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An Evaluation of Loneliness

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Abstract

Loneliness is not a simple mood, it is complicated and has several layers. An evaluation of loneliness aims to show the complexity of loneliness mood, indicate its layers and investigate loneliness by evaluating different approaches, authors and studies. It aims to review literature in order to understand and evaluate of different layers of loneliness such as types, reasons and outcomes of loneliness, the perception of lonely people, and coping mechanisms. It is important to understand its different layers in order to effectively help someone coping with it as it decreases the satisfaction of life and increases risky behaviour.

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1. Introduction: Description of Loneliness

Loneliness is an unwanted and disturbing feeling. Loneliness is feeling alone in oneself or incomplete or not satisfied enough rather than being physically alone. Unlike loneliness, if being alone is the result of a preferred choice, it may not cause the feeling of loneliness.

Loneliness is a common and distressing problem (Bradburn, 1969). Even though on different levels, most of the people experience loneliness at least once in their lives (Perlman and Peplau, 1981). Loneliness is described as the discrepancy between the desired relationships and the actual relationships by Peplau et. al (1979). So it is the inadequacy and deficit in the perceived social relationships. Loneliness is a state of emotion perceived subjectively rather than it is something that can be measured with the number and physical proximity of the people around. In forming of the feeling of loneliness, the level of satisfaction in social relationships rather than the number is important.

Weiss (1973) argued that loneliness is divided into two categories: Emotional loneliness and social loneliness. According to the description that Weiss (1973) provided, emotional loneliness is the state that there is no close committing relationship, and social loneliness is the state that there is no a satisfying social circle. Social loneliness is accompanied by the feelings of being rejected and boredom. Weiss (1973) believed that emotional loneliness is more difficult and painful than the social loneliness.

2. Possible Reasons of Loneliness

Loneliness is caused by various factors. Some of these cause loneliness to be long-term and more permanent and some of them only cause temporary loneliness.

2.1. Personal Characteristics

Some of the personal characteristics cause people to be lonely: Shyness, low self-confidence (Jones, 1982), inefficient social skills, introversion, not being attemptive (Russell et. all, 1980) etc. People with the personal characteristics of shyness, low self-confidence and introversion may not get close with other people due to the various concerns they have about themselves. People with inefficient social skills may lack the skills to get closer with people and maintain these relationships. This kind of personal characteristics decreases the social desirability of the individual. People with this kind of characteristics abstain themselves from taking risks (Perlman and Peplau, 1981). Social attitudes of lonely people

against social situations are different from the social attitudes of people that are not lonely. For example, they do not ask many questions when they interact with people and they do not give much information about themselves (Jones, 1982).

2.2. Childhood Experiences

The childhood experiences may be a reason to become a lonely person. According to a study, children whose parents are divorced feel a deep feeling of loneliness and again the same study shows that during the divorce the younger the child is, the greater the level of loneliness will be (Rubenstein et. all, 1979).

2.3. Gender, Marital Status, and Level of Income

According to Weiss (1973), loneliness is also related to gender, marital status, level of income and age. Weiss stated in his research that women are lonelier than men and married women are less lonely than single women. Weiss also stated that poor people suffer from loneliness more. It is interesting that the claims of Weiss are not suitable with the findings of Durkheim's research on suicide (1951). According to Durkheim's research on suicide, males and the rich are more suicidal than females and the poor, the general characteristics of the suicidal groups is that these groups are more independent, less integrated into a group of people and less responsible for other people. Loneliness is considered to be one of the reasons for being suicidal, so according to this men and the rich would be lonelier. According to some other authors, the way women evaluate and express themselves differentiate than men, thus, it may affect the relationship between gender and loneliness. Additionally, there was not a significant difference between men and women in the loneliness scores of UCLA (Russell et al, 1980).

2.4. Age Groups: Adolescence versus Adulthood

Adolescents express loneliness more than other age groups. Additionally, loneliness is felt less in adulthood and it is felt more among the age of over eighty; however the reason for the fluctuation among the age groups is not completely found out. It is thought that the high expectations during adolescence and knowing how to be happy in adulthood have an effect on the perceived loneliness (Perlman and Peplau, 1981). The feeling of loneliness during adolescence may be caused by the gap during the transitional period when the adolescent leaves the close relationship with the family and tries to make a social circle consisting of friends, and the feeling of loneliness among the age of over eighty may be caused by the death of loved ones.

2.5. Other Reasons: Temporary Reasons and Psychological Disorders

As Perlman and Peplau (1981) states, people with the high risk of loneliness are the people who recently moved, recently got divorced or lost their spouses due to death, recently experienced the death of someone, students who changed

their schools, people who recently started working, mothers whose children grew up and left the house, unemployed, prisoners and the disabled people. Other than these, people with serious illnesses, international students, immigrants, veterans of war and stigmatized groups also experience loneliness. Some of these groups, for example people who recently moved or students who changed their schools experience temporary loneliness, while other groups such as the disabled people, stigmatized groups and people with serious illnesses experience loneliness more permanently.

In addition, long term loneliness may be a result of some psychological disorders. For example, people with dependent personality and borderline personality disorders feel lonelier. Also schizophrenic people experience social isolation, alienation and loneliness. Add to these, depression may also be the reason for loneliness and may be caused by loneliness, thus it can be perceived as a psychological disorder accompanying by loneliness (Ernst and Caioppo, 1998). A depressed person may lose his motivation to socialize and interact with other people and consequently may get lonelier in time.

3. Possible Outcomes of Loneliness

Results of short term/temporary loneliness differentiate from the results of long term/permanent loneliness, at some points they may overlap; however results of permanent loneliness may be more dramatic. Loneliness caused by temporary reasons may become long term loneliness unless they are dealt with. For example, the reason of loneliness for a person who recently moved is a temporary reason rather than a person who has a serious illness which effects last for longer. However the recently moved person's loneliness gets longer and become chronic unless he copes with the loneliness at this new place and make satisfying relationships (Young, 1982).

How people describe the cause of their loneliness also shows how they experience loneliness. The loneliness of a person who blames himself rather than evaluating the situation and processes outside will be deeper (Russell, Peplau & Cutrona, 1980)

3.1. Negative Feelings

Loneliness causes negative feelings such as dissatisfaction (Rubenstein et. al, 1979), boredom (Weiss, 1973), inefficiency, deficiency, and unhappiness (Perlman and Papeu, 1984). The negative feelings decrease the will to do something. The outside world, events and activities seem meaningless and nonsense (Perlman and Papeu, 1984). The feelings of being rejected and unwanted are also experienced and these feelings may cause some people to experience anger (Zilboorg, 1938) and some other to experience fear. Additionally, depression influences the dimension of negative feelings among lonely people: A research shows that depressed lonely people feel dissatisfied and unhappy in every aspect of their lives, while non-depressed lonely people are dissatisfied and unhappy only about their social relationships (Bragg, 1979).

3.2. The Negative Perception of People

The general negative mood in lonely people's lives also applies for the people around them. Lonely people regard people around them more negatively than not lonely people. Lonely people tend to perceive people as insufficient. Jones (1982) also shows that lonely people described both themselves and their partners in their bilateral relationships more negatively. Wittenberg and Reiss (1986) also show that lonely people perceive their roommates more negatively than the students who are not lonely, and the level of trusting to other people is less among lonely people.

Lonely people, as well as that they perceive other people negatively, are perceived more negatively by other people. Lonely people are labelled as less successful, less attractive and if they are single they are labelled as too inept to have a partner (Perlman and Peplau, 1981).

3.3. Less Social Interaction

Lonely people join social activities less and have less social relationships. In a study conducted among students, it is found out that the time spent alone during the day, frequency of eating dinner alone and the frequency of spending the weekends alone are related. Lonely students spend less social time with their friends and they have less close friends (Russel, Peplau and Cutrona, 1980).

3.4. Inability to Cope with Problems

Lonely people feel concern and threat about the problems they encounter rather than actively fighting against them. According to Rubenstein and Shaver (1982), some people react loneliness by crying, sleeping, eating, watching television or doing nothing. Choosing passive ways to cope with loneliness may increase the depth of feeling and the length of loneliness.

3.5. Psychosomatic Disorders

Lonely people experience more psychosomatic disorders such as headache, fatigue and poor appetite. Their quality of sleep is lower (Caioppo et al., 2002). These may be caused by the concerns that lonely people have (Rubenstein and Shaver, 1980). Lonely people may not tend to share their worries, fears and anxieties with other people, they tend to keep disturbing feelings and thoughts within themselves, and this attitude may result in stress, which produces psychosomatic disorders.

3.6. Risky Behaviours: Drinking Alcohol, Using Drugs, Suicide Attempts and Criminal Behaviours

Other reactions against loneliness are drinking alcohol and using drugs. Sadava and Pak (1994) found out that drinking alcohol is observed more among unattached individuals than attached individuals. Unattached individuals showed a high rate

of loneliness. More serious reactions may occur against loneliness such as suicidal ideation and suicide attempts as it gets severe (Ernst and Cacioppo, 1998). Additionally, loneliness may cause criminal behaviour and this may pose danger for the social environment. A research shows that loneliness caused criminal behaviours such as stealing and vandalism in students (Brennan and Auslaner, 1979). Furthermore, it has been found out that the biggest problem that the rapists have is the feeling of loneliness compared to feelings of anger, belittling, and inefficiency and feeling rejected (McKibben, Proulx and Lusignan, 1994).

3.7. Higher Mortality

Mortality rate of lonely people is higher. In addition to this, bereavement which seems like a temporary reason may cause death in a few years after the death of the spouse among old people (Seeman, 2000).

4. Coping with Loneliness

In order to cope with loneliness, both individual methods can be used and professional support can be received.

Studies have shown that individuals who turn towards individual activities such as reading and painting while they are alone feel less lonely. Another research showed that the best way to suppress loneliness is to have a partner. Furthermore, when the diaries of the students were examined, it was found out that individuals who are in a close relationship with a female, no matter the individual is a female or male, feel less lonely.

Individuals who are lonely are suggested to go out, come out of their shells, spending time with other people, make friends and joining social groups. Even though these suggestions can be applied successfully by individuals who experience temporary loneliness, individuals who feel lonely because of their communication skill problems or their personal characteristics, may not succeed in. It would be beneficial that these individuals apply to the support groups, because these lonely people that are unable to communicate properly or lack of proper personal characteristics are less likely to cope with their loneliness without help. Moreover, lonely people are suggested to talk about their loneliness to the people around them.

For some of socially isolated people, their feeling of loneliness may not be that much or may become less in time. The reason for this is the lowering of expectations, thus the gap between the current social relationships and the desired social relationships decreases. Even if social relationships are relatively few, the change in perception cools down the feeling of loneliness (Weiss, 1973).

Therapy is an efficient way to change negative thoughts that accompany loneliness and which makes loneliness chronic, negative self-concept and the perception about other people. Herd and Kubistant (1975 in Kubistant, 1981) suggested that accepting loneliness and telling about it is an important step to do further in order to change the situation.

Another efficient method for lonely people other than therapy is social skills training. With the help of social skills training, the lonely person can develop the social skills that he is not successful at and obtains the skills to cope with

loneliness. Talking fluently on the phone, starting a dialogue, complimenting and receiving compliments, being able to stand silent moments, caring about physical appearance and learning nonverbal methods of communication are among the taught social skills (Rook, 1984).

In conclusion, perception of one's self indicates loneliness. Loneliness may be experienced as emotional and/or social loneliness. The causes of loneliness may be temporary or permanent. Loneliness results in negative feelings, negative perception of others and being negatively perceived by others, inability to cope with problems, psychosomatic disorders, risky behaviours such as drinking alcohol, using drugs, suicide attempts and criminal behaviours. Loneliness overall decreases the satisfaction of life. It is significant to effectively cope with loneliness in order to prevent its negative outcomes. Individual attempts such as going out, involving in social activities can be solutions, unless they are successful attempts to cope with loneliness, professional ways of getting help should be applied for, such as social skills trainings, group and individual psychotherapy.

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