# LONELINESS: IN THE ABYSS

## HISTORY

In January 2024, the American Psychiatric Association conducted a poll that showed that 30 percent of young people felt lonely at least multiple times a week, if not every day. This sense of isolation can be social, emotional or existential.

"Loneliness is a pit of despair like darkness," said wellness counselor Eddie Perez. "[It's] the feeling that 'even though there are people in my world, I am not understood, I'm not accepted, I'm not enough.' Somebody could be experiencing loneliness that has a best friend, but that feeling of despair can stop people from reaching out. It's a snowball effect."
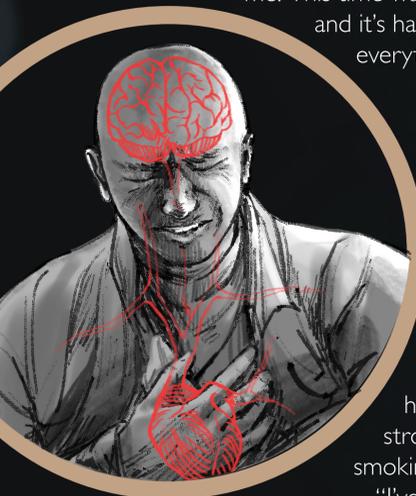
In 2024, San Mateo County declared loneliness a public health emergency, allocating one million dollars to supporting anti-loneliness programs. Community leaders continue to spread awareness and give support.

Despite our world becoming increasingly connected, loneliness becomes more prevalent. The COVID-19 pandemic was a major factor, trapping people in their homes, and for many, taking away the few social relationships that subdued the dreaded feeling of loneliness.

"[For] anybody [from] elementary school through high school age, [COVID] shifted something in that ability to socially connect that is integrated so much in your schooling," Perez said. "I'm seeing a lot more socialization challenges than I saw prior to COVID … [which] contributes to loneliness."

For some, certain circumstances can make it difficult to create lasting relationships.

"I left my old school in the middle of September, and I spent that entire time before I came to Aragon in my bed doing nothing," said senior Madison Spiegel. "I've always had to move, and it's always been habitual for me. This time was more challenging because we're older and it's harder to find friends, especially because everything is already established."

**21%**

of adolescents report loneliness, the age group with the highest rate, according to the report "From loneliness to social connection" by the World Health Organization.

## IMPACTS



Loneliness, despite being a mental affliction, poses significant physical health risks. According to the meta-analysis "Perspectives on Psychological Science" co-authored by Dr. Julianne Holt-Lunstad, a lack of social connection presents as much risk for health conditions such as heart disease, stroke, dementia and even early death, as smoking 15 packs of cigarettes every day.

"I've experienced having some relationships in school, and then having none," said senior Ava Baptista. "And I'd say that it really does create a big impact, whether you see it or not."

The absence of meaningful connections is a major cause of loneliness, contributing to why adolescents specifically, as indicated by a study by the World Health Organization, encounter it more often than people of other age groups. Combined with the complex environment of school, this can make it difficult for children to navigate social hierarchies and find a sense of belonging.

"I am neurodivergent, so I have a lot of learning struggles, but I didn't know until two years ago," Spiegel said. "I spent most of the time believing I was a super bad kid, which caused me to not be able to make friends super easily … It hindered my ability to reach out to friends or teachers."

In the end, it may be easy to fall into the painful loop of failing to reach out, feeling increasing loneliness and becoming even less encouraged to open up.

## SOCIAL MEDIA

Many people turn to social media to connect with others. The COVID-19 pandemic has skyrocketed the number of people who use social media in this way, since in-person relationships became limited, if not nonexistent.

In a poll by the American Psychiatric Association, 16% of people chose social media as one of their top three places they felt the most community and belonging. Social media gives people a platform for exploring shared interests and acts as a proxy for those with higher social anxiety.

"Sometimes, texting is better because when I'm in person, I feel really vulnerable," said junior Katy Yu. "I want to be behind a screen, and it's easier to express my feelings without them really seeing my expressions. It can be an easier way to reach out to someone because the response is just online. You can just block them and forget about it."

There are many contradicting studies on the effect of social media usage on loneliness. Studies published by the National Institutes of Health show that those who use social media for more connection feel lonelier, especially people under age 60.

"A lot of social media is [fear of missing out]," Spiegel said. "A lot of the time, it's easy to feel lonely when you go on your phone, and you see people doing different stuff that your parents don't allow you to do, or you don't have the money to do, or you just don't really have a group of people to do it."

Furthermore, parasocial relationships with celebrities or fictional characters can increase mental health struggles. According to Harvard Medical School, these one-sided relationships can result in an increase in loneliness and isolation, contributing to the overall loneliness epidemic.
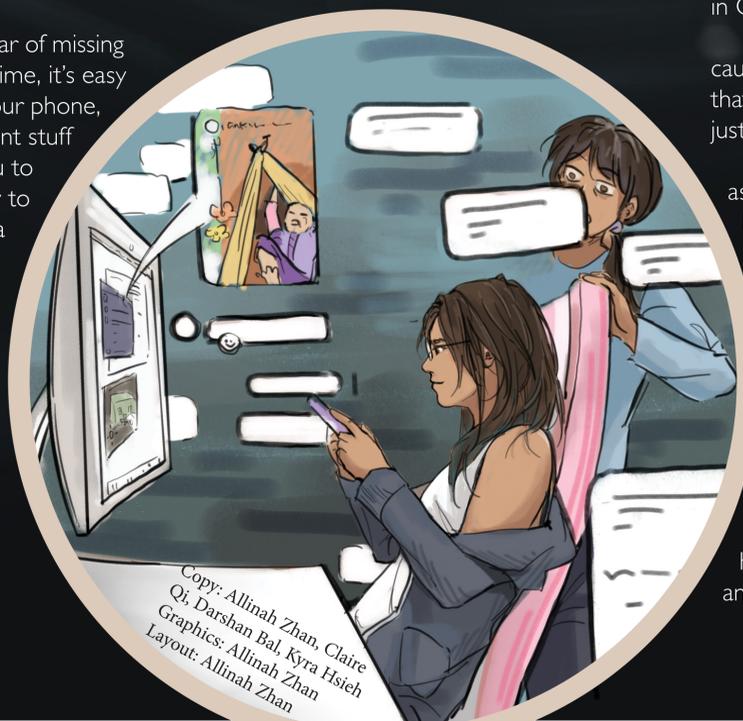


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## ADDRESSING THE ISSUE

One of the biggest challenges of addressing the loneliness epidemic lies in the stigma surrounding it, as admitting to feeling lonely feels like a confession of weakness. Hence, it takes great inner courage to find a supportive inner circle and ask for help. Even gradual steps towards opening up to others, with an emphasis on one's own self-worth, can help create a community space where connection becomes central.



"I made this mindset: it never hurts to ask," Spiegel said. "'Do you want to hang out? Do you want to go get ice cream? Do you want to come and study with me at the library?' You never know if that person also really needs somebody to hang out with."

Although using chatbots and other tools may help, it cannot replace genuine interpersonal connection.

"I've talked to my wellness counselors," said junior Katy Yu. "When you use ChatGPT, you're framing the questions in a way to get the answer that you want. With real life people and professionals, they genuinely see the problem that you're in, and they don'g in this situation."

Finding common ground through shared interests helps to bridge social gaps, with volunteering and hobbies offering excellent opportunities.

"[I found my friends] through some of my interests," said junior Reagan Alegria. "For example, through playing games. We interact physically, we talk sometimes outside of class. But sometimes we interact online whenever we're out busy doing something else."

People may also find understanding and personal growth in leadership; it not only allows one to support others but also offers a different perspective.

"We discuss a lot of coping mechanisms for loneliness in Bring Change to Mind Club," Spiegel said. "Being a leader, having to put together these presentations, I'm also learning as well. And I've also learned so much from what I'm having to teach other people."

No matter how hard it may seem at the moment, loneliness is only temporary. Through self-discovery and persistence, connection and support are in reach.

According to a study from the Stanford Institute for Human-Centered AI, when researchers prompted language models with ideas surrounding feelings of suicidal ideation, the models would play into such feelings and enable this dangerous conduct.

## AI'S INFLUENCE

As artificial intelligence technology continues to advance rapidly, many teenagers turn to large language models for the social connection that they crave.

"What quicker way to access a friend then go check [an] AI app and chat them up?" Perez said. "I definitely see an increase in the usage of [AI] … [but] that indicates to me that there aren't supports in their life."

Chatbots often display sycophancy, a tendency to agree with the user's prompts to keep them on the app, which may create a negative feedback loop reinforcing one's own thinking. OpenAI claims they have attempted to reduce this in ChatGPT.

"Sometimes I need an objective opinion, which might not make sense because AI is always saying what you want to hear," Yu said. "But sometimes I need that validation and I know that it's not good, so I've been using less lately, and I've just been talking to more people instead."

While some tech executives like Meta CEO Mark Zuckerberg promote AI as a method to fix the loneliness epidemic — as he stated in a podcast with Dwarkesh Patel — this only blurs the line between real and technological. It tricks people struggling with loneliness into believing they have developed true relationships, inevitably causing even more hurt when people realize the falsity of these relationships they've invested so much in.

"You're in your own digital world," Yu said. "Your [view] of people distorts, and you might feel disgust towards real people because you've shaped your online friend to be exactly how you want it. People have many flaws, and it's important that you learn how to adapt to facing them."

In Feb., a Florida teenager developed romantic feelings for a chatbot on Character.ai that mimicked Daenerys Targaryen, a character from "Game of Thrones." In his final conversation with the bot, it asked him to "come home" to her, and he obliged by taking his own life. On Oct. 29, character.ai announced they would bar minors from using their chatbots.