

## An Exploratory Analysis on Teenage Loneliness and Coping Mechanisms in the Bay Area

Danica Raisinghani

### Abstract:

Loneliness among adolescents is a complex emotional experience that extends beyond physical isolation, often linked to social disconnection despite the presence of family or friends. This qualitative study explores loneliness and coping mechanisms among 11 teenagers (aged 15-19 years) in Palo Alto, Bay Area, California. Using in-depth interviews and thematic analysis, two overarching themes emerged: (a) Loneliness as an emotional experience, including feelings of emotional isolation, perceived judgement, and disconnection from family; and (b) Coping mechanisms, such as seeking social connection, engaging in hobbies, avoiding vulnerability, and substance use. External triggers like the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated feelings of loneliness, while introverted and extroverted teens experienced it differently. Introverts reported more intense loneliness despite large social circles, while extroverts struggled with forming meaningful connections. Most participants expressed distrust or discomfort in sharing their emotions, even within close family or friend circles. The findings underscore the multifaceted nature of adolescent loneliness and its impact on emotional well-being. Although the small sample size limits generalizability, the study highlights the need for more extensive research on the social and emotional dynamics that contribute to teenage loneliness and how teens navigate these feelings in an increasingly digital world.

**Key Words:** Behavioral and social sciences, clinical and developmental psychology, sociology and social psychology, Teenage Loneliness, Coping Behaviours

### Introductions

Loneliness is defined as “A state of solitude or being alone”, however it may also be defined as, “a state of mind” and “A subjective, negative feeling related to the deficient social relations”.<sup>1</sup> Teenagers are especially susceptible to loneliness, with higher prevalence of loneliness for teenagers among other socio demographic groups. The social and developmental changes that occur during adolescence have been connected to feelings of loneliness. More detachment from parents and efforts to build new relationships with peers in the larger social sphere are specifically indicators of a developing demand for autonomy and a desire to forge a distinct teenage identity that extends beyond the close family setting.<sup>2</sup>

Adolescents are more likely than any other age group to report feeling lonely "sometimes" or "often" with 3–22% of them reporting chronic loneliness.<sup>3,4</sup> Finding strategies to lessen or avoid loneliness is crucial. Once it happens, it can have detrimental effects on one's physical and

emotional well-being, such as obesity, cardiovascular illness, anger, depression, and suicidal thoughts.<sup>5</sup> Intrapersonal characteristics, like personality traits like introversion and poor social skills, have frequently been identified by research as significant risk factors for loneliness.<sup>6</sup> Adolescent loneliness has been previously associated with "personal characteristics", such as shyness, low self-esteem, poor social skills, and having fewer close friends. Conversely, having more friends and higher-quality relationships may protect against childhood loneliness. Adolescent loneliness has also been linked to the family environment. In particular, disparities in teenage loneliness have been linked to poorer parental education, marital disruption (living in one-parent or step-family households), and various parenting philosophies, including inconsistent parenting and parenting with high levels of warmth and participation.<sup>7,8,9</sup>

Loneliness is more complicated than just not having people around. Rather an emotional feeling, a sense of not being connected, even when friends or family are present. This is one of the first studies focused on the issue of loneliness among teenagers residing in the Bay Area, specifically Palo Alto aged 15-19 years and the coping mechanisms.

## Methods

This was a qualitative study using a grounded theory approach and was conducted among teenagers (aged 15 - 19 years), residing in Palo Alto, Bay Area California between May-September 2024. Non probability convenience sampling was done and a total of 11 ( in-depth interviews were conducted among subjects from a variety of educational backgrounds, including public schools, private schools, homeschooling, and universities. during this period. In Depth interviews included both inductive and deductive approaches to explore the meaning of loneliness for the participants and their coping mechanisms. Assent & written informed consent were obtained from study subjects wherever applicable prior to collection of data.

A structured in-depth interview tool was used to explore their understanding and experiences of teenagers with respect to loneliness. The questions were diverse covering a range of themes from personal relationships, social interaction and family dynamics. Level of personal and social support they have and social behaviours in the context of loneliness were also enquired, including group activities as well as social activities.

## Data Collection and thematic analysis

In-depth interviews were conducted at public settings,so as to put the participants at ease and allow them to respond without any pressors.The interviews were conducted in English language. Interview lasted between 30-45 minutes each. Physical memoing as well as audio recording was performed during the interview with the assent/ consent of the participants. Data was collected till theoretical saturation. The recordings were transcribed and thematic analysis was conducted under two broad themes Loneliness and Coping Mechanisms. The coding was

verified by a third independent reviewer. This method allowed us to explore loneliness as an emotional experience rather than just a social one, and to highlight the psychological impact it has on teenagers in different life situations.

## **Results & Discussion**

Analysis of the in-depth interviews reveal 5 themes under 2 overarching areas a) Loneliness and b) Coping Mechanisms. Under loneliness as experience, the themes which emerged were i) Emotional Isolation Despite Social Presence, ii) Feeling Disconnected from Family, iii) Perceived Judgment and Difficulty in Making Friends, iv) Overthinking and Over-Awareness of Loneliness, v) External Triggers for Loneliness. Under the coping mechanisms for loneliness the sub themes were i) Seeking Social Connection, ii) Distraction and Hobbies, iii) Avoiding Vulnerability iv) Use of Substances v) Balancing Alone Time and Social Interaction.

### **Themes Related to Loneliness as an Experience:**

#### **Emotional Isolation Despite Social Presence:**

Many interviewees expressed that loneliness isn't just physical isolation but emotional disconnection. One participant said

*' she could be at a loud party but still feel invisible '*

Another one echoed the same sentiments adding that even with stating,

*." feeling emotionally lonely even when surrounded by people during a road trip with her family"*

#### **Feeling Disconnected from Family:**

Several participants mentioned feeling emotionally distant from their families despite being physically present, stating

*'her mother was absent due to her job and her connection with her sister had drifted'*

Another participant described not feeling emotionally close to his dad, even though they lived together.

#### **Perceived Judgment and Difficulty in Making Friends:**

Some participants described difficulties in making new friends, citing judgement and social awkwardness as barriers. A major factor being distrust toward friends, which made it harder to connect with one of the participants suggested

*'Struggling to fit in due to different interests from his peers'*



### **Overthinking and Over-Awareness of Loneliness:**

Many interviewees mentioned becoming hyper-aware of their loneliness in certain situations. One participant felt that

*"everyone hates me (her),"*

though she acknowledged this perception might be self-imposed, whereas, another subject expressed that

*'after events, the loneliness hit her hardest'*

### **External Triggers for Loneliness:**

External events like the COVID-19 pandemic were significant triggers for many of the study subjects in the context of loneliness as a result of being cordoned off/ isolated. For example,

*'being isolated during the pandemic made her feel intensely lonely'.*

Others reported, school-related loneliness

*"due to the lack of connection in social groups'*

### **Themes Related to Coping Mechanisms for Loneliness:**

#### **Seeking Social Connection**

Several interviewees cope with loneliness by reaching out to friends or participating in social activities. One of them stating,

*'only way to "cure loneliness" is by connecting with others'*

emphasising that humans are inherently social creatures. Another subject commented, that

*'she copes by staying socially active, going out frequently, and surrounding herself with people'*

&

*'reaching out to people when feeling lonely'*

#### **Distraction and Hobbies**

Distraction through hobbies and activities was one of the most common coping mechanisms. One the participants coped with loneliness by

*'engaging in creative outlets such as writing or sketching, which helps her avoid dwelling on the feeling'*

Other participants play video games, play guitar and read to distract himself from loneliness.

### **Avoiding Vulnerability**

Some participants expressed discomfort in discussing loneliness with others, choosing instead to keep their feelings to themselves. One of them stated

*'she doesn't talk to anyone about her loneliness because it feels embarrassing and like a personal failure;*

Other participants stated not feeling comfortable sharing his emotions and prefers to avoid burdening others.

### **Use of Substances**

For a few interviewees, substances such as weed and alcohol were used to cope with loneliness.

*'using weed and alcohol to deal with loneliness and to make socialising easier'*

Substances help him connect with others in social settings, framing them as tools for friendship-building.

### **Balancing Alone Time and Social Interaction**

Some individuals found a balance between solitude and social interaction helpful for coping. For example, One of the identified as an "ambivert," appreciating time alone to recharge but also valuing connections when needed. One participant stated

*'Switching between extroversion and introversion, sometimes enjoying solitude but recognizing the need for social interaction after a while'*

In this study one of the common themes was that most of the teens had complicated or distant relationships with their parents, which seemed to make their loneliness worse. Several teens mentioned that they didn't feel comfortable talking about serious problems with their parents, especially with their fathers. In some cases, the teens felt closer to their mothers but still held back on discussing deep emotional issues. These strained relationships often led to a feeling of emotional isolation at home, even if they were physically with their family members. These findings are similar to a study conducted in Finland, where researchers found that lack of attachment to parents or lack of parental confirmation can lead to doubt of self worth culminating in long term loneliness.<sup>10</sup> Other studies have stated that loneliness arises from not being loved and being excluded, especially in the context of family.<sup>11</sup> Adolescents may not find it comfortable to share sensitive topics with their parents which might lead to isolation.

Most of the teens defined loneliness as more than just being alone. They saw it as a feeling of emotional disconnect, even when they were surrounded by people. Several mentioned feeling lonely even while hanging out with friends. Loneliness, for them, was more of an internal state—feeling like no one truly understands or connects with them on a deeper level, regardless of their social circle.

While most of the teens had friends and were socially active, they still experienced loneliness. Some admitted that, even when they were around friends, they often felt like they didn't fully belong. In group settings, some said they acted differently with various friend groups, which made it confusing when those groups overlapped. A few teens felt like they couldn't trust their friends enough to talk about serious personal problems, which added to their feelings of isolation. On the other hand, a couple of teens mentioned that they were confident in social settings and didn't feel the need to change their personality to fit in. They felt accepted by their friends but still acknowledged moments of loneliness, especially when they couldn't form deeper connections quickly. Other studies also show that there is a correlation between loneliness and self isolation, with adolescents having low self esteem finding it difficult to develop new relationships and finding themselves isolated and lonely.<sup>12,13</sup>

The teens had different ways of coping with loneliness. Some of them turned to distractions like sleeping, watching TV, or listening to podcasts to escape their feelings. A few teens relied on substances like weed and alcohol to manage their loneliness, while others leaned on hobbies like running or pottery to pass the time and clear their minds. Some mentioned that hanging out with friends helped them manage stress, but for many, it didn't completely get rid of the feeling of being emotionally alone.

Even though many of the teens seemed confident in social situations, they often admitted to feeling emotionally vulnerable or lonely beneath the surface. Several expressed difficulties with trusting others or sharing their true emotions, which made it harder for them to form deep, meaningful connections. While they might appear outgoing and socially active, their emotional struggles often remained hidden, adding to their overall loneliness. Socialising physically as well as on social media may have complex interpretations for loneliness. Lack of in-person contact with peers can increase loneliness, whereas, they can seek the same connection through social media. The fact that they don't have to open up regarding their true self, may often come as respite while trying to search for meaningful connections.<sup>14</sup>

The teens' experiences with loneliness differed based on their personality types. Introverted teens seemed to experience loneliness more intensely, often feeling like outsiders in group settings. They also struggled more with making deep connections, even though some had large social circles. Extroverted teens found it easier to make friends but still experienced loneliness

when those friendships didn't feel genuine or meaningful. Overall, loneliness seemed to affect both introverts and extroverts, though how they dealt with it and how they experienced it varied.

The generalizability of the results of this study is limited due to a relatively small sample size.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, this study sheds light on the multifaceted nature of loneliness among teens, revealing that it is more than just physical isolation. Emotional isolation, even amidst social interactions, emerged as a dominant experience. Teens often grapple with feelings of disconnection from their families, distrust in friendships, and heightened awareness of their loneliness, which is further exacerbated by external triggers like the COVID-19 pandemic. Coping mechanisms varied, ranging from seeking social connections to distractions like hobbies and substance use. However, the core struggle appeared to lie in the inability to form deep, meaningful relationships, leaving many teens feeling emotionally vulnerable and isolated. While some teens found solace in socializing, others preferred solitude or turned to online interactions, highlighting the complexity of loneliness in the digital age. These findings suggest that loneliness among adolescents is shaped by both internal and external factors, with personality traits playing a key role in how loneliness is experienced and managed. However, the study's small sample size limits the generalizability of its results, underscoring the need for further research to explore these themes in larger, more diverse populations.

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