



Peer-related loneliness across early to late adolescence: Normative trends, intra-individual trajectories, and links with depressive symptoms



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A B S T R A C T

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Study aims were to: (a) describe normative levels and person-oriented developmental trends in loneliness across adolescence, and (2) examine the association between loneliness and depressive symptoms during this same epoch. Participants included 478 youth (239 males and females; 80% Caucasian, 16% African American, and 4% other). Measures of loneliness and multiple indicators of depressive symptoms were gathered yearly across grades 6 through 12 (ages 12–18). Findings implied that most adolescents experience loneliness more strongly during early rather than later adolescence, but not all adolescents traverse the same loneliness trajectories. Youth followed one of five distinct trajectories, characterized as: (a) stable non-lonely, (b) stable low lonely, (c) stable high (chronic) lonely, (d) moderate decliners, and (e) steep decliners. Adolescents following stable high and moderate loneliness trajectories displayed the most depressive symptoms and, although informant differences were found, these youth also manifest the largest gains in depressive symptoms over time.

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Evidence implies that people experience loneliness in different contexts (e.g., peer-, parent-related loneliness; see Goossens & Marcoen, 1999) and at different times during the life cycle (childhood, adolescence, adulthood; see Cassidy & Asher, 1992; Hawthorne, 2008; Larson, 1999). Although these findings suggest that some people report feelings of loneliness at nearly every stage of the life cycle, we know far less about the consistency with which individuals experience loneliness over time or across specific developmental periods. This omission stems, in part, from investigators propensity to study loneliness at discrete points in time, such as at specific ages, or with specific age groups (e.g., young children, pre-adolescents, 7th–9th graders; see Brendgen, Vitaro, & Bukowski, 2000; Cassidy & Asher, 1992; Larson, 1999).

Because of the age-specific nature of this evidence, there is a need to more closely examine the continuity or vicissitudes of loneliness across developmentally significant epochs, such as adolescence. As Larson (1999) has observed, the shifting cultural and developmental demands of adolescence (e.g., individuation; emergent autonomy; greater identification with peers than parents) make this a period during which changes in peer-related loneliness are likely. Thus, there is a need to chart normative (mean-level, or average) changes in loneliness to determine whether adolescent's feelings of loneliness tend to rise, fall, or remain stable across this period. Further, if discontinuity is evident, it will be important to determine when loneliness peaks and subsides during this period (see Brennan, 1982; Hawthorne, 2008).

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Normative changes in loneliness across adolescence

Thus far, few investigators have systematically charted normative (mean-level) changes in loneliness across extended intervals of adolescence (e.g., ages 12–18). Perhaps because of this limitation, the available evidence paints a conflicting picture of developmental trends. Whereas some findings imply that loneliness increases, and perhaps even peaks during adolescence (Hawthorne, 2008; Heinrich & Gullone, 2006), other data suggest loneliness is more pronounced among younger children (e.g., see Luftig, 1987), or remains low as youth approach and enter adolescence (Bartels, Cacioppo, Hudziak, & Boomsma, 2008). This lack of evidentiary coherence may, in part, be attributable to investigators' tendency to study general rather than context-specific forms of loneliness. In research on peer-related loneliness—the focal construct for this study—extant findings imply that these feelings tend to decline across the adolescent age period (Goossens & Marcoen, 1999; Marcoen & Goossens, 1993).

Individual differences in loneliness trajectories across adolescence

Another understudied question is whether there are intra-individual differences in loneliness during adolescence, and whether these differences are characterized by continuity or change across this period. Early findings suggest that, whereas some youth are chronically lonely, others manifest discontinuities such as progressively increasing or decreasing levels of loneliness from childhood into adolescence (Qualter & Brown, 2010; Schinka, van Dulmen, Mata, Bossarte, & Swahn, 2011). Qualter & Brown (2010), for example, followed youth between the ages of 5 and 17 and identified four distinct loneliness trajectories: low stable, moderate decliners, moderate increasers, and high stable. Using a sample of more than 800 youth, Schinka et al. (2011) analyzed loneliness across three time points (i.e., grades 3, 5, and age 15), and identified five distinct trajectories, which they labeled stable-low, moderate-increasing, high-increasing, decreasing, and chronic. Schinka et al. found that, although most children (49.1%) had consistently low levels of loneliness, a substantial number (31.6%) showed modest gains in loneliness after middle childhood, or between 5th grade and age 15. Smaller numbers of youth were identified as exhibiting high-increasing (4.5%), decreasing (10.7%), or chronic (4.1%) loneliness trajectories.

From the findings of Qualter and Brown (2010) and Schinka et al. (2011) it may be inferred that differences exist in the types of loneliness trajectories that youth exhibit over the course of their development. However, the nature of the trajectories that occur during adolescence may not be well specified because, in both the Qualter and Brown (2010) and Schinka et al. (2011) studies, loneliness was assessed from childhood to adolescence, and the data points used to map these trajectories were rather widely- or irregularly-spaced across the designated longitudinal intervals. Thus, in addition to examining normative trends, there remains a need to map individual differences in the magnitude and continuity of youths' loneliness experiences during the adolescent age period.

Concurrence of loneliness and depressive symptoms across adolescence

Those who study loneliness have also been interested in its association with other aspects of psychological adjustment. In particular, the question of whether loneliness is related to depression, and to what extent, is longstanding (see Weeks, Michela, Peplau, & Bragg, 1980). Conceptually, it has often been assumed that these constructs are positively related because both share a common symptom (e.g., emotional distress) and have been construed as indicators of internalizing difficulties. Overlap between these constructs is further evidenced by the fact that the instruments used to tap each construct sometimes contain similar items.

However, hypotheses about the origins of loneliness and depression tend to emphasize differing determinants and, therefore, appear to characterize the two as partially distinct constructs (Koenig & Abrams, 1999). Loneliness has been conceptualized as an individual's cognitive and emotional response (Peplau & Perlman, 1982; Rotenberg, 1999) to unmet social needs, deficient or aberrant social resources and, in particular, lack of close affiliative ties (e.g., friendship; see Weiss, 1973). Depression, in contrast, has been construed more expansively (i.e., as having a more diverse symptomatology) and attributed to a broader range of causes (Koenig & Abrams, 1999), including determinants other than deficient or dysfunctional social relations (i.e., the individual's genetic makeup, neurological disorders, psychological dysfunctions).

Accordingly, if the constructs of loneliness and depression denote partially distinct but related constructs, then measures of these two constructs would be expected to correlate modestly rather than highly. Indeed, most of the evidence gathered to address this question supports this assumption (see Koenig & Abrams, 1999; Weeks et al., 1980). During adolescence, the period investigated in this study, concordance estimates tend to fall in the 0.30 to 0.60 range (Koenig, Isaacs, & Schwartz, 1994; Larson, 1999; Moore & Schultz, 1983).

Much remains to be learned, however, about the relation between loneliness and depression during adolescence. For knowledge to advance, at least three principal limitations must be addressed. First, because it has been established that loneliness and depression are concurrently linked, there is a need to explore prospective associations within longitudinal studies as a means of addressing hypotheses about temporal precedence and directions of effect. Thus far, only a few longitudinal studies have been undertaken with children and adolescents. Using cross-national samples of children and pre-adolescents, Rotenberg et al. (2004) obtained significant predictive associations between loneliness and depression across a one-year interval. In a more protracted study, Qualter, Brown, Munn, and Rotenberg (2010) measured loneliness and depression from the ages of 5 to 13 and found that, after controlling for prior depression, loneliness at ages 5 and 9 predicted depressive

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