

## Fact sheet "Definition of Loneliness"

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### Brief definition of loneliness

*Loneliness is an **unpleasant and distressing feeling** in which someone's social relations do not correspond to their wishes and is therefore perceived by that person as inadequate. This feeling relates to both the quality of relations (e.g. lack of confidants) and the quantity of social contacts (e.g. lack of a social network)<sup>1</sup> as well as to the belonging to a larger community or society<sup>2</sup>. If loneliness persists, it's associated with higher risks for physical and mental illness and mortality.<sup>3</sup>*

There are many different definitions of loneliness. They depend on the theoretical focus and whether they favor social circumstances or individual perspectives. Today, a socio-psychological definition has become established both in public health and in interventions with people who suffer from loneliness: loneliness is defined here descriptively as *a person's unpleasant and distressing feeling of discrepancy, in which their social relationships do not correspond to their wishes and are therefore perceived as inadequate.*<sup>1</sup>

This cognitive discrepancy concerns both the quality of social relations (e.g. lack of confidants), and the quantity of social contacts (e.g. lack of a social network)<sup>1</sup> as well as belonging to a larger community or society<sup>2</sup>. The advantage of this discrepancy approach is that it not only covers the actual social contacts, but also the perceptions and needs of a person, for feelings of loneliness are very individual, normal and depend on the situation.<sup>1</sup> However, chronic loneliness (over a long period of time – months to years) can have serious physical and psychological consequences as a result of the persistent stress.<sup>3,4</sup>

Thanks to the discrepancy approach, broader influencing factors can also be included: If there is a change in a person's social conditions (e.g. individualisation of society, migration, impoverishment) or their social needs (e.g. with the death of a spouse, retirement or relocation), it can lead to feelings of loneliness in the short or long term. This definition therefore focuses not only on individual but also on environmental factors, on society as well as on social and cultural norms and values. Accordingly, public health measures should have a clear target: on the one hand, the social relations or expectations of the (lonely) individual<sup>5</sup>, on the other hand the structural conditions of society, to prevent the development of loneliness<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Perlman, D. & Peplau, L.A. (1981). Toward a Social Psychology of Loneliness. In S. Duck & R. Gilmour (Eds.), *Personal Relationships in Disorder* (p. 32). London: Academic Press.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. e.g. Cacioppo, J. T. & Cacioppo S. (2012). The phenotype of loneliness. *The European Journal of Developmental Psychology*, 9/4, 446-452.

<sup>3</sup> Holt-Lunstad J., Smith, T.B., Baker, M. et al. (2015). Loneliness and social isolation as risk factors for mortality: a meta-analytic review. *Persp Psychol Sci*, 10, 227-237.

<sup>4</sup> Krieger, T., Seewer, N. & Skoko, A. (2021). Chronische Einsamkeit – mehr als ein Symptom einer Depression. *Psychotherapie im Dialog*, 22, 59-63. <https://doi.org/10.1055/a-1215-1677>

<sup>5</sup> Luhmann, M. (2022). *Definition und Formen der Einsamkeit*. KNE Expertise 1/2022, S. 21-24. Frankfurt a.M.: Institut für Sozialarbeit und Sozialpädagogik. Available at <https://kompetenznetz-einsamkeit.de/publikationen/kne-expertisen>

<sup>6</sup> Barreto, M., Doyle, D.M. & Qualter, P. (2024). Changing the narrative: Loneliness as a social justice issue. *Advances in Political Psychology*, 00, 1-25. <https://doi.org/10.1111/pops.12965>

### Relational aspects of loneliness

- *Feelings of emotional loneliness*: lack of significant other people (confidants such as partners, close friends, close family members, etc.)
- *Feelings of social loneliness*: lack of social networks (e.g. positive contacts with the extended family, colleagues, acquaintances, neighbours)
- *Feelings of collective loneliness*: lack of a sense of belonging to a larger community or to society

Source: Luhmann, M. (2022). *Definition und Formen der Einsamkeit*. KNE Expertise 1/2022. Institut für Sozialarbeit und Sozialpädagogik. Frankfurt a.M., pp. 21-24. Available at <https://kompetenznetz-einsamkeit.de/publikationen/kne-expertisen>

### Loneliness – Social isolation – Being alone

"Loneliness, being alone and social isolation describe different states and feelings. **Loneliness** is a subjective feeling. People who are lonely are not necessarily socially isolated. Conversely, socially isolated people are not automatically lonely. Unlike loneliness, **social isolation** is objective and can be measured as such. Social isolation describes the amount of social contact or the frequency of social interaction, with a low quantity and frequency not necessarily being perceived as negative. **Being alone** describes a temporary state in which there are no other people around. Being alone therefore differs from social isolation ... and from loneliness, which is a subjective negative feeling."

Source: Factsheet – Was ist Einsamkeit? Available at [www.Kompetenznetz-einsamkeit.de](http://www.Kompetenznetz-einsamkeit.de)

### Problematic aspects of loneliness

Loneliness is a signal that encourages us to socialise. However, if loneliness persists for a long time, this feeling can become chronic, and it becomes more difficult for the individual to re-establish social contacts or close relationships. Early and preventive measures are therefore important to support adaptive coping mechanisms.

Source: Krieger, T., Seewer, N. & Skoko, A. (2021). Chronische Einsamkeit – mehr als ein Symptom einer Depression. *Psychotherapie im Dialog*, 22, 59-63. <https://doi.org/10.1055/a-1215-1677>

It should also be noted that feelings of loneliness are categorised in the Swiss “*Atlas der Emotionen*” as doubly shielded feelings: Like shame and hopelessness, they are not readily addressed but are actively concealed by the Swiss population. At the same time, loneliness itself is often associated with shame. This is why destigmatising and indirect approaches are also important measures.

Source: Bosshard, L., Bühler, G., Cravilioni, J. & Hermann, M. (2020). *Atlas der Emotionen. Die neue Gefühlslandkarte der Schweiz*. Zürich: Sotomo (Im Auftrag von Gesundheitsförderung Schweiz).