Children’s Experiences of Loneliness
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Social Relationships Matter
What is loneliness?

"Loneliness is unpleasant, is not synonymous with social isolation or rejection, and is the result of perceived quantitative or qualitative deficiencies in one’s social relations” (Peplau & Perlman, 1982).
Loneliness is an aversive state across the lifespan (Qualter, 1995, 1998)

• Children as young as 5 years of age offer valid definitions of loneliness

• Children offer clear ways of coping with loneliness, reporting a need to connect with others, sometimes physically and sometimes mentally.

• Loneliness motivates people across the life course to connect with others.
Different sources of loneliness across the lifespan

1. Peer friendship. With a move from friendship quantity to friendship quality from childhood to adolescence.

2. Peer group. By adolescence, there are concerns about ones social standing. Reduces in later adolescence, but the need for intimate friendships is maintained.

3. Romantic relationships. Over the course of adolescence, the quality of the romantic relationship becomes important. Continues to predict loneliness in adulthood.
Age-related changes in loneliness

• it is stable, but low, from age 7 to 12 years (Qualter et al., 2010)
• it peeks during early adolescence and then very slowly decreases until early adulthood (Qualter et al., 2013)
• is stable during adulthood, but increases at oldest old age (i.e., 85 years and older)
• No meaningful gender differences (Maes, Qualter, Goossens et al., under review).
Figure 1. Normative Changes in Loneliness Across the Lifespan

16-105 years
Figure 2. Normative Changes in Loneliness Across the Lifespan

Sources: Yang and Victor 2011: 16-105 years
Qualter et al., 2013: 5-17 years
Are adolescents getting lonelier? Is this normative period of adolescent loneliness lasting for longer?

- Recent examination suggests an increase into early adulthood (Danneel et al, 2018).

- That fits with cross-sectional data from ONS that shows higher levels of loneliness in the 16-24 age group in 2018 compared to other adult groups. Same for other surveys across the world.
Figure 3. Is the normative early adolescent loneliness experience lasting for longer?

Sources: Yang and Victor 2011: 16-105 years
Qualter et al., 2013: 5-17 years
Loneliness is adaptive: Loneliness is an evolutionary mechanism.

Loneliness makes us want to reconnect with others.

(Cacioppo et al., 2006)
Loneliness and physical health among youth

- Poorer self-reported health (Harris, Qualter, et al., 2013; Qualter et al., 2013)
- Increased reports of headache (Stickley et al., 2013)
- Greater sleep disturbance (Harris, Qualter, et al., 2013; Matthews, 2017)
- Delayed sleep onset (Harris, Qualter, et al. 2013; Stickley, 2013)
- Just confirmed with Danish population HBSC data, but not with Canadian QLSCD data (Eccles, Qualter, et al., 2018)
- Increases in BMI for girls (Qualter, Hurley, et al., 2018)
Loneliness and mental health among youth

- Prolonged loneliness during childhood and early adolescence is linked to depression in late adolescence (Qualter et al., 2013).
- Loneliness and depressive symptoms predict each other over childhood (Qualter et al., 2010), and adolescence (Vanhalst et al., 2013).
Chronic loneliness affects how we interact with others.

- Acceptance of transgressions (Nowland & Qualter, in press): Having a poor quality friendship is better than having no friendship at all!

- Loneliness is contagious (Qualter, & Nowland, under review): (1) Lonely Birds of a Feather Flock Together and (2) loneliness is socialized
Interventions to tackle youth loneliness

- Recent meta-analyses of current published interventions: moderate effects on reducing loneliness in young people (-.398, p<.001). Type of intervention was important: those studies utilizing a social cognition intervention were the most effective (Eccles & Qualter, in prep).
Solutions to loneliness

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

Source: BBC Loneliness Experiment, 2018
• All children and adolescents who worked with me on these projects.
• Funders of the projects
• All colleagues involved in the projects
• And to you for listening