

## Loneliness & Social Isolation in Mental Health Research Network

### Research questions collated from events in June & July 2019

The network held two events to bring people from a range of backgrounds together in Summer 2019. Researchers from a range of specialties, people with lived experience of mental distress, people from voluntary/community organisations, and clinicians, came together with the aim of further understanding loneliness and social isolation in mental health from a range of perspectives. See our Network Events page for presentations given at the events:

<https://www.ucl.ac.uk/psychiatry/research/epidemiology-and-applied-clinical-research-department/loneliness-and-social-isolation-0>.

The events explored experiences of loneliness amongst people with mental health problems, how loneliness can lead to mental health problems, and how loneliness gets in the way of recovery from mental health problems.

Below is a summarized list of questions about factors that might help explain the relationship between mental health and loneliness/social isolation that were raised during roundtable discussion at these events. We are sharing these as potential research questions that could be of interest to people planning research in this area (although there may be research addressing these questions already).

**Please note** that this is a draft document: the list is not definitive, questions may overlap, and the categorization is not finalized. Many questions would fit into more than one category and these categories should not be considered on their own. It should also be noted that **funding applications to the Network plus project funding calls do not need to answer these questions specifically** – the purpose of this document is to generate ideas and to express the outcomes of all the fruitful roundtable discussions at our summer 2019 events.

Confiding relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Does a lack of confiding relationships mediate the association between negative events (for example bereavement) and depression?</li> <li>• Across the life course, does the quantity of confiding relationships in early life, and the quality of confiding relationships in later life, protect against mental health problems?</li> <li>• Does reliance on only a few confiding relationships in older people create vulnerability to depression after sudden bereavement and the loss of a key confidant?</li> <li>• Among groups vulnerable to developing mental health problems (new students, immigrants), does living in a large group create greater vulnerability to new onset depression? Is this mediated by a perception of a lack of intimate connections?</li> </ul>
Social support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What roles do lack/loss of social support and identify play in loneliness/isolation/mental health problems?</li> </ul>

Personality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Does personality type (including personality disorder) influence whether social isolation is experienced as loneliness?</li> <li>• What personality/cognitive factors protect against mental health problems and loneliness after retirement?</li> <li>• What role does personality play in loneliness/isolation and mental health?</li> <li>• What role do character traits like personality (introversion, shyness, feeling of being a failure) play in loneliness/isolation in people with mental health problems?</li> </ul>
Cultural	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What individual and cultural factors differentiate between people who are lonely who become depressed and those who do not?</li> <li>• What cross-cultural similarities/differences exist in relation to the pathways between loneliness/isolation/mental health problems?</li> <li>• How does a person with a mental problem's cultural/ethnic family background and context lead to loneliness?</li> <li>• How do different cultures define loneliness? How does this influence the relative stigma of loneliness?</li> <li>• How do individual, family and societal/community-level factors interact to increase the risk of loneliness/isolation/mental health problems? E.g. some cultures/countries are more collectivist.</li> </ul>
Psychological	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Do people who feel lonely find it harder to trust people, and is this a risk factor for mental health problems?</li> <li>• Do people with mental health problems internalise their feelings of loneliness more than those without mental health problems? Does this mediate the association of loneliness with slower recovery from depression?</li> <li>• How does low self-esteem lead to loneliness across all ages and ethnicity of people with mental health problems?</li> <li>• How does a lack of motivation to engage when amongst peers lead to loneliness?</li> <li>• What is the role of loss of control or choice in loneliness/isolation/mental health problems? Does this mediate the effect of e.g. poverty on loneliness/isolation/mental health problems?</li> <li>• What role does stigma/secrecy around mental health/fear (of failing, not improving, trying to join in and not fitting) play? Does it lead to withdrawal?</li> <li>• What role does hypervigilance to social threat, atypical (dulled) responses to social rewards and information processing biases play in (creating social environments that lead to) loneliness/isolation/mental health</li> </ul>

	<p>problems? What role does brain structure/function play in this?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What role does cognition play in in loneliness/isolation/mental health problems? E.g. self-perception/disgust, threat</li> <li>• What role does cognition play in loneliness in people with mental health problems? Are factors/pathways condition-specific or acerbated in particular conditions? E.g. trust/fear and PTSD</li> <li>• Is hypervigilance stronger in marginalized groups e.g. those with mental health problems?</li> </ul>
Aspects of loneliness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What is the relationship between duration and intensity of loneliness in relation to risk of new onset mental health problems?</li> <li>• Is the experience of loneliness different for individuals with mental health problems? E.g. chronic/'intrinsic' vs situational – what distinguishes these groups of people?</li> <li>• What are the similarities between loneliness and mental health problems? Is loneliness a side effect of mental health problems?</li> <li>• How is loneliness distinct from solitude and isolation?</li> </ul>
Is loneliness part of depression?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Do diagnostic validation studies suggest that loneliness should be considered a symptom of the syndrome of depression (and/or other mental health problems), for consideration in ICD-12?</li> </ul>
Genetic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Do genetic studies provide evidence for an evolutionary advantage of loneliness, and what factors predict the success of this evolutionary signal in redressing loneliness and reducing risk of mental health problems?</li> <li>• What role do genetic vulnerabilities play? Are these common causes of both loneliness and mental health problems?</li> </ul>
Identity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Does an erosion of social identities (for example, on transition to parenthood or a chronic sickness) increase the risk of loneliness and of mental illness?</li> <li>• How does a lack of social identity, caused by boundaries created by communities, lead to loneliness?</li> <li>• How does use of social media resulting in comparison of self to variety of people, lead to loneliness?</li> <li>• What role does identity play in the onset and course of loneliness/social isolation and mental health problems? E.g. admission to ward, loss of identity e.g. when person caring for dies it can be traumatic, admission to wards</li> <li>• What role does social identity play in loneliness/isolation/mental health problems?</li> </ul>
Help-seeking	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Does social network size decrease following the onset of depression? Is the extent of this decline associated with a reduction in help-seeking for mental health problems?</li> </ul>

Self-stigma	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How do people with loneliness and mental health problems self-stigmatise?</li> <li>• What aspects of Self-Stigma of a person with a mental health problem lead to loneliness?</li> </ul>
Stigma	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How is self-stigma influenced by the public stigma of loneliness and mental health problems? How does this vary by culture? Is there a qualitative difference between the stigma of loneliness and the stigma of mental health problems?</li> <li>• Is there a correlation between a reduction in the public stigma of loneliness and the increase in disclosure of loneliness? Does this correlation differ among people with and without mental health problems?</li> <li>• How do different cultures define loneliness? How does this influence the relative stigma of loneliness?</li> <li>• How does the stigmatisation of having a diagnosed personality disorder, by NHS staff lead to loneliness?</li> <li>• What role does stigma (perceived/actual) play in loneliness and mental health problems?</li> <li>• What is the role of (i) societal discrimination and (ii) internalized stigma (non-acceptance of self) in loneliness in people with mental health problems? Does the strength of effect vary with symptom severity?</li> </ul>
Social issues	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How do social factors such as deprivation, poverty, housing issues, and victims of crime, leading to feelings of hopelessness, cause loneliness?</li> <li>• Do demographic factors such as gender, ethnicity and age moderate the relationship between loneliness/isolation and mental health problems?</li> </ul>
Outcomes of illness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How does instability caused by mental health symptoms and multiple admissions, lead to loneliness?</li> <li>• Are some conditions more likely to lead to loneliness/isolation than others?</li> </ul>
Transition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In young people how do we differentiate loneliness from a transition period?</li> <li>• Across the stages of life, what aspects of loneliness affects people most and when?</li> <li>• How do life transitions such as grief/loss/bereavement, entering parenthood, moving to a new area/job, losing identity/sense of self/employment lead to loneliness/isolation and mental health problems? Is there a causal pathway here, what is the direction?</li> <li>• Are there transitions/changes in circumstance that particularly increase the risk of loneliness/isolation in people with mental health problems e.g. admission to hospital, loss of employment?</li> </ul>
Common factors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Are the risk factors for loneliness the same for clinical and general populations?</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Are there common factors that independently increase the risk of loneliness/isolation and mental health, rather than being on a shared causal pathway? How does each factor increase the risk of loneliness/isolation and mental health problems? E.g. substance abuse, bullying, stigma/discrimination/lack of understanding leading to avoidance, imprisonment, physical health problems/disability, deprivation (access to suitable housing, employment), sociopolitical/cultural context, inability to communicate feelings, particular groups e.g. asylum seekers/refugees - loss of identity/status (lesser paid job)/skill/power, racism, trauma</li> <li>• What are the common underlying factors leading to in loneliness/isolation/mental health problems? E.g. victimization, being out of work/education, genetic risk.</li> </ul>
Substance misuse	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What role does substance misuse play in loneliness and mental health problems?</li> </ul>
Structural /environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What are the structural and environmental factors (e.g. sociopolitical context) leading to loneliness and mental health problems? E.g. schools, luxury flats in London whose inhabitants feel lonely, fragmentation of society, pace of the modern world</li> <li>• Does the relationship between isolation/loneliness and mental ill-health, and the underlying factors, differ between rural and urban populations?</li> <li>• What role does the built environment play in loneliness/isolation and mental health? E.g. access to safe social spaces, green spaces, spaces to allow people to take time for themselves. Does the degree of agency associated with the built environment have an impact (co-production, choice about where to live)?</li> <li>• What aspects of the built environment can contribute to in loneliness/isolation/mental health problems? E.g. intentional design, lack of privacy/inappropriate communal spaces, lack of access to transport links/communal facilities/nature</li> </ul>
Lack of skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Are mental health problems and loneliness associated with lack of [e.g. social/communication] skills i.e. not feeling equipped to face the world? Or inability to articulate feelings?</li> </ul>
Bullying	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• (How) does bullying (associated with mental health problems?) lead to loneliness and mental health problems (in particular in schools and prisons)?</li> </ul>
Technology	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What role does technology play in increasing the risk of loneliness/isolation in individuals with mental health problems? E.g. shopping online/electronic checkouts reduces human interaction, social media. Or does technology help?</li> </ul>

Early relationships /experiences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What is the impact of early relationships on loneliness/isolation/mental health problems? E.g. family dynamics, growing up in care, lack of parent presence/care, bullying, violence/trauma</li> <li>• What role do early experiences (e.g. in the family) play in loneliness/isolation/mental health problems?</li> <li>• Do factors like introverted families, not talking about inner experiences and associated rumination and catastrophising/feeling of being different /inability to relate to others play a role in loneliness/isolation/mental health problems?</li> <li>• What role do early experiences play in loneliness/isolation in people with mental health problems?</li> </ul>
Disabilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What impact do physical/sensory disabilities have on loneliness/isolation/mental health problems?</li> </ul>
Barriers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In what ways can loneliness be a barrier to recovery? E.g. lack of support, lack of agency, avoidance, obsessing, (perceived) stigma and lack of understanding</li> <li>• What are the barriers to people with mental health problems joining in social events? E.g. time required to deal with condition takes time away from socializing, symptoms/changes in behavior, cognitive biases, not feeling understood and withdrawal, avoidance by others, stress of having mental health problem can prevent people socializing</li> </ul>
Associations between loneliness, social isolation and mental health problems	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Are individuals still at risk of mental health problems when they are no longer lonely? (and vice versa)</li> <li>• Is social isolation more closely related to loneliness in clinical populations?</li> <li>• Does degree of isolation depend on symptom severity and type of diagnosis?</li> </ul>
Experience of loneliness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What is the physiology/somatic experience of loneliness? Does this differ from the somatic sense of mental health conditions such as anxiety and depression?</li> </ul>