Loneliness, Isolation, and Human Touch:

A Global Perspective in the Era of COVID-19

Research By: ad COUNCIL EDGE
strategic consulting

In Partnership With: Beiersdorf

Introduction

Research has shown that people who have satisfying relationships with family, friends, and their community are happier, have fewer health problems, have better cognitive function, have less depression, and live longer. Similarly, human touch and physical displays of caring have also shown to be important for social connection and bonding, as well as for psychological well-being. However, a lack of deeper relationships may manifest in mental health issues like anxiety, depression, adjustment disorder, chronic stress, insomnia, and even cognitive decline later in life.

To date, the majority of attention from the research community has been on understanding and mitigating the effects of loneliness on older people. This focus, however, is limited in its scope and leaves out many vital demographics. **Many people are, in fact, at risk for loneliness - and the ensuing health factors these issues can cause.**

While loneliness can affect anyone at any time, there's now another lens through which the issue should be examined: the global COVID-19 pandemic and social distancing and isolation measures. In general, research has so far been mixed as to the impact of COVID-19 on loneliness and isolation. Some say loneliness has actually leveled off recently, while others say the pandemic is creating an impending mental health crisis. All of this indicates that now is an important time to begin intervention efforts targeting those at risk for feeling lonely on a regular basis.

The findings from this study provide a critical opportunity for researchers, health professionals, agencies, companies, and nonprofits: **By understanding those who are vulnerable** - those who have high risk factors, and/or those who have the demographic profile that would likely move them into these categories - **leaders can more effectively intervene to mitigate loneliness.**

> **"**
> **By understanding those who are vulnerable...leaders can more effectively intervene to mitigate loneliness.**

Purpose

Because of the current global pandemic and the potential rise in loneliness worldwide, Beiersdorf and the Ad Council partnered to take a deeper look at loneliness, what can be done to address and prevent it from happening, and if or how factors like isolation and human touch play a role in contributing to or mitigating loneliness.The research team designed a mixed-methods research study across six countries (U.S., England, Italy, Germany, China, Brazil) specifically to understand:

+ How people define feeling alone;
+ Why loneliness occurs and what contributes to loneliness;
+ Solutions to combat loneliness, including human touch;
+ The causality and correlation between loneliness, human touch, social inclusion, and connections/relationships;
+ What interventions and public campaign approaches could help address the issue; and
+ The state of loneliness before and during the pandemic.

Definitions Used Within the Study

Feeling alone/loneliness happens when there is a difference between the trusted, quality relationships we have and those we want.

Socially isolated is lacking social contact with others, by your own choice or not.

Physically isolated is being physically alone/away from others, by your own choice or not.

Human touch means touch between people (such as embracing or hugging).

Close proximity means being in one's physical presence, but not physically touching.

Close connection is having a trusted, quality relationship with someone who makes you feel valued.

Methodology

This study consisted of four unique research methods from April to August 2020:

Literature Review
The research team performed a global review and analysis of literature and research on loneliness, isolation, and physical/human touch.

Expert Interviews
The team interviewed (via videoconference) four global experts who have led major research initiatives on the topic.

Qualitative Interviews
The research team leveraged a two-day online discussion with 60 individuals (n=10 per country), along with five phone interviews (targeted toward those 65+) to explore loneliness across six countries (United States, England, Italy, Germany, China, Brazil).

Quantitative Survey
A 15-minute online survey (with supplemental phone interviews) was conducted from July 29 - August 18, 2020 among adults ages 18+ living in the United States, England, Germany, Italy, Brazil, and China. All surveys were nationally representative of each country's proportions for age and gender. Overall, n=6,413 interviews were achieved. Within each country:

United States: n=1,002   Germany: n=1,000   Brazil: n=1,006

England: n=1,000   Italy: n=1,000   China: n=1,405

Factor and Regression Analysis
After finalizing the qualitative and quantitative phases and interviewing key experts in the field, the research team took this study one step further through factor analysis and regression. To understand what drives loneliness, the team examined hundreds of possible contributing factors and their relationship to experiencing feelings of loneliness.

For more information on this study's methodology, see the full report at AdCouncil.org/Loneliness

Key Takeaways
& Findings

Takeaway 1:

Loneliness is a global issue with a large population experiencing at least one contributing factor of loneliness.

A third of the global sample (36%) regularly experiences at least one of the contributing factors of loneliness (feeling alone and/or physical or social isolation) - an amount that increased to 44 percent during COVID-19. In addition, almost half of those who are lonely developed it recently – within the last two years.

In order to slow or stop more people from becoming lonely, **preventative measures should focus on reaching those who are at risk of increased or regular loneliness** (the 36% discussed throughout the report). These measures should be developed now - not only because of the global pandemic, but also because of the finding that nearly half of those who are lonely developed it recently. In other words, the longer it takes for leaders and key stakeholders to develop effective programs or interventions for loneliness, the more people will inevitably become regularly lonely.

Key Findings:

+ **One in five** (19%) people say they feel lonely on a regular basis.

+ **Over a third** (36%) of the global sample regularly experiences at least one factor of loneliness (feeling alone and/or physical or social isolation).

+ **About half** of those who regularly experience at least one factor of loneliness have developed such feelings recently (within the past two years).

+ COVID-19 contributed to a **slight increase** in isolation, but caused no increase in loneliness - though it did affect happiness.

+ Though general feelings of loneliness did not significantly increase during COVID-19, the number of people who regularly experience at least one factor of loneliness did (from 36% to 44%).

Who is Lonely?
Those Who Feel Alone on a Regular Basis (19%)

Those who feel alone on a regular basis exhibit the following demographic profile:

Personality:
Somewhat more introverted (38%).

Ethnicity/Country of Origin:
+ England: Slightly more likely to be non-white (17%).
+ China: More likely to be non-Chinese (29%).

Age:
More likely to be 18-34 years old (41%), less likely to be 55+ years old (19%).

Employment:
Of those working, more have multiple employers/jobs (26%).

Limitations:
More limited by transportation/proximity:
+ Less likely to own a car/motorbike/scooter (47%).
+ Fewer do not have the ability to walk to restaurant/bars (43%).
+ Fewer do not have the ability to walk to friends'/family houses (38%).

Health:
+ Higher rate of having a mental health condition (anxiety, depression) (31%).
+ Higher rate of having a disability/injury that impacts mobility (21%).

Income:
Lower average household income in some countries:
+ Brazil: R$49,000
+ Germany: €40,100
+ England: €36,100

Marital Status:
More likely to be single/never married (31%).

Activities:
On a monthly basis, those who feel alone are somewhat more likely to go out or take part in events with general connections (online groups, social clubs, religious events, sporting events, etc.), go to concerts/festivals, or volunteer.

Who Regularly Experiences at Least One Factor of Loneliness?
Those Who Feel at Least One Factor of Loneliness on a Regular Basis (36% of the Global Sample)

Those who feel alone on a regular basis exhibit the following demographic profile:

Employment:
Of those working, more likely to have multiple employers/jobs (25%).

Personality:
Somewhat more introverted (39%).

Age:
More likely to be 18-34 years old (39%), less likely to be 55+ years old (21%).

Marital Status:
More likely to be single/never married (30%).

Limitations:
More limited by transportation/proximity:
+ Less likely to own a car/motorbike/scooter (49%).
+ Fewer do not have the ability to walk to restaurants/bars (44%).
+ Fewer do not have the ability to walk to friends'/family houses (41%).

Health:
+ Higher rate of having a mental health condition (anxiety, depression) (27%).
+ Higher rate of having a disability/injury that impacts mobility (18%).

Ethnicity/Country of Origin:
+ **England**: Slightly more likely to be non-white (18%).
+ **China**: More likely to be non-Chinese (29%).

Activities:
On a monthly basis, those who feel at least one factor of loneliness are somewhat more likely to go out or do events with general connections (online groups, social clubs, religious events, etc.).

+ **U.S.**: More likely to go to religious/spiritual services; less likely to go to social events overall (e.g., going over to family/friends' houses or having them over, going to a park/bar/event with others, etc.).
+ **England**: Less likely to go to outdoor festivals/events, religious or spiritual service, or volunteer.
+ **Italy**: More likely than others to go to a bar/pub/club; less likely to go to a club or social group meeting, concert/theatre/opera/museum or outdoor festival/event, or volunteer.
+ **China**: Socially involved on a monthly basis (go to a park/public space, festival/event, social club, sporting event, concert/theater), and regularly volunteer.
+ **Brazil**: Very social/active with others on a monthly basis.
+ **Germany**: Attend fewer social events overall.

Income: Lower average household income overall (except China):
+ U.S.: $75,000 + Brazil: R$54,700 + Germany: €40,000
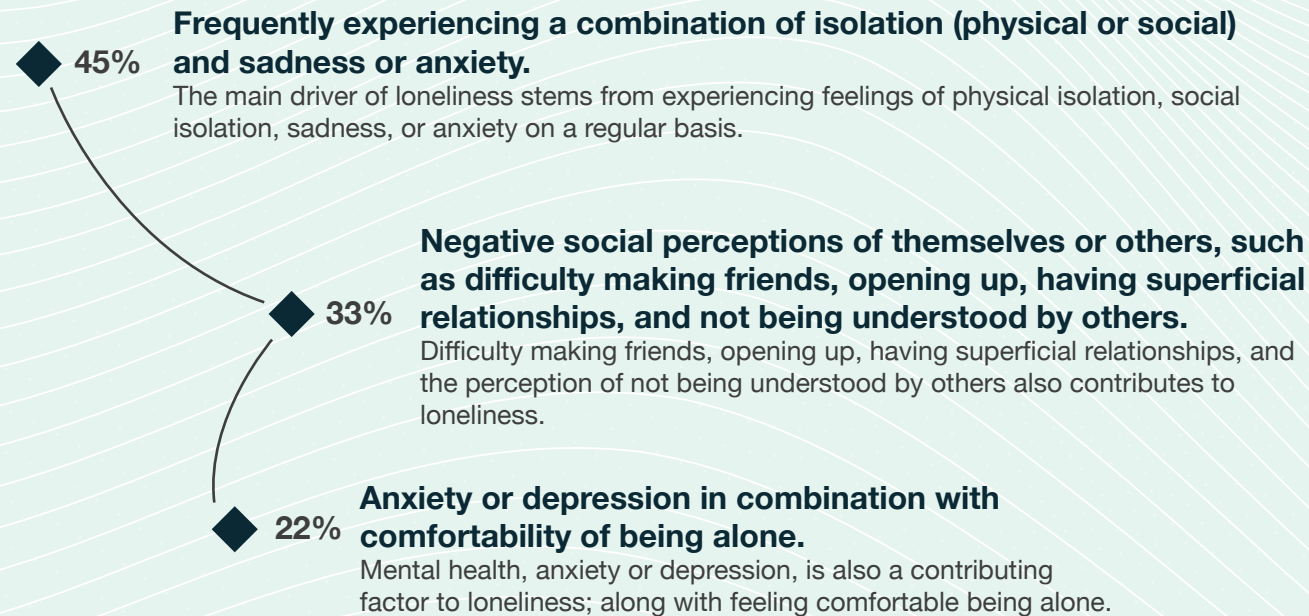+ England: €38,000 + Italy: €33,600

Takeaway 2:
A consistent, major theme associated with loneliness is mental health.

To understand what drives loneliness, the research team examined hundreds of possible contributing factors (200+), using factor and regression analyses. These pieces together offer a clear and evidence-based theory of the real drivers or factors of loneliness. It also points to the fact that in many cases, loneliness intervention programs should be designed from a lens of psychology, self esteem and mental health.
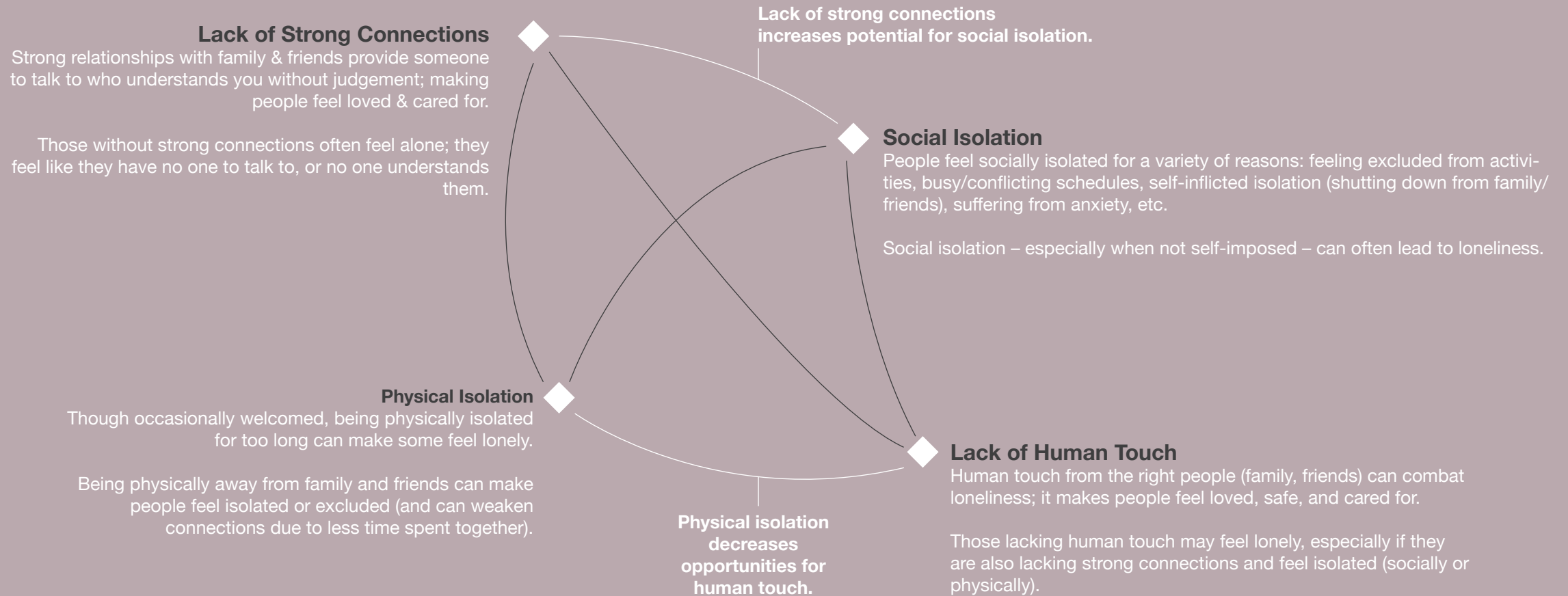
45%

Frequently experiencing a combination of isolation (physical or social) and sadness or anxiety.
The main driver of loneliness stems from experiencing feelings of physical isolation, social isolation, sadness, or anxiety on a regular basis.

33%

Negative social perceptions of themselves or others, such as difficulty making friends, opening up, having superficial relationships, and not being understood by others.
Difficulty making friends, opening up, having superficial relationships, and the perception of not being understood by others also contributes to loneliness.

22%

Anxiety or depression in combination with comfortability of being alone.
Mental health, anxiety or depression, is also a contributing factor to loneliness; along with feeling comfortable being alone.

Key Findings:

Isolation and mental health drives loneliness (as indicated by the three drivers of loneliness on the left).

Just over a third (36%) of people wish they had deeper relationships with more people - more so for people who regularly experience at least one factor of loneliness (47%).

Factors Contributing to Loneliness from Qualitative Interviews
the more factors at the same time = the greater the chance for loneliness

Lack of Strong Connections

Strong relationships with family & friends provide someone to talk to who understands you without judgement; making people feel loved & cared for.

Those without strong connections often feel alone; they feel like they have no one to talk to, or no one understands them.

Lack of strong connections increases potential for social isolation.

Social Isolation

People feel socially isolated for a variety of reasons: feeling excluded from activities, busy/conflicting schedules, self-inflicted isolation (shutting down from family/friends), suffering from anxiety, etc.

Social isolation – especially when not self-imposed – can often lead to loneliness.

Physical Isolation

Though occasionally welcomed, being physically isolated for too long can make some feel lonely.

Being physically away from family and friends can make people feel isolated or excluded (and can weaken connections due to less time spent together).

Physical isolation decreases opportunities for human touch.

Lack of Human Touch

Human touch from the right people (family, friends) can combat loneliness; it makes people feel loved, safe, and cared for.

Those lacking human touch may feel lonely, especially if they are also lacking strong connections and feel isolated (socially or physically).

Takeaway 3:

Interventions should focus on preventative measures to address the consistent factors of loneliness - and specifically with younger populations.

The literature review within this study found that interventions that have been implemented on a broader scale have either focused on older adults or the general population. Interventions that focus on young people haven't been scaled and are still being tested. In addition, initial research in the field has largely focused on older populations, though quantitative findings from this study show that this focus may be misguided: According to this study's global sample, younger people are much more impacted than older individuals.

Because of these findings, the most effective interventions should focus on preventing the consistent factors of loneliness (as previously discussed) within the populations most affected.

Key Findings:

+ To cope with loneliness or isolation, **people perform solo and personal activities rather than with groups**. Overall, about two-thirds of people gravitate toward more solo activities, or activities by oneself, such as watching TV, listening to music, or napping. *See the chart on page 12 for additional survey responses.*

+ **Likelihood to participate in interventions or perform actions to combat loneliness is low**. For example, just over a third (37%) of the global sample said they're likely (extremely/very likely) to schedule regular calls with close family/friends when feeling a factor of loneliness -- which is the highest-rated response. *See the chart on page 13 for additional survey responses.*

+ **Loneliness tends to occur in those that are younger**: Of those who feel alone on a regular basis, 41% are 18-34 years old, vs. 19% are 55+. Of those who regularly experience at least one factor of loneliness, 39% are 18-34 years old, vs. 21% are 55+.

Actions Taken When Feeling Lonely or Isolated

Actions Taken When Feeling This Way (Ranked 1-5)	Alone	Physically Isolated	Socially Isolated
Connect with others via technology (net)	**51%**	**50%**	**51%**
Call family member(s), friend(s), or loved one(s)	23%	21%	22%
Connect with people on social media	18%	18%	19%
Text/message family member(s), friend(s), or loved one(s)	17%	17%	17%
Video chat with family member(s), friend(s), or loved one(s)	14%	14%	15%
Schedule regular calls/video chats with family member(s), friend(s), or loved one(s)	8%	9%	9%
Connect with others in-person (net)	**40%**	**38%**	**40%**
Invite others out/to my home (subnet)	25%	26%	26%
Invite people over to my home to spend time together	12%	12%	13%
Invite people who you have a close connection with out for an activity	12%	11%	12%
Invite other people out for an activity	8%	9%	9%
Drop by a family member's, friend's, or loved one's home	14%	14%	15%
Hug/embrace family member(s), friend(s), or loved one(s)	14%	12%	12%
Watch TV/movies, play video games, or other entertainment	28%	27%	28%
Listen to music	27%	27%	27%
Sleep/take a nap	18%	19%	18%
Spend time with pets	14%	14%	14%
Exercise/get physical activity - Alone	12%	12%	12%
Perform a hobby or activity - Alone	11%	12%	12%
Get into or connect with nature - Alone	10%	10%	10%
Cry	9%	8%	8%
Get into or connect with nature - With others	9%	8%	8%
Clinical (net)	**13%**	**14%**	**14%**
Consult someone (subnet)	9%	10%	10%
Consult a mental health professional	5%	6%	6%
Consult a mentor	5%	5%	5%
Take prescription medication	6%	5%	6%
Religious, faith, or spiritual practice	8%	8%	9%
Meditate or practice mindfulness	7%	7%	7%
Exercise/get physical activity - With others	7%	7%	7%
Volunteer for a cause or help someone else in need	6%	7%	7%
Use alcohol or drugs	6%	6%	6%
Perform a hobby or activity - With others	6%	5%	5%
Write in a journal or diary	5%	6%	6%
Solo Activities (NET)	**66%**	**67%**	**67%**

Actions Taken When Feeling Lonely or Isolated

Likelihood to Participate in Interventions or Perform Actions to Combat Loneliness	Total	Alone and/or Isolated	Not Alone and/or Isolated	Alone	Not Alone
Schedule regular calls or video chats with close family and friends	37%	37%	36%	38%	37%
Join a group or club to participate in an activity you enjoy (such as, walking, reading, singing, eating)	33%	37%	32%	37%	32%
Receive regular (daily, weekly) phone calls to see how you're doing	31%	34%	29%	36%	30%
Volunteer for a local charity or help a person in need	29%	32%	27%	34%	27%
Visit with members of your community/ neighborhood (at a park, community center, café, museum, sports event, etc.)	27%	29%	26%	29%	27%
Connect with others on a happiness app that includes daily actions you can take to create a happier world	27%	33%	23%	35%	25%
Participate in community days where neighbors gather in a designated area to socialize, play, exercise, or enjoy entertainment	25%	29%	23%	30%	24%
Participate in an online program that guides you through daily actions for happier living	24%	31%	20%	34%	22%
Receive help with house chores, technology lessons, and other services	24%	30%	21%	33%	22%
Participate in a community program and get support for education, job training, food, housing, etc.	23%	30%	20%	31%	21%
Talk to a mental health professional, such as a therapist or psychologist	23%	33%	17%	36%	20%
Talk to a mentor (a trusted relationship with an adult such as a teacher, coaches, neighbors, and volunteers)	21%	28%	17%	31%	19%

Takeaway 4:

Technology, social media, and human touch are all tools that can help to maintain and support relationships among close connections.

When it comes to designing interventions or programs, there are a number of tools that can help interventions be more impactful. This study found that technology can be used as a tool to help support close connections to further in-person interactions and meaningful activities. Human touch - as much as in-person-meetings - is also important to support and maintain existing, close connections to prevent people from falling into the 'at risk' category.

In general, the findings from this study revealed that when feeling lonely or isolated, the majority of people will turn to activities that are solo in nature. Group and civic activities were not shown, within this global sample, to lessen one's feelings of loneliness - and contradicts the hypothesis that such social engagements will address the issue. Overwhelmingly, respondents reported taking part in solo activities to address loneliness, such as on-to-one interactions.

Key Findings:

+ To cope with loneliness or isolation, **people perform solo and personal activities rather than with groups**. (Overall, about two-thirds of people gravitate toward more solo activities, or activities by oneself, such as watching TV, listening to music, or napping.) See the chart on page 12 for additional survey responses.

+ In order to build stronger relationships, **respondents typically connect via technology** (73% net), such as phone or text/social media; **or invite someone over to their house or out for an activity** (68% net). See the chart on page 15 for additional survey responses.

+ Close proximity to and/or human touch from a person's spouse/significant other, children, and best friends/friends **can help a person feel less alone** – followed by other family members (siblings, parents).

+ When alone or feeling lonely, regardless of group, **people prefer human touch from a close connection** (53% for the global sample) - though notable differences exist by country. See the chart on page 16 for additional survey responses.

Tools/Interventions Taken to Build Stronger Connections

Among those who experience feeling	Total	Alone and/or Isolated	Not Alone and/or Isolated	Alone	Not Alone
Connect via technology (net)	73%	72%	73%	71%	73%
Call them on the phone	44%	37%	48%	35%	46%
Text/message them	34%	32%	34%	32%	34%
Connect with them on social media	32%	32%	32%	33%	32%
Video chat with them	28%	27%	28%	26%	28%
Invite others out/to my home (net)	68%	64%	71%	62%	70%
Invite them over to my home to spend time together	39%	32%	44%	30%	42%
Invite them out for a drink or meal	35%	30%	37%	27%	36%
Invite them out for an activity	32%	29%	35%	27%	34%
Participate in a hobby/activity with them	28%	25%	30%	25%	29%
Set up regular meetups (net)	40%	38%	41%	37%	40%
Setting up regular weekly in-person meet-ups	27%	26%	27%	25%	27%
Setting up regular monthly in-person meet-ups	22%	20%	24%	19%	23%
Dropping by their home	35%	31%	37%	29%	36%
Clinical/Consult someone (net)	12%	21%	7%	22%	9%
Consult a mental health professional	7%	12%	4%	12%	6%
Consult a mentor	7%	12%	4%	13%	5%
Attend a religious, faith, or spiritual service or function together	10%	12%	9%	12%	9%

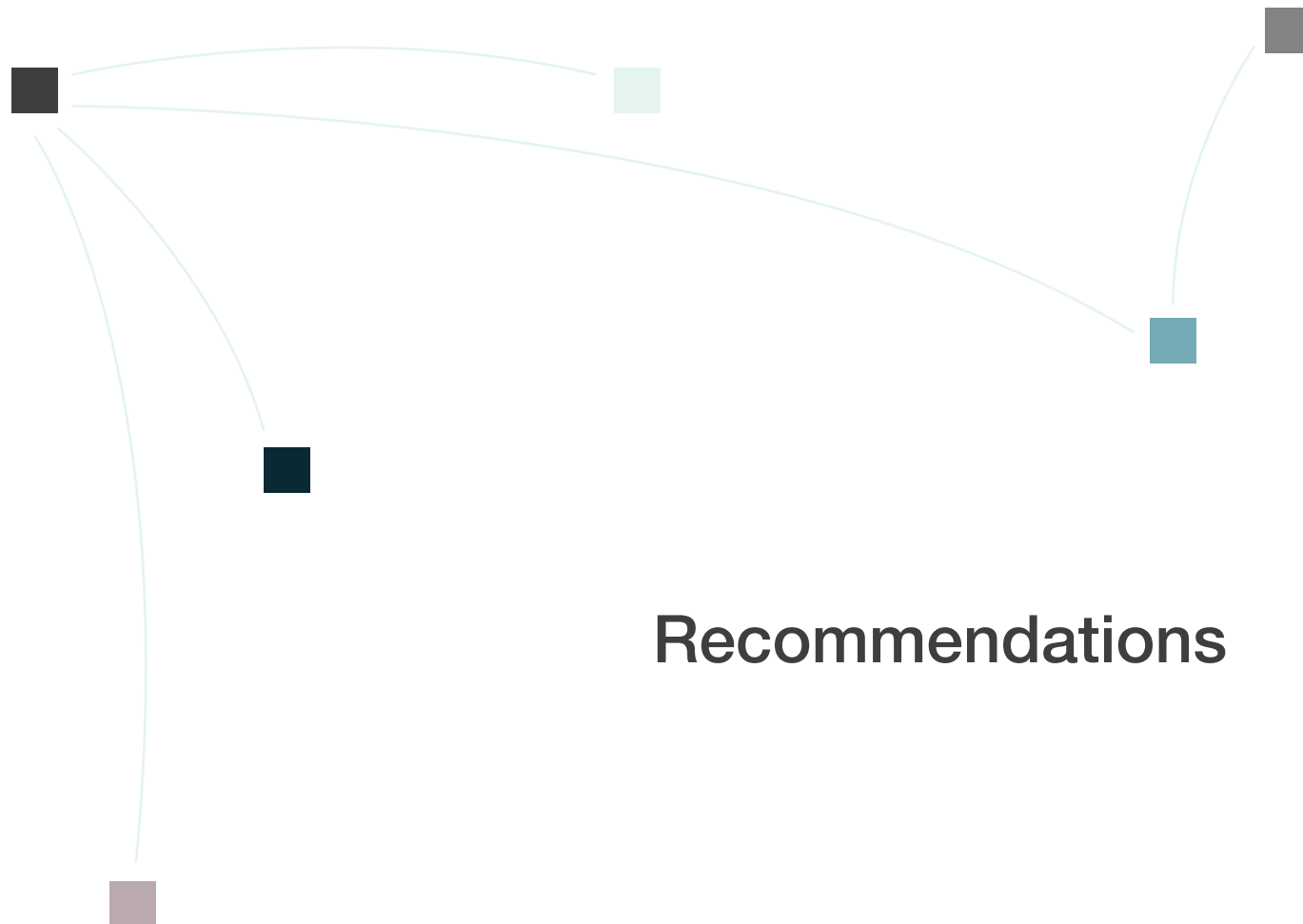# Desire for Human Touch vs. Close Proximity With Others When Feeling Alone

With Close Connections

	% prefer human touch	neutral	% prefer close proximity
Global Total	53%	28%	19%
Alone/Isolated	48%	28%	24%
Not Alone/Isolated	56%	28%	16%
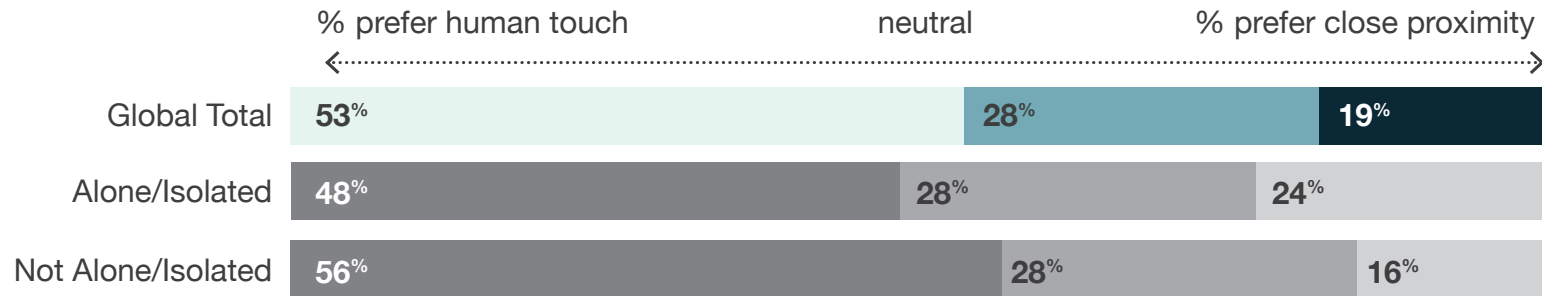
With NO Close Connections

	% prefer human touch	neutral	% prefer close proximity
Global Total	20%	31%	49%
Alone/Isolated	26%	28%	46%
Not Alone/Isolated	17%	32%	51%
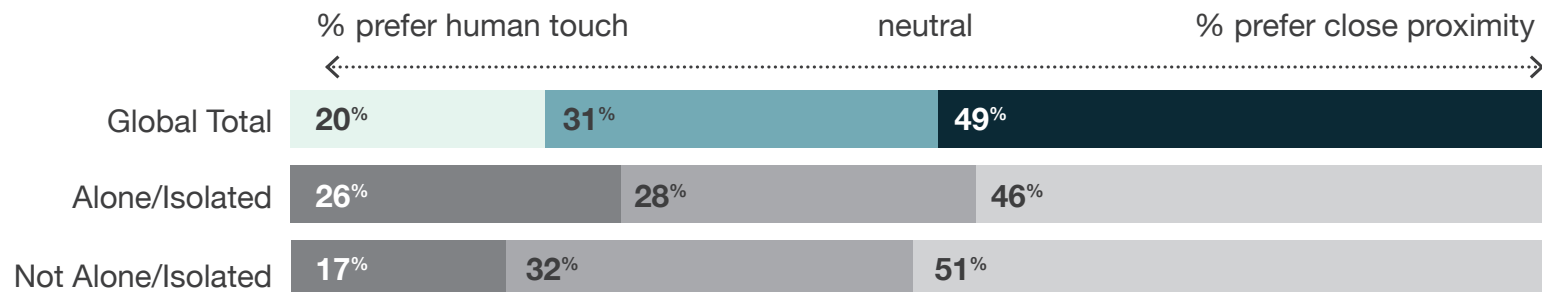
Recommendations

Recommendations

1. **Understand who is most at risk for loneliness, and focus prevention efforts on this population.**
More than one in three people regularly experience at least one factor of loneliness (feeling alone and/or physical or social isolation). Based on the findings in this study, these people are more likely to be 18-34 years old, more likely to be single/never married, and are somewhat more introverted. Now that the true profile of who is currently lonely and who is at risk for feeling lonely is understood, key stakeholders should design and focus interventions and programmatic efforts on these populations.

2. **Focus on the real risk factors for loneliness.**
This study found the following drivers of loneliness:
+ Frequently experiencing a combination of isolation (physical or social) and sadness or anxiety;
+ Negative social perceptions of themselves or others, such as difficulty making friends, opening up, having superficial relationships, and not being understood by others; or
+ Anxiety or depression in combination with comfortability of being alone.

Leaders and key stakeholders should focus on these factors when developing social issue marketing efforts and creating programs that nudge individuals to enhance relationships among their connections. Strong relationships are crucial to mitigating feelings of loneliness and isolation. When individuals can accurately assess their own connections and understand how to build stronger, more meaningful relationships - especially after big life events or lifestyle changes - they then have the tools to strengthen their social circles as a way to prevent their own loneliness or isolation.

Recommendations

3. **Design unique intervention efforts that are tailored to individuals.**
In general, the findings from this study revealed that when feeling lonely or isolated, the majority of people will turn to activities that are solo in nature. About a third of people who regularly experience at least one factor of loneliness (feeling alone and/or physical or social isolation) indicate that they are likely to take part in the following, which calls for a mixed-methods approach to addressing loneliness:
+ Schedule regular calls or video chats with close family and friends (37%).
+ Join a group/club to participate in an activity they enjoy (37%).
+ Receive regular phone calls to see how they're doing (34%).
+ Connect with others on a happiness app that includes daily actions they can take to create a happier world (33%).
+ Talk to a mental health professional, such as a therapist or psychologist (33%).

4. **Nudge and support individuals to develop stronger connections based on valued relationships.**
Of those who regularly experience at least one factor of loneliness, nearly half wish they had deeper relationships with more people. Strong relationships with connections have a critical impact on a person's feeling alone or not, so it's vital that individuals work to build and maintain such relationships to prevent loneliness/isolation. Campaign efforts, interventions, and investments should focus on approaches that reinforce the importance of strong relationships, and the tools (such as human touch) that can help maintain such relationships. When speaking to people who are at risk of becoming lonely, messaging should emphasize why and how solid relationships can help mitigate loneliness, and the steps a person can take to deepen relationships with their connections.

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