

Loneliness limits recall of positive social experiences



People who report being more lonely use fewer social words when describing positive but not negative autobiographical memories, according to research published in *British Journal of Social Psychology*. These findings suggest that loneliness might be characterized by less spontaneous recall of positive social experiences, rather than hypersensitivity to all social cues or a general negativity bias.

Loneliness is a negative emotional state that arises when people are unsatisfied with the quality or quantity of their social interactions. The World Health Organization has declared that loneliness is a public health issue owing to its short-term adverse effects on sleep and immune functioning, and association with long-term risks for cardiovascular diseases and reduced longevity. It is therefore important to understand the causes of chronic loneliness and how it can be ameliorated.

It has been suggested that loneliness triggers a cycle of negative expectations of social interactions that prevents positive social connections and thereby perpetuates isolation. “We know loneliness affects how people process social information”, explains study author Tasuku Igarashi. “But the limited previous research on its impact on memory were primarily small-scale and conducted with undergraduate samples in laboratory settings, limiting the ecological validity and generalizability.”

In the study, over 4,000 Japanese participants recruited online were asked to describe a positive, negative or neutral event in their recent past using at least 200 Japanese characters while imagining their felt emotion as vividly as possible. The frequency of social word use in these narratives was analysed using the Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count tool. “I was inspired by work that analysed loneliness

and language use on social media, and I saw an opportunity to apply similar methods to autobiographical memory research”, says Igarashi. Participants also rated their loneliness either before or after the memory task.

Individuals used more social words on average in the positive and negative event condition than in the neutral condition. There was a negative correlation between loneliness and the use of social words in the positive and neutral event conditions. By contrast, there was no relationship between social word use and loneliness in the negative event condition. These results suggest that people who were lonelier were less likely to recall a social experience when asked to describe a positive or neutral autobiographical memory, which perhaps reflects the fact that they avoid positive social cues in their daily life.

“Effective interventions must link enhanced recall to actions that motivate social interactions”

Going forward, Igarashi would like to use experience sampling methods to see whether encouraging positive memories could reduce loneliness. “However, improving memory access alone will not solve chronic loneliness”, says Igarashi. “Effective interventions must link enhanced recall to actions that motivate social interactions and increase opportunities for engagement.”

Jenn Richler

Original article: Igarashi, T. Loneliness and socioemotional memory. *Br. J. Soc. Psychol.* <https://doi.org/10.1111/bjso.12783> (2024)

Related article: Liu, T. et al. Head versus heart: social media reveals differential language of loneliness from depression. *npj Ment. Health Res.* **1**, 16 (2022)