Alone Together – Program Research

According to recent surveys, approximately half of U.S. adults report experiencing loneliness, with some of the highest rates reported by young adults.[1] One alarming survey conducted by the University of California Riverside in 2019 found that 69% surveyed students reported feeling very lonely.[2] The rate of loneliness among young adults has increased every year between 1976 and 2019 and began to decrease in the years following the COVID-19 pandemic.[3] While it's understandable that social distancing during the lockdown would contribute to higher levels of loneliness, what's unexpected is that loneliness rates were actually greater in 2019, before the pandemic, compared to 2023, after the pandemic. This may indicate the effectiveness of programs aiming to increase social connections or conversely may be evidence of greater normalization of loneliness. Recent data from 2024 reports show that 49.7% of college students experience loneliness, a figure that remains concerning.[4]

Young adults are almost twice as likely to report feeling lonely than those over age 65 even though older adults are more socially isolated (HHS, 19). This could signify that younger adults may have higher expectations for social connection and lack the skills to transform alone time into a more generative experience: solitude. Additionally, it might mean that young adults are more willing to act as a bellwether, openly voicing the challenges of social isolation in ways that older generations do not. By articulating these problems, young adults may be taking a first step toward finding solutions to the enduing problem of social isolation.

Social media use is intertwined as a cause and effect of loneliness. Participants who reported using social media for more than two hours a day had about double the odds of reporting increased perceptions of social isolation compared to those who used social media for less than 30 minutes per day.[5] Feelings of loneliness are often linked to other mental health issues, such as anxiety and depression, as well as increased risks for physical ailments including cardiovascular disease, dementia, stroke, and premature death (HHS, 4). This issue goes beyond the scope of healthy habits such as exercise and diet, as the physical risks of loneliness exceed even those posed by obesity and physical inactivity.

The ideas and dreams of attending universities are most prominent to individuals who are seeking higher education. Although attending a university can be the most exciting moment, it can also cause students to feel isolated or lonely which can cause an increase in negative impacts on their mental health and well-being. The likelihood of experiencing severe psychological distress is more than four times higher for college students who report feeling lonely: 28.4% of students report feeling alone, 23.1% report feeling excluded, and 21% report not having any friends (Active Minds, 2024).

Universities have not yet figured out a way to separate a student's "wellness" from their "well-being". The focus is shifted towards a student's "wellness" which is described as a

person who is in a good healthy state based on exercise, diet and nutrition. According to the American College Health Association (ACHA), universities are trying to make a systemic shift away from a student's "wellness" and shift towards focusing on a student's "well-being" which is described as a good mental state of being healthy and happy. The ACHA also reported that students should use the word "well-being" and not "wellness".

[1] U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of the Surgeon General, *Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation: The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory on the Healing Effects of Social Connection and Community* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2023), https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/surgeon-general-social-connection-advisory.pdf
[2] American College Health Association, *ACHA-NCHA II 2019 Health and Wellness Highlights: Undergraduate Students* (University of California, Riverside, 2019), https://studentdocs.ucr.edu/saar/ACHA-NCHA%202019%20Health%20and%20Wellness%20Highlights%20Presentation%20HSH.pdf
[3] American College Health Association. American College Health Association-National College Health Assessment III: Undergraduate Student Reference Group Data Report Spring 2023. Silver Spring, MD: American College Health Association; 2023.
[4] American College Health Association. American College Health Association-National College Health Assessment III: Undergraduate Student Reference Group Executive Summary Spring 2024. Silver Spring, MD: American College Health Association; 2024
[5] Primack BA, Shensa A, Sidani JE, et al. Social Media Use and Perceived Social Isolation Among Young Adults in the U.S. Am J Prev Med. 2017;53(1):1-8)