



Prospective associations between loneliness and emotional intelligence



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ABSTRACT

Loneliness has been linked cross-sectionally to emotional skill deficits (e.g., Zysberg, 2012), but missing from the literature is a longitudinal examination of these relationships. The present study fills that gap by examining the prospective relationships between loneliness and emotional functioning in young adolescents in England. One hundred and ninety-six adolescents aged 11–13 years (90 females) took part in the study and completed the youth version of the Mayer-Salovey-Caruso Emotional Intelligence Test (MSCEIT-YV) and the peer-related subscale of the Loneliness and Aloneness Scale for Children and Adolescents (LACA) at two time points, which were 10 months apart. Prospective associations were obtained for male and female adolescents separately using cross-lagged statistical techniques. Our results showed prospective links between understanding and managing emotions and loneliness for both females and males. Perceiving and using emotions were prospectively linked to loneliness in males only. Possible explanations and directions for future research are discussed.

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Introduction

Loneliness is characterized across development as the perceived dissatisfaction with current social relationships (de Jong-Gierveld, 1987; Perlman & Peplau, 1981) and is marked by negative feelings, including sadness and pessimism (Cacioppo & Hawkley, 2005). It often develops under social circumstances where social connection needs are not met, including the ending of a relationship (Peplau & Perlman, 1979), the move to a new city or school (Perlman & Peplau, 1981), or during life transitions more generally (Young, 1982). The aversive feelings activated when lonely motivate us to re-engage with others, which means loneliness is typically transient (Cacioppo & Hawkley, 2009). However, a number of recent multi-wave longitudinal studies that investigated developmental trajectories of loneliness from childhood through adolescence and into early adulthood showed that some people experience high stable or increasing levels of loneliness over several years (Jobe-Shields, Cohen, & Parra, 2011; Ladd & Ettekal, 2013; Qualter, Brown et al., 2013; Schinka, van Dulmen, Mata, Bossarte, & Swahn, 2013; Vanhalst, Klimstra et al., 2012; Vanhalst, Rassart et al., 2013).

Prolonged loneliness is related to a host of psychological and physical health problems in adulthood (for reviews, see Hawkley & Cacioppo, 2010; Heinrich & Gullone, 2006), but the health implications of prolonged loneliness are also evident

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during adolescence. For example, chronic loneliness during adolescence predicts poor physical health (Harris, Qualter, & Robinson, 2013; Qualter, Brown, et al., 2013) and increases in anxiety and depressive symptoms (Schinka, van Dulmen, Bossarte, & Swahn, 2012; Schinka et al., 2013; Qualter, Brown, Munn, & Rotenberg, 2010; Qualter, Brown et al., 2013; Vanhalst, Goossens, Luyckx, Scholte, & Engels, 2013), with those highest on loneliness showing the biggest gains in depressive symptoms over time (Ladd & Ettekal, 2013). There is also an association between suicidal ideation and loneliness during childhood and adolescence (Schinka et al., 2012, 2013).

Given the negative health outcomes of prolonged loneliness during adolescence, researchers have examined interpersonal factors that predict risk of prolonged loneliness. Findings show that low self-worth and personality traits (i.e., introversion and emotional instability) predict prolonged loneliness across childhood and adolescence (Qualter, Brown et al., 2013; Vanhalst, Goossens et al., 2013). Recent empirical prospective work also suggests that poor emotion regulation skills predict increases in loneliness over time (Nightingale et al., 2013; Vanhalst, Luyckx, Raes, & Goossens, 2012).

In the current study, we extend previous work that has established a link between poor emotion regulation and later loneliness to look at emotional skills more generally. We build on the arguments posited by Heinrich and Gullone (2006, p. 712) that prospective work examining emotional skills and emotion regulation “may provide a promising avenue for future loneliness research”, especially among adolescents. The current study was designed to examine the prospective association between emotional skills and loneliness in a sample of early adolescents.

Loneliness and emotional skills

In the present study we consider emotional skills in the context of the framework of ability emotional intelligence (AEI), which includes four different emotional abilities: perceiving emotions, using emotions to facilitate thought, understanding emotions, and managing emotions (Mayer, Salovey, & Caruso, 2008; Rivers, Brackett, & Salovey, 2008). Ability emotional intelligence can be seen as an intelligence which addresses “the capacity to reason with and about emotions and/or (...) the contribution of the emotions system to enhancing intelligence” (Mayer et al., 2008, p. 505); emotions and emotion-relevant stimuli are used to guide thinking and behavior.

AEI has been linked to loneliness, life-satisfaction, relationship quality, academic success, and social competence in previous research with adolescent samples (Ciarrochi, Chan, & Caputi, 2000; Lopes et al., 2004; Lopes, Salovey, & Straus, 2003; Márquez, Martín, & Brackett, 2006; Mestre, Guil, Lopes, Salovey, & Gil-Olarte, 2006; Zysberg, 2012). In some of those studies specific aspects of AEI were associated with specific social outcomes: Emotion regulation was related to reported satisfaction with social support from others (Ciarrochi et al., 2000), self-reported social support from parents (Lopes et al., 2003), quality of interaction with friends (Lopes et al., 2004), quality of interaction with people of the opposite sex (Lopes et al., 2004), and teacher ratings of negative interactions with peers (Mestre et al., 2006); Emotion perception was associated with the amount of, and satisfaction with, social support (Ciarrochi et al., 2000), and loneliness (Zysberg, 2012). In the Lopes et al. (2004) and Márquez et al. (2006) studies, all aspects of AEI were negatively associated with self-reported negative interaction with close friends and a host of self-reported social strategies. These studies suggest that different aspects of emotional skills are related to loneliness and social constructs associated with loneliness, but these relationships have only been examined cross-sectionally. Prospective examination of how different dimensions of AEI skills predicts changes in loneliness is warranted.

Why are emotional skills important in understanding loneliness?

From an evolutionary perspective, loneliness is viewed as an adaptive process because negative emotions we feel when we are socially disconnected motivate us to repair connections and strengthen social relations (Cacioppo & Hawkley, 2009; Cacioppo et al., 2006). Based on this model, successfully overcoming loneliness requires people to perceive and manage the negative feelings associated with loneliness effectively (Cacioppo & Patrick, 2008). Recent prospective work supports this idea and shows that poor emotion regulation skills predict increases in loneliness over time (Nightingale et al., 2013; Vanhalst, Luyckx et al., 2012). However, there is currently no published work examining the role of emotion perception skills in predicting changes in loneliness over time. We would expect that people who are unable to identify their own emotions would have problems understanding that they feel a certain way because they are lonely, and these problems in emotional identification will reduce the likelihood of reconnection with other people.

Other AEI dimensions may also be important for predicting changes in loneliness. Where someone does not understand the complicated relationship between emotions, including how they evolve over time (understanding emotion), they may not understand that the negative feelings they are experiencing – be it sadness, pessimism, hostility, or irritability – are all triggered by loneliness. Because a person does not understand this common origin of their negative feelings, they may not be in a position to reconnect with others and reduce loneliness over time.

So far, we have talked about how AEI might impact response to loneliness, but there is also the question of whether feeling loneliness impacts emotional skills, particularly emotion regulation, over time. The evolutionary model of loneliness posits that perceived social disconnection is tantamount to feeling unsafe, and this sets off implicit hypervigilance for social threat in the environment (Cacioppo & Hawkley, 2009). One of the consequences of this mechanism is a diminished capacity for emotion regulation (Hawkley & Cacioppo, 2010). Evidence to support this notion comes from empirical work showing that loneliness increases our attention to certain sources of information at the expense of other important information (Bangee, Harris, Bridges, Rotenberg, & Qualter, 2014; Cacioppo et al., 2000; Qualter, Rotenberg et al., 2013). That work suggests that

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