025). Corroborating this, a 2021 global survey by Ipsos highlighted that 43% of urban Indians stated they felt lonely and friendless most of the time, particularly in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Loneliness is fundamentally defined as the subjective, aversive feeling arising from a discrepancy between an individual's desired level of social connection and their actual level of social connection (Peplau & Perlman, 1982). Mijuskovic (1977) argued that loneliness is

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not a temporary emotion but an intrinsic and universal state of being, asserting that every individual is fundamentally solitary and existentially adrift in the world. Seligson (1983) contended that loneliness was one of the most poorly conceptualised psychological phenomena, suggesting that a lack of recognition by the scientific community as a separate and unique entity explained the initial scarcity of research in the field. Despite these early challenges, subsequent studies consistently linked loneliness to a variety of detrimental psychological and social factors (Nelson, 2025). Research indicates that individuals who feel lonely often struggle with traits such as poor social skills (Deniz et al., 2005), low self-esteem (Peplau & Perlman, 1982), shyness (Jones, Rose, & Russell, 1990), and difficulties with social adjustment (Jones & Carpenter, 1986). Moreover, these individuals tend to be less extraverted (Hojat, 1980) and exhibit higher levels of negative affect, including anxiety, depression, and neuroticism (Shepherd and Edelman, 2005). The core mechanism for this distress lies in the subjective perception of deficient or severed social relationships, which ultimately leads to high levels of anxiety and a feeling of alienation from society.

Contrary to the long-held assumption that loneliness primarily affects the elderly, studies in India suggest that younger demographics also experience substantial rates, aligning with recent global findings. The prevalence of loneliness is alarmingly high among young Indians. A 2020 meta-analysis, conducted by Md Mahbub Hossain and colleagues, reported a pooled prevalence among younger participants at 24%. This vulnerability is often linked with factors such as social media use, increased migration, and the pressures of rapid socio-economic transition. While youth rates are high, the elderly consistently show a substantial, often higher, burden of loneliness. In 2004, India recorded that 4.91 million individuals were living alone and experiencing loneliness. (Bubna, 2020). The Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS) recently reported that 12 per cent of Indian youth frequently felt depressed, while 8 per cent often experienced loneliness. (CSDS et al., 2017)

### ***Rationale of the study***

Loneliness has emerged as a critical psychosocial and public health concern that severely affects the mental health and overall well-being of young people (Nelson, 2025). In addition to this, adolescence and early adulthood are critical transitional periods; disruptions in social networks make this demographic group highly vulnerable, leading to negative mental health outcomes such as depression, anxiety, and profound psychological distress. An extensive body of scholarly work conclusively demonstrates that the consequences of social isolation and loneliness among youth are severe, leading to measurable detrimental effects on physical and mental health outcomes, reduced quality of life, and decreased longevity (Vögele et al., 2021). The experience of loneliness among youth is intricately linked to several detrimental psychological correlates that reinforce the subjective feeling of social seclusion and ultimately loneliness. Young people who experience chronic loneliness tend to possess a diminished sense of self-worth, which can manifest as heightened self-criticism and social inhibition (Peplau & Perlman, 1982). In this context, loneliness has been identified as a serious and daunting problem with hazardous effects on physical and mental health. Therefore, to effectively manage this complex problem, a clear understanding of loneliness is imperative. Replete literature throws light upon potential risk factors regarding loneliness, but very few studies actually demonstrate its protective factors. In this regard, the present study addresses this gap by examining existing literature for exploring certain protective factors, in light of positive psychology, how these positive factors can undo the traumatic effects of an adversity. Ultimately, these psychological strengths may operate as a buffer against the detrimental effects of loneliness and can help in promoting holistic psychological flourishing.

### METHOD

The present study employed a focused narrative research review to systematically identify, evaluate, and synthesise existing literature. The search strategy was restricted exclusively to open-access research papers to ensure the findings are easily available and verifiable. In this regard, three major academic databases were utilised for source identification, viz., *Google Scholar*, *PubMed*, and *ResearchGate*, with research papers focusing on the relationship between positive factors that help in reducing loneliness published in the last 30 years.

### RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The present paper aims at highlighting protective factors that can reduce the risk or impact of social isolation and ultimately loneliness. In this context, several factors play a vital role in mitigating the debilitating effects of loneliness; however, for the present paper, a comprehensive review emerging from the focused narrative approach identified four critical and convergent thematic areas, viz.: self-esteem, locus of control, emotional maturity, and life satisfaction, which can act as a shield against the deleterious effects of loneliness.

#### *Self-esteem: Guarding against Loneliness*

Bandura (1997) defined self-esteem as the positive value an individual assigns to their overall self-assessment. This conceptualisation is supported by many studies that consistently present an inverse relationship between self-esteem and loneliness, indicating that higher levels of self-regard are associated with reduced feelings of isolation (Lasgard & Elklit, 2009; Mahon, Yarcheski, Cannella & Hanks, 2006). Therefore, self-esteem is regarded as a fundamental human need for self-affirmation and is a critical predictor of psychological adaptation and resilience in the face of adversity.

Furthermore, one of the most robust theoretical frameworks in modern psychology is the **Sociometer Theory of Self-Esteem**, originally proposed by Mark R. Leary and colleagues (1995). This evolutionary psychological model fundamentally shifts the perspective on self-esteem. Rather than viewing self-esteem as a primary psychological need or an end-state in itself, Sociometer Theory posits that self-esteem is an internal psychological gauge like a "sociometer" that monitors the degree to which an individual is being included versus excluded by other people. This model is particularly useful when examining the psychological correlates of perceived isolation, as it directly bridges intrapsychic phenomena (self-esteem) with interpersonal dynamics (social inclusion and relational value). When an individual possesses high self-esteem, their internal sociometer registers a high likelihood of social acceptance, leading them to feel secure and less vulnerable to social isolation. This security translates directly into proactive social behaviour. Therefore, individuals with high self-esteem are often better equipped to initiate and maintain healthy social connections, interpret ambiguous social cues positively, and cope effectively with perceived social exclusion, thereby reducing the distress associated with feeling disconnected (Li et al., 2024). Conversely, low self-esteem leads to hypervigilance for rejection, a self-fulfilling prophecy of social failure, and a default attributional style that interprets social distance as evidence of personal inadequacy (Bhave et al., 2024; Skoko et al., 2025).

In addition, self-esteem influences attributional style during setbacks. When facing temporary social rejection or difficulty in connecting, an individual with high self-esteem tends to attribute the failure to external or specific, changeable factors (e.g., "They were busy," or "That approach didn't work"). In stark contrast, an individual with low self-esteem is prone to making internal, stable attributions (e.g., "I am inherently unworthy," or "How

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hard I try, I would fail." ). This maladaptive pattern exacerbates social withdrawal, heightens self-criticism during social interactions, and fosters a fundamental belief that one is undeserving of close, reciprocal relationships, perpetuating the cycle of chronic loneliness (Seewer et al., 2022).

In the Indian context, where rapid urbanisation, changing family, and heavy reliance on digital communication are prevalent, the role of self-esteem is crucial. The traditional emphasis on collective belonging and familial identity is increasingly challenged by independent career paths and geographic mobility, creating novel contexts for isolation. Studies involving students and young adults in India have consistently demonstrated a statistically significant negative relationship between self-esteem and feelings of loneliness (Dhillon, 2016). This pattern aligns with the "proactive psychological resource" theme, suggesting that high self-esteem acts as a necessary protective factor in a rapidly evolving social landscape.

The findings from our narrative review strongly suggest self-esteem's role in mitigating social isolation and loneliness across Indian populations. Thus, culturally relevant interventions must not only address social skill deficits but also focus on fostering the internal sense of worth to provide resilience against the inevitable relational challenges encountered in modern Indian society.

### *Locus of Control: An Antidote to Loneliness*

Locus of Control is defined as the extent to which individuals perceive control over their lives and environment (Lefcourt, 1976). The conceptual framework for understanding the relationship between agency and social isolation is significantly informed by Julian Rotter's concept of the Locus of Control (LOC), which describes the extent to which an individual believes that reinforcements (outcomes) are determined by their own efforts or by external forces (Rotter, 1966). **The IPC Model (Internal, Powerful Others, Chance) of Levenson (1981)** splits the construct into three independent, measurable dimensions. An individual does not just fall on a single point of a continuum; rather, they have varying degrees of belief in all three loci simultaneously.

While examining relational dynamics such as why certain young adults experience chronic perceived isolation while others do not, the IPC model offers granular insights: For eg, A student with a high **Internal** locus will actively attempt to mitigate feelings of isolation by joining clubs, initiating conversations, or altering their social strategies when rejected. A student with a high **Powerful Others** locus might feel isolated because they are waiting to be "chosen" or validated by high-status peers. Their social integration feels entirely dependent on the acceptance of specific gatekeepers. A student with a high **Chance** locus of control who feels socially disconnected is at the highest risk for chronic loneliness. Because they attribute social success to "luck" or "fate" (e.g., "I'm just not lucky enough to find good friends").

Individuals with an Internal Locus of Control (Internal LOC) believe social outcomes depend on their own behaviour, capacities, and attributes. This internal orientation is a critical factor in mitigating perceived loneliness because it fosters proactive social agency. By believing their social experiences and relational success are controllable, individuals are significantly more likely to initiate social contact, invest sustained effort in meaningful relationships, and perceive themselves as competent social actors. When facing social setbacks, such as temporary rejection or difficulty connecting, those with Internal LOC

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interpret these events as transient challenges that can be overcome through increased effort, skill development, or strategic adjustments, rather than as inevitable consequences of personal failings or external bad luck. This belief in self-efficacy directly counteracts the chronic withdrawal and sense of helplessness that often fuels and perpetuates perceived loneliness, turning potential isolation into a solvable problem (Weiss, 1973; Peplau & Perlman, 1982). Furthermore, an internal locus of control (LOC) is robustly correlated with enhanced psychological resilience and the deployment of adaptive coping strategies (Buddelmeyer & Powdthavee, 2016).

Conversely, the External Locus of Control presents a risk factor for heightened and prolonged loneliness. The multidimensional models of LOC, such as Levenson's (1970), further divide external control into two dimensions: Powerful Others and Chance/Fate. Individuals primarily oriented toward these external factors believe that their social standing, the quality of their relationships, and life outcomes are dictated by the influence of powerful people, luck, or destiny. This perspective leads to a form of learned helplessness in the social sphere. Learned Helplessness, originally identified by Martin Seligman and Steven F. Maier in the late 1960s, is a psychological phenomenon in which an individual repeatedly endures aversive or painful stimuli that they cannot control. When experiencing loneliness, these individuals are less motivated to seek out new connections or repair existing ones because they fundamentally believe their efforts will be futile against immutable forces. This lack of personal agency transforms feelings of loneliness into a static, inescapable condition, accelerating the cycle of social withdrawal and deepening the deficit in perceived social connection (Qualter et al., 2015).

Hence, the present review highlights that individuals exhibiting a high internal LOC demonstrate a greater propensity for cognitive reappraisal, which is the capacity to positively reframe social interactions, and exhibit elevated perceived self-efficacy in navigating interpersonal stressors, rather than defaulting to passive resignation. Consequently, the cultivation of personal agency and perceived environmental mastery functions as a critical psychological buffer, effectively mitigating the deleterious psychosocial impacts of loneliness.

### ***Emotional maturity: A Shield Against Loneliness***

Emotional maturity is one of the crucial cognitive and behavioural factors that influences an individual's vulnerability to, and her recovery from, perceived loneliness. The foundational definitions of emotional maturity underscore its multidimensional nature. Framed by Smitson (1974), emotional maturity represents an active, ongoing sequence in which the personality continuously works toward enhanced psychological equilibrium, cultivating holistic wellness both within oneself and throughout one's interpersonal relationships. Fundamentally, an emotion itself is an affective experience that accompanies generalised inner adjustment and mentally and psychologically stirred-up states in an individual, which manifests in overt behaviour (Crow & Crow, 1974).

In this respect, higher levels of emotional maturity are intrinsically linked to enhanced capabilities in emotion regulation, cognitive reframing of negative social experiences, and effective interpersonal communication (Peplau & Perlman, 1982; Weiss, 1973). This capacity for emotional regulation is the primary mechanism through which maturity combats loneliness. Emotionally mature individuals do not repress or ignore feelings of distress or social need, but rather, they possess the psychological wealth to process these feelings constructively. They are better equipped to accurately interpret the intentions of others,

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distinguishing effectively between a temporary state of solitude and the painful, distressing experience of social isolation (Beadle et al., 2012). This skill allows them to manage the distress associated with unmet relational needs without resorting to social withdrawal, passive self-pity, or other maladaptive coping strategies that would otherwise deepen their loneliness.

The regulatory capacity inherent in emotional maturity leads directly to a proactive approach to relationship maintenance and initiation. Mature individuals understand that social connections require consistent effort, empathy, and perspective-taking (McKinney, 1960). This enables the individual to focus on building and maintaining high-quality connections—characterised by trust, intimacy, and mutual support—rather than focusing purely on the mere quantity of social contacts (Qualter et al., 2015). The qualitative depth of these relationships naturally satisfies the core human needs for belonging and intimacy, making the individual highly resilient to the subjective experience of loneliness. The consistent striving for emotional health, as described by Smitson (1974), is thus central to maintaining psychological well-being and a fulfilling social life.

Thus, the review suggests that emotional maturity and loneliness are closely associated with one another. Emotionally mature individuals have a better capability of recognizing, comprehending and managing their emotions and also influencing others' emotions by building healthier relationships, which can reduce distressing loneliness. Adversely to this, low emotional maturity can lead to conflict, dependency and poor communication, which may lead to seclusion and debilitating loneliness. Moreover, it is imperative that emotional maturity helps an individual in reducing loneliness.

### ***Life satisfaction: Contentment over Loneliness***

Life satisfaction is broadly defined as an individual's subjective evaluation of her own quality of life. Brown (1981) characterised it as an ongoing, dynamic process that unfolds across the lifespan, while Hamilton (1995) defended it as the overall degree of contentment an individual holds regarding their personal lifestyle. Expanding on this, Diener (1984) described it as a general cognitive assessment that represents a universal measurement of an individual's attitude toward their life at a specific point in time, ranging from detrimental to fulfilling outcomes. Fundamentally, life fulfilment generally implies the level of pleasure or gratification a person derives from their experiences (Telman & Ünsal, 2004).

The construct of life satisfaction is defined as an individual's global cognitive appraisal of their life's quality and fulfilment (Diener, 1984), and consistently demonstrates a powerful inverse relationship with perceived loneliness. Research studies routinely confirm that individuals reporting higher life satisfaction simultaneously report significantly lower levels of loneliness, highlighting the intertwined nature of emotional well-being and social connection (Qualter et al., 2015; Rantepadang & Gery, 2020). Therefore, the relationship is intuitive: a life rich in perceived social connection naturally leads to greater satisfaction, whereas a life marked by isolation undermines feelings of contentment.

The connection between these two constructs, life satisfaction and loneliness, is often explained through the lens of the two-factor model of loneliness. The most prominent and widely applied "two-factor" framework in the study of perceived isolation is Robert Weiss's Typology of Loneliness (1973). According to Weiss (1973), an individual will experience one of two distinct forms of loneliness: Emotional Loneliness or Social Loneliness. High life satisfaction is often underpinned by the presence of meaningful, high-quality social

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relationships, which serve as a primary buffer against feelings of social isolation (Malimon, 2023). Conversely, the distressing experience of chronic loneliness is defined by a perceived deficit in the quality or quantity of one's relationships, which often precipitates a negative global self-evaluation, leading to decreased life satisfaction (Halim & Dariyo, 2016).

Thus, the review highlights that high life satisfaction reflects fulfilment, purpose, meaning and a strong social circle, which acts as a buffer against the catastrophic effects of loneliness. Contrary to this, chronic loneliness undermines life satisfaction and well-being by reducing positive emotions and weakening social connections. In the context of positive psychology, it is imperative to acknowledge that loneliness can have deleterious effects on one's personality, cultivating inner resources and meaningful engagement can mitigate its impact and boost quality of life.

### CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This scoping review confirms that loneliness among adolescents and young adults is not merely a situational problem stemming from a lack of social contact, but rather a deeply multifaceted psychological phenomenon, intrinsically linked to key internal psychological resources. By reviewing research evidence, this paper conclusively highlights that robust self-esteem, a strong internal locus of control, elevated emotional maturity, and high overall life satisfaction serve as significant protective factors against loneliness by fostering a profound sense of social connectedness. Ultimately, these psychological assets shape positive social trajectories over time, which, as studies consistently show, buffer against adverse psychosocial outcomes, promote healthy social adjustment, and mitigate the risk of mental health disorders. These findings carry vital, actionable, practical implications for a range of professional stakeholders dedicated to empowering youth and reinforcing their psychological resilience. The emphasis on internal psychological resources suggests that interventions must move beyond simple group activities designed to increase social contact. Educational institutions serve as critical environments for the social and psychological development of adolescents and young adults, placing them in a key position to implement proactive change. The evidence supports the necessity of designing supportive educational environments that enhance psychological resilience. For policymakers, the findings advocate for systemic funding and resource allocation toward preventative youth mental health initiatives rather than solely reactive crisis management.

Looking ahead, future research directions should include a deeper exploration of cultural variations in how these four correlates manifest and how they influence the perception of loneliness across different global contexts. Furthermore, given the ubiquity of digital life, there is an urgent need to study the evolving role of digital social interactions. These interactions should be examined not only as potential amplifiers of comparison and deficit but also as viable tools for mitigating loneliness by fostering genuine, quality connections and providing safe spaces for developing emotional maturity and self-esteem. By proactively addressing these specific psychological factors within the educational setting, institutions can build a more resilient and connected student body, thereby mitigating the long-term adverse psychosocial outcomes associated with loneliness.

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