Post-secondary student support.

Coping with isolation and loneliness

Introduction

This resource is designed to help Good2Talk service providers better understand and address the challenges of isolation and loneliness faced by post-secondary students. It provides an overview of how these issues manifest in young people and explores the connection between mental health and feelings of isolation and loneliness. By highlighting key contributing factors, this resource equips service providers with strategies and practical approaches to identify, support, and empower post-secondary students who are using Good2Talk's phone, texting, and online messaging services.

Understanding isolation and loneliness in post-secondary students

Loneliness has emerged as an epidemic and major public health concern.[1-3] It has been estimated that about 13% of people living in Canada report always or often feeling lonely.[4] Contrary to the common belief that loneliness is more prevalent in older adults, recent global data shows that comparatively, people aged 16 to 25 experience more intense and frequent feelings of loneliness.[5,6] Younger adults, including post-secondary students, face distinct barriers that can make addressing loneliness more complex.

While isolation and loneliness are often used interchangeably, they represent different experiences. Isolation refers to an objective state of being physically or socially separated from others. It can either be voluntary (choosing to spend time alone) or involuntary (due to circumstances like remote learning).[7] Importantly, isolation does not always lead to loneliness.[7] In contrast, loneliness is a subjective feeling of disconnection, which can occur even in the presence of others. Loneliness is more closely related to the quality of relationships and emotional fulfillment rather than the physical presence of others.[8]

Isolation and loneliness among post-secondary students in Canada

Isolation and loneliness have become increasingly common among post-secondary students, with many reporting feelings of disconnection despite being in large social environments.[9] Ogrodniczuk et al. (2021) conducted a national survey of 8,248 students across 41 campuses in Canada, revealing that a large number of students experience high levels of loneliness, with over 80% reporting feelings of sadness, anxiety, and loneliness. The transition to university or college,

This project is funded by the Province of Ontario. The views expressed herein are those of the Knowledge Institute and do not necessarily reflect those of the Province.

especially for first-year students, is often a key trigger for loneliness as they adjust to a new environment and navigate the pressure of forming social connections.[10]

Additionally, societal shifts toward individualism and heightened academic pressures may exacerbate these experiences.[11,12] As well, parental relationships play an important role during these transitional years. Higher parental support is associated with lower levels of loneliness, providing post-secondary students with an emotional buffer during periods of adjustment and throughout college years.[13]

The COVID-19 pandemic further intensified feelings of isolation and loneliness among students. Remote learning, social distancing, and limited in-person interactions disrupted the typical experiences of students. Even as campuses reopened, many students, accustomed to online-only interactions, have found it challenging to re-establish social ties.[14-16] Those who experienced the pandemic during their formative years may be even more prone to experiencing ongoing social isolation as they transition into post-secondary education.

Certain groups of students are particularly at risk of isolation and loneliness, including international students, students who are affected by systemic inequities (for example, those who identify as 2SLGBTQ+, equity-deserving youth, racialized youth), and those with disabilities.[17-19] These students often face additional barriers, such as cultural and language differences or accessibility challenges, making it harder for them to form strong social connections.

A 2020 survey by the Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance (OUSA) revealed high rates of loneliness and isolation among Ontario post-secondary students: 50% of 2SLGBTQ+ students, 51.1% of students with disabilities, 50% of Indigenous students, and 41.2% of students wearing visible religious symbols reported feeling lonely and isolated "often".[20] These findings highlight a bigger impact of loneliness compared to their peers who are not affected by systemic inequities.[20]

Lastly, social media seems to play an important role. While engaging on digital platforms can provide students with a means of staying connected, it may also contribute to their feelings of loneliness. Many students report that online interactions, especially on social media, can lead to negative comparisons with their peers and create a sense of inadequacy, worsening their feelings of isolation and loneliness.[21]

Factors contributing to isolation and loneliness

Several factors can contribute to isolation and loneliness in post-secondary students, including:[10,21-23]

- Transition to adulthood (adapting to a new environment, leaving home).
- Academic pressures (heavy coursework, high expectations).
- Cultural and language barriers, particularly for international students.
- Physical separation from family, friends, or peers, often due to geographical distance or remote learning.
- Lack of social skills, which can hinder relationship-building.
- Impact of technology and social media, which can amplify feelings of inadequacy and disconnection.

Types of isolation and loneliness

Post-secondary students may experience several types of isolation and loneliness:[7]

- **Social isolation:** a lack of social connections or interactions, where students feel physically or socially cut off from peers and campus life.
- **Existential isolation:** a deeper sense of disconnection from others and the world, often stemming from questions about life's meaning or one's purpose. This can be felt even in the presence of others.
- **Emotional loneliness:** feeling the absence of close, meaningful relationships and emotional support.
- **Situational loneliness:** loneliness triggered by specific life circumstances, such as a new environment, personal struggles, or an inability to participate in social activities due to factors related to work, health, finances or other issues.
- **Chronic loneliness:** long-term, persistent feelings of loneliness that do not easily go away. If not addressed properly, this can lead to mental and physical health challenges over time.

Signs of isolation and loneliness

Service providers may notice various signs of isolation and loneliness among students.[24,25] These signs could be linked to several different conditions, and they can look different for each individual.

- **Behavioural signs:** withdrawal from social activities, reduced participation with peers and frequently being alone, skipping classes.
- **Physical signs:** poor hygiene, reduced sleep quality, frequent illnesses.
- **Emotional signs:** increased irritability, emotional outbursts or a flattening of emotional expression, constant sadness/depression.
- **Cognitive signs:** negative self-talk, lack of interest in activities, poor concentration.



Impact of lonlieness on student well-being

Loneliness can significantly disrupt a student's mental health, physical health, social development, and academic performance. Persistent feelings of loneliness may lead to issues like anxiety, sleep disturbances, impaired social interactions, and reduced motivation, all of which can hinder students' overall well-being and success.[26-30] The following diagram illustrates these key impacts across different areas of student life.



*i.e., mental health conditions causing distressing physical symptoms without medical explanation, including excessive worry about symptoms, fear of serious illness, or unexplained neurological symptoms.

Helping students navigate isolation and loneliness

The role of service providers

Service providers play a key role in supporting post-secondary students experiencing isolation and loneliness. Their guidance and approach can significantly impact students' comfort in sharing experiences and seeking help. The following outlines key actions that service providers can take to foster connection and offer effective support to students.

- **Create a safer and more inclusive environment:** It is important to foster a welcoming atmosphere during interactions. Students who feel seen, respected, and valued are more likely to open up about their struggles.

- **Build trust and rapport:** Establishing trust early in the conversation helps students feel comfortable discussing their experiences. Using a non-judgmental approach and expressing empathy can reduce the fear of stigma around feelings of loneliness.
- **Recognize when to intervene:** Knowing the signs of isolation and loneliness allows service providers to explore the topic further and identify when a student might need more direct support. If they express the need and interest, gently guide students toward appropriate resources or follow-up services.
- **Provide active listening emotional support:** Active listening is a powerful way to show understanding. By validating students' feelings and reassuring them that their experiences are common, service providers can help students feel less alone and more supported. Actively ask curious questions during the session to understand the situation and help students make sense of their experience.
- **Encourage positive social behaviours:** Small steps toward social engagement can make a big difference. Encourage activities like attending a campus event, joining a club, or participating in study groups. This will help students rebuild or establish social connections.
- **Connect students with resources:** Act as a bridge by directing students to mental health services, substance use health support, or campus resources that promote social engagement. This might include peer support programs, wellness services, spiritual gatherings, or student organizations.

Strategies to cope with isolation and loneliness

- **Promote social connection:** Encourage students to take part in campus activities, events, or student organizations aligned with their interests. Participating in shared experiences can help build meaningful connections and a sense of community.[8,31,32]
- **Facilitate peer support networks:** Suggest peer support systems, such as mentoring programs or buddy initiatives. These networks provide a space for students to share their experiences, offer and receive emotional support, and form strong, lasting relationships.[31,32]
- **Develop coping skills:** Inform students about practical skills to help manage feelings of isolation and loneliness. These might include mindfulness techniques, journaling, or exercises focused on emotional regulation.[19,33] Discuss the difference between problem-focused coping (addressing the root causes of isolation and loneliness) and emotion-focused coping (managing emotional responses) and evaluate together the most appropriate course of action to take at the moment.[34,35] Research suggests that simply being around others does not always alleviate loneliness.[36] With this in mind, service providers should emphasize the importance of learning to be comfortable with oneself, addressing the underlying causes of isolation, and developing ways to meet personal needs.
- **Address physical isolation:** For students living off-campus or studying remotely, encourage engagement with campus life through virtual events, online study groups, or hybrid activities. Discuss the pros and cons of attending in-person, on-campus spaces where students can socialize informally or relax.
- **Be mindful with technology and digital tools:** Encourage students to use technology intentionally, opting for platforms that facilitate meaningful conversations and virtual meet-ups. Discuss apps or online communities that can support positive engagement.
- **Promote physical health:** Isolation and loneliness can negatively impact physical well-being. Remind students of the importance of maintaining healthy routines, such as regular exercise, a balanced diet, and good sleep hygiene. Where possible, invite them to connect with campus wellness resources.

- **Reframe isolation and loneliness:** Help students explore periods of isolation as an opportunity for self-reflection and growth. Encourage them to identify personal goals, explore new hobbies, or pursue interests that meet their personal needs and foster self-awareness and resilience.[19] Building hope, self-discovery, and proactive coping skills can mediate feelings of loneliness and empower students to navigate challenging emotions more easily



To learn more about emotion-focused and problem-focused coping strategies, check out our Good2Talk resource: Coping with change: Promoting resilience in post-secondary students (staff version); Coping with change (student version).

To learn more about how to build hope in post-secondary students, check out our Good2Talk resources: Building hope in post-secondary students (staff version); Hope and your mental health: Tips for young people (student version).

To learn more about the impacts of technology on post-secondary students, check out our Good2Talk resource: Screen use by young people during the COVID-19 pandemic (staff version); Technology and screen use (student version).

Additional resources for post-secondary students

- This Good2Talk resource offers helpful tips and support for students who are feeling lonely, isolated, or homesick. It is a great starting point those seeking guidance in managing these emotions.
- Offered by the Centre for Innovation in Campus Mental Health, the Managing stress and loneliness course is designed to equip students with strategies and practical tools for improving mental health and well-being.
- Breaking modern loneliness: a workshop on mental health is a workshop guided by the National Health Education Standards from the Centres for Disease Control and Prevention. It focuses on the mental health challenges of modern loneliness and provides students with insights to foster connection and emotional resilience.
- mindyourmind | Youth Mental Health Resources is a space where mental health, wellness, engagement, and technology meet. Developed in collaboration with young people aged 14 to 29, this website hosts co-created interactive tools and innovative resources to build capacity and resilience and to encourage community engagement.
- This Life Promotion Toolkit by Indigenous Youth provides knowledge and resources to strengthen connections and promote life. It contains a list of friendship centers, community service projects, and different activities to help students connect with others, with spirituality and with life purpose.
- This resource on Romantic relationships can be helpful in understanding some relationship factors associated with well-being and social connection.

References

1. Gerst-Emerson, K., & Jayawardhana, J. (2015). Loneliness as a public health issue: The impact of loneliness on health care utilization among older adults. *American Journal of Public Health, 105*(5), 1013–1019
2. Holt-Lunstad, J. (2017). The potential public health relevance of social isolation and loneliness: Prevalence, epidemiology, and risk factors. *Public Policy & Aging Report, 27*(4), 127–130.
3. Jaffe, S. (2023). US surgeon general: Loneliness is a public health crisis. *The Lancet, 401*(10388), 1560.
4. Statistics Canada. (2021). Loneliness in Canada.
5. Cigna. (2018). Loneliness and the Workplace: 2020 U.S. report.
6. Wellbeing and Loneliness - Community Life Survey 2019/20. (2020).
7. Brown, V., Morgan, T., & Fralick, A. (2021). Isolation and mental health: Thinking outside the box. *General Psychiatry, 34*(3), e100461.
8. Lee, C. S., & Goldstein, S. E. (2015). Loneliness, stress, and social support in young adulthood: Does the source of support matter? *Journal of Youth and Adolescence, 45*(3), 568–580.
9. Ogrodniczuk, J. S., Kealy, D., & Laverdière, O. (2021). Who is coming through the door? A national survey of self-reported problems among post-secondary school students who have attended campus mental health services in Canada. *Counselling and Psychotherapy Research, 21*(4), 837–845.
10. Von Soest, T., Luhmann, M., & Gerstorf, D. (2020). The development of loneliness through adolescence and young adulthood: Its nature, correlates, and midlife outcomes. *Developmental Psychology, 56*(10), 1919–1934.
11. Barreto, M., Victor, C., Hammond, C., Eccles, A., Richins, M. T., & Qualter, P. (2020). Loneliness around the world: Age, gender, and cultural differences in loneliness. *Personality and Individual Differences, 169*, 110066.
12. Beller, J., & Wagner, A. (2020). Loneliness and Health: The Moderating Effect of Cross-Cultural Individualism/Collectivism. *Journal of Aging and Health, 32*(10), 1516–1527.
13. Leon, M. D. C., Moreira, J. F. G., Saragosa-Harris, N. M., Waizman, Y. H., Sedykin, A., Peris, T. S., & Silvers, J. A. (2022). Parent and friend relationship quality and links to trajectories of loneliness during the first year of college. *Child Psychiatry & Human Development, 55*(3), 680–694.
14. Hamza, C. A., Ewing, L., Heath, N. L., & Goldstein, A. L. (2020). When social isolation is nothing new: A longitudinal study on psychological distress during COVID-19 among university students with and without preexisting mental health concerns. *Canadian Psychology/Psychologie Canadienne, 62*(1), 20–30.
15. Horigian, V. E., Schmidt, R. D., & Feaster, D. J. (2020). Loneliness, mental health, and substance use among US young adults during Covid-19. *Journal of Psychoactive Drugs, 53*(1), 1–9.
16. McQuaid, R. J., Cox, S. M., Ogunlana, A., & Jaworska, N. (2020). The burden of loneliness: Implications of the social determinants of health during COVID-19. *Psychiatry Research, 296*, 113648.
17. Fagan, M. J., Wunderlich, K., Wu, C., Fang, M., & Faulkner, G. (2023). Lonely but not alone: Examining correlates of loneliness among Canadian post-secondary students. *Journal of American College Health*, 1–10.
18. Flesaker, M., Freibott, C. E., Evans, T. C., Gradus, J. L., & Lipson, S. K. (2024). Loneliness in the college student population: Prevalence and associations with substance use outcomes. *Journal of American College Health*, 1–7.
19. Icekson, T., Begerano, O. D., Levinson, M., Savariego, J., & Margalit, M. (2021). Learning difficulties and loneliness in college and beyond: The mediating role of self-efficacy, proactive coping, and hope. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health, 18*(19), 10508.

20. Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance (OUSA). (2020). Results from the 2020 Ontario undergraduate student survey. In *Ontario Undergraduate Student Survey* (OUSS) [Report].
21. Thomas, L., Orme, E., & Kerrigan, F. (2019). Student loneliness: The role of social media through life transitions. *Computers & Education, 146*, 103754.
22. Feldman, D. B., Davidson, O. B., Ben-Naim, S., Maza, E., & Margalit, M. (2016). Hope as a mediator of loneliness and academic self-efficacy among students with and without learning disabilities during the transition to college. *Learning Disabilities Research and Practice, 31*(2), 63–74.
23. Korzhina, Y., Hemberg, J., Nyman-Kurkiala, P., & Fagerström, L. (2022). Causes of involuntary loneliness among adolescents and young adults: an integrative review. *International Journal of Adolescence and Youth, 27*(1), 493–514.
24. Hawkley, L. C., & Cacioppo, J. T. (2010). Loneliness Matters: A theoretical and empirical review of consequences and mechanisms. *Annals of Behavioral Medicine, 40*(2), 218–227.
25. Jefferson, R., Barreto, M., Verity, L., & Qualter, P. (2023). Loneliness during the school years: How it affects learning and how schools can help. *Journal of School Health, 93*(5), 428–435.
26. Eres, R., Lim, M. H., & Bates, G. (2023). Loneliness and social anxiety in young adults: The moderating and mediating roles of emotion dysregulation, depression and social isolation risk. *Psychology and Psychotherapy Theory Research and Practice, 96*(3), 793–810.
27. Leigh-Hunt, N., Bagguley, D., Bash, K., Turner, V., Turnbull, S., Valtorta, N., & Caan, W. (2017). An overview of systematic reviews on the public health consequences of social isolation and loneliness. *Public Health, 152*, 157–171.
28. Linden, B., & Jurdi-Hage, R. (2017). Examining the predictors of mental health outcomes among undergraduate postsecondary students in Canada. *Journal of Social Behavioral and Health Sciences, 11*(1).
29. Perez, L. G., Siconolfi, D., Troxel, W. M., Tucker, J. S., Seelam, R., Rodriguez, A., Shih, R. A., & D'Amico, E. J. (2022). Loneliness and multiple health domains: Associations among emerging adults. *Journal of Behavioral Medicine, 45*(2), 260–271.
30. Poole, H., Khan, A., Smith, A. C., & Stypulkowski, A. (2023). The importance of others: The link between stress and social connectedness in university students. *The Canadian Journal for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning, 14*(1).
31. Ellard, O. B., Dennison, C., & Tuomainen, H. (2022). Review: Interventions addressing loneliness amongst university students: A systematic review. *Child and Adolescent Mental Health, 28*(4), 512–523.
32. Lovell, J., & Webber, M. (2023). Adaptation of connecting people to address loneliness and social isolation in university students: A feasibility study. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*, 1–16.
33. Besse, R., Whitaker, W. K., & Brannon, L. A. (2021). Reducing loneliness: The impact of mindfulness, social cognitions, and coping. *Psychological Reports, 125*(3), 1289–1304.
34. Deckx, L., Van Den Akker, M., Buntinx, F., & Van Driel, M. (2018). A systematic literature review on the association between loneliness and coping strategies. *Psychology Health & Medicine, 23*(8), 899–916.
35. Schoenmakers, E. C., Van Tilburg, T. G., & Fokkema, T. (2015). Problem-focused and emotion-focused coping options and loneliness: How are they related? *European Journal of Ageing, 12*(2), 153–161.
36. Stavrova, O., & Ren, D. (2023). Alone in a Crowd: Is Social Contact Associated with Less Psychological Pain of Loneliness in Everyday Life? *Journal of Happiness Studies, 24*(5), 1841–1860.

In partnership with Kids Help Phone, ConnexOntario, 211 Ontario
and the Knowledge Institute on Child and Youth Mental Health and Addictions.