

# Social Connectedness and Health

# Outline

1. The Absence of Social Connectedness – Loneliness
2. Scientific Findings On Health Implications
3. Where Does This Leave Us?

# 1. The Absence of Social Connectedness – Loneliness

*Loneliness is the distress that occurs when there is a discrepancy between desired and actual social relationships*

## 2. Scientific Findings On Health Implications – Health Behaviors

### Findings:

- Lonely group higher BMI (survey of 1289 adults, mean age 46.3 years)<sup>1</sup>
- Lonely group more overweight/obese

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<sup>1</sup> [https://github.com/Henryvw/eruditus/blob/master/archive/eruditus\\_05/src/loneliness\\_health\\_behaviours.pdf](https://github.com/Henryvw/eruditus/blob/master/archive/eruditus_05/src/loneliness_health_behaviours.pdf)

## 2. Scientific Findings On Health Implications – Stress

### Findings:

- Lonely individuals perceive life as more stressful<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> [https://github.com/Henryvw/eruditus/blob/master/archive/eruditus\\_05/src/loneliness\\_everyday\\_life.pdf](https://github.com/Henryvw/eruditus/blob/master/archive/eruditus_05/src/loneliness_everyday_life.pdf)

## 2. Scientific Findings On Health Implications – HPA Axis Functioning

*The hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenocortical (HPA) axis is a finely coordinated system of direct and feedback influences that begins with hypothalamic secretion of corticotropin-releasing hormone (CRH), which regulates the release of adrenocorticotrophic hormone (ACTH) from the pituitary gland, which, in turn, regulates the release of **cortisol** from the cortex of the adrenal gland.<sup>3</sup>*

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<sup>3</sup> Human Bonding: The Science of Affection p. 352

## 2. Scientific Findings On Health Implications – HPA Axis Functioning

*Under acute stress circumstances, circulating glucocorticoids (GCs, i.e. cortisol) act to reduce or contain inflammation and minimize cellular damage. Chronic stress, however, involves a dysregulation of the HPA axis with elevated circulating GCs but a resistance to their immunosuppressant and anti-inflammatory effects. Poorly regulated inflammation is a trademark of many chronic health conditions, including **atherosclerosis** and **cardiovascular events**, **diabetes**, **obesity**, **cancer**, **asthma**, and **rheumatoid arthritis**.*<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Human Bonding: The Science of Affection p. 353

## 2. Scientific Findings On Health Implications – HPA Axis Functioning

### Findings:

- Lonely nonpsychotic psychiatric inpatients excreted significantly greater amounts of urinary cortisol than nonlonely inpatients
- Lonely middle-aged individuals showed a greater 30-minute post awakening increase in salivary cortisol
- Prior-day feelings of loneliness and related feelings of sadness, threat, and lack of control were associated with a higher cortisol awakening response (CAR) the next day



## 2. Scientific Findings On Health Implications – Immune Functioning

### Findings:

- High-lonely individuals have impaired cellular immunity, as reflected in lower natural killer (NK) cell activity
- Loneliness has been associated with a smaller increase in NK cell numbers among middle-aged adults
- Chronic loneliness was associated with poorer antibody response to a component of the flu vaccine in young adults

## 2. Scientific Findings On Health Implications – Cognitive Functioning

### Findings:

- In a 4-year prospective study of initially dementia-free older adults (mean age 80.7 years), the risk of Alzheimer's disease was more than twice as great in lonely compared with nonlonely individuals. In addition, loneliness was associated with lower cognitive ability at baseline and with a more rapid decline in cognition during the 4-year follow-up
- Loneliness predicted a more rapid cognitive decline over a 10-year period in a Finnish sample of adults 75 years of age and older

## 2. Scientific Findings On Health Implications – Sleep Health

### Findings:

- Poor social relations and loneliness are associated with poor sleep quality and daytime dysfunction
- The greater daytime dysfunction is accompanied by more nightly micro-awakenings
- Lonely feelings one day predicted daytime dysfunction the following day, but daytime dysfunction was not a significant predictor of lonely feelings the following day

# Where Does This Leave Us?

### 3. Where Does This Leave Us?

*Loneliness is the distress that occurs when there is a **discrepancy** between **desired** and **actual** social relationships*

# 3. Where Does This Leave Us?

**Discrepancies can arise when**

- intimate partners fail to satisfy our need for connectedness and leave us feeling isolated
- lack of close, confiding friendships leaves us wanting for a sense of relational connectedness
- social groups or collectives that we value leave us feeling like we don't belong

### 3. Where Does This Leave Us?

*Perceptions of poor social relationship quality are the most important contributor to feelings of loneliness (de Jong-Gierveld, 1987; Hawkley et al., 2008; Pinquart & Sörensen, 2001; Wheeler, Reis, & Nezlek, 1983)<sup>5</sup>*

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<sup>5</sup> Human Bonding: The Science of Affection p. 344

# 3. Where Does This Leave Us?

**Question for the audience:**

How can one influence their desired state of social relationships?



*You can kiss your family  
and friends good-bye and  
put miles between you, but  
at the same time you carry  
them with you in your  
heart, your mind, your  
stomach, because you do not  
just live in a world but a  
world lives in you.*

— Frederick Buechner

Thank you 🙌