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# What Do We Mean By "Loneliness"?

(and why it matters)

Symposium Loneliness and Social Isolation in Mental Health

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## UCLA Loneliness Scale (Version 3)<sup>1</sup>

Statement	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often
H I don't have any friends				
H I don't have anyone to talk to when I need help				
H I don't have anyone to confide in				
H I feel isolated from others				

# Descriptions of Loneliness

ENCYCLOPEDIA BRITANNICA:

**Loneline**

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# Conceptualising Loneliness (1)

## 1. Loneliness as a Report on Physiological Change

The James-Lange Theory of Emotions: Emotion is a felt report on physiological arousal that is the result of information from the nervous system.

## Conceptualising Loneliness (2)

### 2. Loneliness as an Evaluative Feeling

a)

# Conceptualising Loneliness (3)

## 3. Loneliness as an Attention-Guiding Pattern

Emotions can be understood as patterns of salience: they structure what attracts our attention and thus help select relevant information.<sup>8</sup>

Then loneliness structures our perception of and attention to aspects of the environment in relevant ways

It then presents the environment so as to highlight the absence of appropriate social connection in it

One **advantage** of the view is that loneliness can really seem to direct one's focus of attention: for the lonely person, those aspects in which the felt absence of social connection comes to the fore are often presented as being at the centre of her conscious life.

One **problem** is that as stated, the view tells us nothing about the cause of loneliness: why can apparently well-connected people feel lonely?

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<sup>8</sup>!\\*!6. 3&2R!@!"NLZ-!<2\$)8-/#-%/="3)>, "/&"#!E25=,01/\*!8F'!8:]!<, \*&&!

# A Taxonomy

Some of the takes on loneliness I have sketched may well be mutually compatible, others less so.

They all explain some aspects of the experience of loneliness well and some others less well. It is not obvious that there is any "correct theory" here: much will depend on the particular sufferer, her circumstances and experience.

If so, an extended debate about which this theory is may not be very useful.

But we can helpfully group the proposals along the lines of their *explanatory focus*:

## 1. OBJECTIVIST VIEWS

These views seek to explain loneliness in terms of objective facts about the physical and social world in which the sufferer operates, which include facts about the subject's physiology and facts about the perceived environment

## 2. SUBJECTIVIST VIEWS

These views seek to explain loneliness in terms of the sufferer's felt experience and thus in terms of considerations about her inner life.

## 3. RELATIONAL VIEWS

These views seek to explain loneliness in terms of a relation (of a perceptual or, on e.g. Goldie's view, an emotional nature) between the sufferer and their environment.

# Why Bother?

Each of the three kinds of view has different implications for how to improve a sufferer's mental health:

- (1) On the objectivist view, we need to address the physiological and/or environmental causes of loneliness.
- (2) On the subjectivist view, we need to address the sufferer's self-perception
- (3) On the relational view, we need to address the sufferer's way of perceiving her environment

Each of these three views thus has quite distinct practical implications. While it appears that there is no obviously correct theory of loneliness (possibly because there is no single one phenomenon of "loneliness"), some theories may be more useful than others to describe *particular* cases. If so, a careful description of individual sufferers' (or groups of sufferers') cases, and consideration of the theoretical frameworks that are useful in devising that description, is vital for the development of appropriate strategies to alleviate loneliness: there is then no "one-size-fits-all" solution.

To end on a selfish note: if anyone is interested in working with me to put together a proposal for a symposium on loneliness at the next meeting of the European Society for Philosophy and Psychology (Leipzig 31 August - 3 September 2020), please get in touch!