

Loneliness: Mental State of Different Levels of Learners During Lockdown Due to COVID-19

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Abstract

Loneliness is an emotional state, not necessarily the objective state of being alone—it is dissatisfaction with social relationships, regardless of how few or numerous, infrequent, or active relationships are. Loneliness is considered a predictor of suicidal ideation or behavior. This article is an attempt to find out the rate of loneliness among learners as lockdown due to covid 19 have been affecting and bringing the normal educative life to a halt abruptly, using a modified UCLA Loneliness (Russell, 1996) questionnaire to 70 students on online mode. The result showed 62% of learners struggling with little loneliness frequently and 5.71% severe loneliness among the learner sample respondents requiring the immediate attention of government, teachers, educationists and psychologists.

Keywords: Loneliness, learners, mental state, COVID-19 Lockdown, Isolation.

Our contemporary society has witnessed lots of conflicting interpersonal as well as intrapersonal trends. There is an increasing and urgent need for constant as well as instant connectivity (expressed in behaviors such as regular checking of e-mails, frequent contacts with cell phones in public places, sending instant messages) and endless communication among people. While lots of instant connectivity is emphasized, there is a growing recognition for the need of intensified individualism as expressions of the self and person, encouraging independent mindset and psychotrends, providing increased opportunities for a selective meeting of individual choices of eating habit, living, lifestyle, working, dressing, and leisure activities. Indeed, our society has often been labeled “The Age of Loneliness” (Moody, 2001) in which the phenomenon of loneliness and not necessarily being alone may be considered almost epidemic and a cause of concern in different cultures (Chen & French, 2008). Margalit (2010, p. 4) has rightly stated the need for a wider effort to study loneliness in the following paragraph -

“The fact that loneliness predicts feelings of hopelessness and depressed mood (Page, 1991) even in the early stages of development, emphasizes the importance of early identification and intervention programs for loneliness to prevent a later sense of distress and its consequences upon emotional health, adjustment, and development. A rapidly growing trend in social research is currently targeting children with a focus on young children who lack friends or feel lonely and isolated in school. Much of the increased research interest stems from evidence indicating that children who experience poor peer relations and social alienation constitute “at-risk” populations who may demonstrate both reduced opportunities for social learning and greater adjustment problems during adulthood (Asher & Paquette, 2003; Asher, Parkhurst, Hymel, & Williams, 1990).”

The importance of the study of loneliness is paramount when research on suicide has revealed that there is a strong association between suicide ideation, parasuicide and loneliness among young adults and adolescents (Stravynski & Boyer, 2001). Considering

human life as the most valuable possession of man, a study toward measures in easing the human mind can be a worthwhile activity.

The concept of loneliness has remained a constant theme throughout history, appearing in various forms of literature and study. The Hebrew-Christian Bible also addressed loneliness. In Genesis, even God himself said in Genesis 2:18, “It is not good for the man to be alone,” and thus created a woman companion (Bible NIV, 1991). American author Wolfe (1941) described loneliness as an essential and inevitable component of the human condition. Today, the topic of loneliness is still prevalent, thereby even psychiatry department taking an important part of the medical world; much discussion in art, literature and psychology, an indication that it is a common thread of humanity (Lyon, 2015, p. 9). Rubenstein, Shaver and Peplau (1979) cluster experiences of loneliness into four categories: (i) impatient boredom, (ii) desperation, (iii) depression, and (iv) self-deprecation. *Impatient boredom* describes a mild experience of loneliness manifested by feelings of unease, anger, and the inability to concentrate. *Desperation*, the most common, is a moderate level of loneliness that can include feelings of panic, helplessness, and abandonment. Finally, prolonged and severe experiences of loneliness are described as either *depression* (e.g., feelings of melancholy, isolation, emptiness) or *self-deprecation* (e.g., feeling unattractive, down on self, stupid, ashamed). People experiencing mild forms of loneliness often resort to active solitude (e.g., self-fulfilling activities like studying, working, engaging in hobbies) or social contact (i.e., communication in face-to-face or mediated settings). While people with mild loneliness mostly reacted productively, people with a higher degree of loneliness are the ones that need help (even medical too) and counseling. People with depression or self-deprecation are vulnerable to isolate themselves from society and reacting negatively thereby posing hazard to themselves.

Loneliness among university students have been investigated and associations of Loneliness with the following variables have studied so far:

- *Culture* by Bauer and Rokach(2004) and Roux and Connors (2001),
- *Gender* by Beutel et al. (2017), and Kim (2001) and McWhirter(1997);
- *Social media* by Yang (2016);
- *Internet* by Bozoglan Et al (2013), Odaci&Celik (2013) and Ong et al (2011) and
- *Smartphone use* by Bian and Leung (2015),
- *Attachment* by Bernardon et al (2011), DiTommaso et al (2003) and Ilhan(2012);
- *Mental distress* by McIntyre et al (2018), and
- *Academic performance* by Stoliker&Lafreniere(2015).

Loneliness and its various effects on health and living has also been studied. It has been associated with a greater risk to lives for all-cause:

- *Mortality* studied by Rico-Urbe et al (2018),
- *Multi-morbidity* studied by Stickley and Koyanagi(2018),
- *Depression* by Beutel et al (2017), and
- *Suicidal behavior* studied by Stickley and Koyanagi(2016) and Wong et al. (2018).

Defining Loneliness

Loneliness can be confused with aloneness or being alone. ‘Aloneness’ is rather a physical and positive experience and a ‘development necessity’ whereas loneliness is the psychological affective reaction to a discrepancy between desired and actual social relation effecting the psyche of the person (R.Catton, 1999, p. 1). A lonely person is not satisfied or happy and does not appreciate his/her relationships (Wainman, 2010, pp. 5,6). According to Perlman and Peplau(1981, p. 31), Loneliness is defined as, “the unpleasant experience that occurs when a person’s network of social relationships is deficient in some important way, either quantitatively or qualitatively”. According to De Jong Gierveld(1987, p. 120) “Loneliness is a situation experienced by the individual as one where there is an unpleasant or inadmissible lack of (quality of) certain relationships”. Loneliness is an emotional as well as psychological state, not necessarily the objective state of being alone—it is dissatisfaction with social relationships, regardless of how few or numerous, infrequent or active the person’s relationships are(Hawkey & Cacioppo, 2010). Loneliness is different from social isolation and introversion. A person who is contented with the quality of the relationships he or she has, however solitary he or she might be might not feel lonely (Eng, 2016) but a lonely person feels lonesome in a crowd. Loneliness is a painful emotional and psychological experience that affects the current quality of life and represents a developmental risk for future wellbeing as well. It signals the high failure in the valued area of relationships of persons (Margalit, 2010, p. 2). Philosophers and thinkers in the past also had mentioned the idea of positive loneliness (De Jong Gierveld, 1998). To them positive loneliness was the voluntary withdrawal from social interactions and

relations to gain satisfaction in higher goals such as reflection, meditation, seeking virtues and belief (De Jong Gierveld, 1998; Hofstätter, 1957). However, this study will not focus on this positive side of loneliness as described Wainman (2010). The concept of Loneliness in this study is more of a psychological state and a subjective phenomenon. Contrary to social isolation, which can be measure by the number of relationships a person has, Loneliness in this study is rather a feeling and not necessarily physical. Social isolation is sometimes considered as loneliness, despite being a separate concept. Loneliness is always considered an unpleasant, negative feeling. Loneliness is when the psychological quality of social relationships a person has, does not live up to the expectations of that person. There are two dimensions of loneliness according to De Jong Gierveld(De Jong Gierveld, 1987) namely, emotional loneliness and social loneliness. Emotional loneliness develops when a person misses a close social bond (e.g. partner or best friend etc.), while social loneliness stems from missing a group of contacts or relations or the feeling of not belonging to a specific group (Pijpers, 2017, p. 15). These dimensions together constitutes what is considered negative loneliness.

Peplau and Perlman (1982) offered 12 formal definitions that reflected differing theoretical orientations that focus on the nature of social deficiency experienced by the lonely. They have categorized these orientations into three major approaches: (a) needs for intimacy, (b) cognitive processes, and (c) social reinforcement. A definition of loneliness to be complete must take into account all three approaches or social deficiencies according to them. Comprehensively defined, loneliness is thus, the absence or perceived absence of satisfying social relationships, accompanied by symptoms of psychological distress that are related to the actual or perceived absence any relations as such(Young, 1982). Thus, Loneliness, in this study refers not simply to social or physical isolation but rather a feeling regardless of being isolated or socialized.

Contributing factors

i) Situational or social factors

Mansfield et al. (2019) has explained loneliness as a subjective evaluation of feeling isolated, deprived of companionship, lacking a sense of belongingness and without access to a satisfying social network and bonds. Conceptualizations based on meaning and emotions together with possible measures of structural isolation could be more useful than simple counts of ties between individuals or persons. While social isolation may compound social loneliness, being alone does not necessarily equate with loneliness, and it is possible to feel lonely in the presence of social connections. Voluntary withdrawal from social contacts for purposes of reflection and creative activity can be positive and meaningful rather than negative. Social loneliness across the life course is fluid and temporal and represents an

interplay between personal and intrapersonal factors, life events, experiences, loss, physical and mental limits, devaluing old age and wider socio-cultural, economic and political determinants. The vocabulary of social loneliness articulated by young people described it as a painful feeling of being disconnected across many domains of life involving feelings of helplessness, the need to escape from someone or something and submission to or resignation of negative feelings, often alongside feelings of shame, pain and stigma. Youth workers in a study reported high levels of social loneliness in young people as well as the difficulty of identifying the problem without exploring it with young people because they may not admit to loneliness (Cloutier-Fisher, Kobayashi, & Smith., 2011). Social loneliness in young people is affected by changes and transitions, both social and physical, which can be compounded by difficult living situations, weak social networks, high expectations of social networks and cuts in services as well as by poverty and sexual, racial or cultural differences and situations. While social media may present additional pressures, it can also offer young people the possibility of meaningful connections and positive relationships (Mansfield, et al., 2019). Social or situational factor has three general viewpoints shared by all orientations:

1. Loneliness results from deficiencies in one's social relationships.
2. Loneliness is a subjective experience and is not synonymous with objective social isolation.
3. The experience of loneliness is unpleasant and distressing (Wood, 1984, p. 29).

ii) Personality Characteristics

Studies have established the link between several personality factors and loneliness. Lonely people tend to be more introverted and shy, more self-conscious, and less assertive (Jones & Briggs, 1986). Jones, Carpenter and Quitana (1985) in a study also revealed that lonely people often have low self-esteem and in some cases, have poor social skills. Loneliness is also associated with anxiety and depression. A lonely person experiences a feeling of profound undisclosed sadness and emptiness within. To such person the whole world becomes joyless and dim even with the company of others at times. To such person nothing seems worthwhile anymore; emptiness and negativity prevails. Among the effects of those interpersonal deficits is the tendency to be cynical about other people, to feel pessimistic about life, even one's own life and to express an external locus of control (W. Jones, 1982). Lonely individuals are less likely to believe in love as a basis for marriage and more likely to expect that their marriage will end in divorce even before marriage happens (Jones, Hansson, & Smith., 1980). Several of these personality factors can be both a cause and consequence of loneliness. Upmanyu, Upmanyu and Dhingra (1992) studied loneliness among adolescents concerning personality and cognitive measures. Loneliness correlated positively

and significantly with hopelessness and negatively with a locus of control and extraversion. Satyananda Panda (2016) has found that a high level of mean scores of a feeling of loneliness was found among both male and female post-graduate university students in his study, and thus have suggested that professionals need to pay attention to university student's psychosocial state and experiences in the university.

Cultural Factors

Pijpers (2017, p. 18) has stated that culture is an important external factor that contributes to loneliness. In 2012, non-western immigrants in the Dutch population were more lonely than western immigrants or natives (60%, 45% and respectively 35%). As stated earlier in the foregoing paragraphs, loneliness is subjective. Prevailing norms and values regarding social relations vary between different cultures and ethnic groups (Sawir et al., 2008).

iv) Health factor

A cross-national study found associations between loneliness and subjective health status, sleeping problems, short sleep duration, tobacco use, aggressive behavior, injury, and sexual risk behavior (Peltzer & S. Pengpid, 2017). Hayley et al. (2017) also found a link between loneliness and sleep problems. Furthermore, Hartung and Renner (2014) had explored a link between loneliness and illness and O'Donovan & Hughes (2007) had studied a link between loneliness and stress reaction. Loneliness affects the physical health of older people more increasingly, affecting recovery from stroke more slow and the frequency of emergency hospitalizations as well as causing depression and stress more common (CARDI, 2012).

Different Forms of Loneliness

Margalit (2010, p. 6) has discussed an alternative approach differentiated between four unique yet interrelated forms of loneliness experiences:

- Emotional loneliness.
- Social loneliness.
- Existential loneliness.
- Representational loneliness.

Emotional loneliness refers to the distress that reflects the lack (or the loss) of intimately close persons (best friends or loved ones or family). Social loneliness refers to the distress emerging from the lack (or the loss) of pleasing associates and belonging to preferred social groups such as networks of friends, colleagues, etc (Weiss, 1973). Existential loneliness has been considered as a self-perception of personal isolation, a feelings of individual's meaninglessness, helplessness, isolation, loneliness and decreasing sense of self-determination. Representational loneliness is when the self consciousness conflict with the company of others which can never be understood by others in its entirety as it can never be experienced by anyone else but the person (Margalit, 2010). Even though different forms of loneliness have been discussed in this paragraph, this study will not

deal with discrimination of loneliness from one to another.

Loneliness can also be categorized into three types according to Tiwari (2013):

- i. **Situational Loneliness:** Environmental factors and situations (unpleasant experiences, discrepancy between the levels of his/her needs), migration of people, interpersonal conflicts, accidents and disasters, etc constituted the factors of situational loneliness (Mushtaq, Shoib, Shah, & Mushtaq, 2014).
- ii. **Developmental Loneliness:** Personal inadequacies, developmental deficits, significant separations, poverty or low economy, living arrangements, and physical/psychological disabilities constituted Developmental Loneliness (Mushtaq, Shoib, Shah, & Mushtaq, 2014).
- iii. **Internal Loneliness:** Personality factors varying from person to person, locus of control, mental distress, low self-esteem, guilt feeling and poor coping strategies with situations are the factors associated with Internal Loneliness (Mushtaq, Shoib, Shah, & Mushtaq, 2014).

Rationale of the study: The trend of the incidence of suicides among young people has been considered alarming. Loneliness considered to predict future suicide ideation and/or behavior (SIB) also. Bower (2020) found evidence that this effect was strongest in specific groups, including those aged between 16-20 or over 58 years at baseline and in samples that were predominantly female. The report of suicides in the state of Manipur for the decade 1996-2006 is given in the table below:

Table 1 Suicide Report of Manipur

Years	Persons	Female	Male	14 years below	15-29 yeas	30-44 years	45-59 years	60 & above years
1996	18	2	16	-	8	6	4	-
1997	13	6	7	-	10	2	1	-
1998	30	7	23	-	11	16	3	-
1999	24	9	15	2	11	10	1	-
2000	27	13	14	-	11	14	1	1
2001	41	17	24	-	23	10	6	1
2003	26	5	21	-	13	6	3	4
2004	41	9	32	-	22	15	3	-
2006	36	12	24	-	18	12	5	1

Source: Gender Statistics, Manipur 2010, p.126.

The above-given table No.1 shows that suicide occurred at the highest frequency among people between the age group of 15-59 years of age (Statistics, 2010). Finding this agegroup has prompted the curiosity of finding the level of loneliness among young learners within these agegroup, who might display a greater degree of loneliness for teachers, parents and the state to adopt measures to check later suicidal behaviors and tendencies. This is why all learners within the

agegroup of 15-50 years of age have been included in the sample.

Objectives

To find out the average level of loneliness among learners.

To find out if there exists any difference of loneliness among learners based on level of learning, gender, age and social category to which learners belong.

Hypotheses

There exists a significant difference in loneliness among learners based on level of learning, gender, age and social category.

Method

The study is concerned with the idea of loneliness as a feeling coupled with social isolation. Having been locked down with social or physical distancing and isolation for months due to COVID 19, I desire to study the psychological state of mind particularly loneliness among learners. Therefore, I have administered UCLA Loneliness (Russell, 1996) questionnaire to 70 students on online mode through different WhatsApp groups. The researcher being a tribal himself has greater access and confidence of tribal students. Hence, a greater response from tribal students. UCLA Loneliness questionnaire consisted of 20 statements, against which respondents were to respond from never, rarely, sometimes and often.

Scoring System: The range of scores possible will be from a minimum of 20 through 80. Russell (1996) has suggested the interpretation of a range of scores, which will be utilized in this article.

1. 20-40: People attaining this score range are operating comfortably and experience an average level of loneliness.
2. 41-60: People within this range struggle a little with social interactions, experiencing frequent loneliness.
3. 61-80: Scores falling within this range would indicate a person experiencing severe loneliness.

The reliability statistics of the 20 items is .889 Cronbach's Alpha. Learners responded from 9th to 21st May 2020. These students are at different levels or stages of learning viz. senior secondary

school students, college students, University post-graduate students and M. Phil. and Ph.D. scholars as well. The responses of these students are tabled, calculated and analyzed with statistical tools like frequency, descriptive statistics, t-test using IBM SPSS version 25, and presented with tables and graphs.

Results and Discussions

Characteristics of Respondents

The respondents consisted of 70 students at a different level of learning stage. These 70 students comprise of 4 (5.71%) school students, 26 (37.14%) college-going or undergraduate students, 21 (30%) post-graduate students and 19 (27.14%) research scholars. Gender-wise, these students were 47 (67.14%) male and 23 (32.85%) female. Of these students, 7 (10%) were below 20 years, 46 (65.71%) were between 20-30 years, 15 (21.42%) were 30-40 years and 2 (2.85%) were 40-50 years. 56 (80%) of them were unmarried and 14 (20%) were married. 15 (21.43%) belong to the general category, 2 (2.85%) belong to the scheduled caste, 41 (58.57%) belong to the scheduled tribe and 12 (17.24%) belong to other backward classes.

Overall Scores

Table 2. Scores falling within the interpretative range of scores

Sl No	Range of scores	f	%	Interpretations
1	20-40	22	31.43	Operating comfortably
2	41-60	44	62.86	Struggling little
3	61-80	4	05.71	Severe loneliness
N=70				

The range of the score is from a minimum score of 24, which can be interpreted as comfortably operating, to the maximum score of 71, which lies with the interpretative value of Severe Loneliness. The mean being 46.13 (± 10.58). From their responses to the statements as shown in table No 2, it is observed

encouragement among the learners. 5.71% of the learner respondents suffered from Severe Loneliness, which is a concern for teachers and educational leaders.

Loneliness and Level of learning

The level of loneliness based on the mean scores of all levels of student although numerically different lies within the interpretative value of struggling little. Despite the level of maturity in years and level of education, all respondents showed being affected by the psychological state of being lonely. Having observed the t-test result indicates that the differences in the mean scores are significantly different. Therefore, school students showed the highest level of loneliness. As the level of education climbs up, the level of loneliness drops down as observed in the table below.

Loneliness and Gender of Learners

The mean score of loneliness of female students is 48.04 (± 10.99) and male students is 45.19 (± 10.37). Although these two means of female and male loneliness scores differ, they are not significantly different statistically. Both female and male mean scores lie within the interpretative value of struggling little with social interaction and frequent loneliness.

Loneliness and learners' age

Observing the mean scores of learners of different ages almost perfectly and inversely decreases as the age of the learner increases except for 40-50 years learners. However, despite the different mean scores, these different mean scores are not significantly

Table 2 Student of various level of learning

Level of learner	Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Sig
school student	59.25	4	14.886	.034
College Student	47.19	26	11.275	
University PG student	45.33	21	10.057	
Research scholar	42.79	19	7.177	
Total	46.13	70	10.588	

that among the respondents, 31.43% of the respondents operate comfortably without any sign of

different based on the result of the t-test which is .074 as shown below.

Table 3 Gender-wise loneliness

	Gender of respondent	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	Sig. (2 tailed)
Total Score	Male	47	45.19	10.373	1.513	.293
	Female	23	48.04	10.998	2.293	

loneliness or psychological anxiety. The majority of the respondents, say 62.86% to be exact falls on the struggling line, which needs proper guidance and

Loneliness and Marital status of learners

From the table given below, it is observed that unmarried learners score a mean higher than those of

married learners. Even so, both the mean scores lie within the interpretative value of struggling little. However, from the t-test result, it is cleared that these means are not significantly different. Regardless of being married or unmarried, learners struggle little with loneliness.

Loneliness and social category of learners

The social category in India is a constitutional social division of all people for proper distribution of development which categorizes its citizens into four

difference was observed in the mean scores based on these variables.

Conclusion and suggestions

Based on the foregone discussion, it is observed that despite the abundance of technological gadgets and social changes in which learners engaged themselves during the time of covid lockdown, it is clear that learners feel lonely. Although the percentage of severe loneliness may not be a significant number, the strength of struggling little indeed is. Learners

Age of respondent	Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Sig.
Below 20	54.71	7	12.553	.074
20-30	45.98	46	9.049	
30-40	42.20	15	12.924	
40-50	49.00	2	1.414	
Total	46.13	70	10.588	

categories as General, Scheduled Caste, Scheduled Tribe, and Other Backward Classes. As observed from table no 8.7 students belonging to the general

differed significantly in their loneliness based on their level of learning. School students were found to be a high-frequency state of loneliness. It is hoped that as

Table 5 Marital status and loneliness

	Marital Status	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	Sig. (2-tailed)
Total Score	Unmarried	56	46.98	10.810	1.445	.179
	Married	14	42.71	9.219	2.464	

category and Other backward classes showed a slightly higher mean score on loneliness than Scheduled caste and scheduled tribe students. However, on further statistical analysis, these differences are not statistically significant. So, all the values of the mean score lie within the interpretative value of struggling little with social interaction and experiencing frequent loneliness.

Hypothesis testing

The hypothesis that states, “There exist a significant difference in loneliness among learners based on level of learning, gender, age and social category” is accepted only in the case of level of learning as the significant difference was observed in the mean scores based on level of learning of the respondents.

they grow up and mature, they may overcome this state of their mind as it is observed that higher the level of learning brings lower the rate of loneliness among learners. The struggle with loneliness among learners is an important issue that educationists, psychologists and parents have to consider with renewed vigor to help the learners from falling due to the negative side effects of their state of loneliness. When learners do not experience the joy of learning, interacting with friends and teachers, either offline or online, they are bound to feel lonely at some point to an extent. This is where a policy of education is required to address. Teachers, parents and other stakeholders need to brainstorm on the idea of helping learners to actively engage themselves in

Table 6 Social category and loneliness

Total Score	Social Category	Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Sig.
	General category	52.00	2	8.485	.116
	Scheduled Caste	49.00	2	12.728	
	Scheduled Tribe	44.48	54	11.074	
	Other Backward Classes	52.08	12	5.600	
	Total	46.13	70	10.588	

However, the hypothesis is rejected in cases of gender, age and social category as no significant

positively engaging tasks in their learning.

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