

The BBC Loneliness Experiment



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In this post, Pamela discusses the findings from her recent work, The BBC Loneliness Experiment. This work was funded by the Wellcome Trust, and was a collaboration with Claudia Hammond and Geraldine Fitzpatrick at BBC Radio 4, Manuela Barreto (University of Exeter), and Christina Victor (Brunel University, London).

What I did

In February 2018, I launched, with colleagues at University of Exeter, Brunel University, London, and BBC Radio 4, “*The Loneliness Experiment*”, an on-line study of loneliness that set out, among other things, to answer a number of important questions: (1) what is loneliness? (2) is loneliness a different thing depending on age, sexual orientation, socio-economic status, etc., (3) is there stigma surrounding loneliness, and (4) are there successful solutions to loneliness, and do those vary by age?

The survey closed at the end of May 2018, with just under 55,000 people having completed it. The age of respondents was between 16 and 99 years.

Key Findings

There are many interesting findings from the BBC Loneliness Experiment and the research team discusses a number of those in the BBC Radio 4 programme ‘**Anatomy of Loneliness**’ which you can link to at the end of this page. There are three results I think are important for educators: (1) participants of different ages defined loneliness in similar ways, suggesting that there are key features to the experience of loneliness; (2) young respondents reported higher levels of loneliness than older respondents; and (3) the solutions to loneliness varied, but they offered success for people for different ages.

1. Definitions of Loneliness: Commonality of experience for people of different ages

It is not surprising that people discussed loneliness using similar terms despite being of different ages. While the social relationships that impact feelings of loneliness may be different at different ages (e.g., friendship, peer group affiliation, romantic relationships), the actual experience appears to have the same components at all ages: it has an **emotional component**, one of sadness, and is essentially about not feeling we have the **social connections** – in number or quality – that we would like. In my work with children and adolescents under 16 years, I have found the same definitions being used. That means when talking about belonging during class, and when we discuss the importance of social relationships, we can be sure that the children and adolescents we are working with share our understanding.



2. Respondents aged 16-24 years reported higher loneliness than people in all other age groups

LONELINESS RESULTS BY AGE:

- 16-24: sometimes = 31%; often or very often lonely = 40%
- 25-34: sometimes = 29%; often or very often lonely = 34%
- 35-44: sometimes = 26%; often or very often lonely = 36%
- 45-54: sometimes = 24%; often or very often lonely = 34%
- 55-64: sometimes = 22%; often or very often lonely = 32%
- 65-74: sometimes = 21%; often or very often lonely = 29%
- 75+: sometimes = 22%; often or very often lonely = 26%

Many respondents in each age group reported feeling lonely often or very often. But, our statistical analyses suggested that the youngest respondents reported significantly more loneliness than respondents in all other age groups.

Our sample is not representative of the world population so we cannot say that young people are lonelier than other age groups, but our findings suggest that loneliness is experienced by people of different ages. The idea that younger adults might be lonelier than other groups comes from recent work from the UK Office of National Statistics, , that showed that younger people reported the most loneliness and the elderly the lowest rates. Data from the US and Australia also show those trends too. Together, the work suggests that we should not see loneliness as something confined to older age: it seems that young adults report similar or higher rates of loneliness than the elderly, who have traditionally been viewed as the most lonely.

In our study, we also asked older people what the most lonely time of their life had been and they overwhelmingly said early adulthood, picking the age group who scored the highest on loneliness in the study. This suggests that loneliness might be a normal experience of

adolescence, given that it is a time filled with new starts as we try and find the groups to which we want to belong, and the life partner we want to spend time with.

3. Solutions to loneliness: Successful solutions to alleviate loneliness or the associated negative mood were comparable across the age groups.

In the Experiment, people were asked to note the ways they had overcome loneliness in the past. When people experience transient, brief loneliness, some of the solutions like starting conversations are likely to be effective; however, they might not work for prolonged loneliness. What I really like is that the solutions come from people who have overcome loneliness and offer us valuable insight.

1. Find distracting activities or dedicate time to work, study, or hobbies
2. Join a social club or take up new social activities and pastimes
3. Change your thinking to make it more positive
4. Start a conversation with anyone
5. Talk to friends or family about feelings

Recommendations for teachers

We were not able to include children and adolescents in the study. But, the findings suggest that it is important to teach young people strategies so that they can manage it effectively when they experience it during young adulthood (and likely before based on other work). The solutions provided by the respondents to the Experiment are a nice starting point to solutions, offering a toolkit of strategies to try. The podcasts that ran alongside the BBC Radio 4 series of Anatomy of Loneliness (links below) also provide some nice points for your discussions with pupils in secondary school.

In the Government's strategy on loneliness, they note that loneliness will appear in the PSHE curriculum on relationships. Exploring the normative nature of loneliness and ways to cope with it will be important for teachers as they move forward to teach that curriculum.

References/Links

[Anatomy of Loneliness series – episodes 1-3:](https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/m0000mj9/episodes/player)

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/m0000mj9/episodes/player>

[Podcasts on solutions to loneliness:](https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b006qxx9/episodes/player) <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b006qxx9/episodes/player>

If you want to learn more about how loneliness affects us all throughout life, you might like to read this paper I published in 2015 that highlights the mechanism at work that helps ensure re-connection. [Qualter, P., Vanhalst, J., Harris, R.A., Lodder, G., Bangee, M., Van Roekel, E., Verhagen, M., & Maes, M. \(2015\). Loneliness Across the Lifespan. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 10, 250-264, doi:10.1177/1745691615568999](https://doi.org/10.1177/1745691615568999)