

## Mapping the Pathways – Considerations for Research into Loneliness, Social Isolation and Mental Health.

Presentation by Bev Chipp July 19<sup>th</sup> 2019

I have been doing a lot of thinking, reflecting on my own experiences and those of people I know and have come up with a few ideas you can try out for size. I think that in terms of future research we have to go backwards a bit in order to go forward.

We are talking about pathways, but **maybe there is a common root rather than a route from one to the other?** So, let me tell you a little about my own common roots.

### **1. Early Experiences as a seed for both loneliness and mental health**

Back in the days when many of you here were still twinkles out there, searching for an interesting couple to incarnate through, I was growing up around a black and white TV in a boring village.

I am going to suggest that it isn't necessarily that mental ill health leads to loneliness or that loneliness leads to mental ill health but perhaps they share roots?

There was a common exchange in our house that went something like this.

“Mum, Can I watch The Goodies?”

“NO! WE paid for this TV, so WE decide what we'll watch!

It was the only screen in the house (unlike today) and the main source of entertainment, so that denial had a much bigger implication than it would do now.

This dialogue was repeated so often that it had consequences:

Feeling like your preferences aren't important.

Your happiness isn't important.

Your parents don't care about you, and

Setting up an US v. YOU dynamic.

So on the one hand, you have this:

- **Othering** > leads to feelings of apartness/exclusion > then seeding Loneliness.

On the other hand

- **The Invalidation** > Feeling “I don't matter” > Seeding low self-esteem > and Depression

The circumstances have led to both a mental health issue and to loneliness.

We have killed 2 birds with one stone.

### **2. Another Common Cause – It could be Personality Traits**

Introversion is not celebrated in our society. It doesn't help you win friends and influence people.

I was a shy child. They say shyness is nice. But as you know, shyness can stop you from doing all the things in life you'd like to! Being too shy to join in with other kids

playing games, or go to parties, or speak to anyone if you do, or have to go home early because it is all too frightening... Not being one of the popular kids. Being an introverted adult.

- **Feeling a failure** >Negative rumination and thought patterns> leading to Depression.

plus

- **Actual diminished social life** > progressing to relative social isolation > and then Loneliness.

So that is 2 ways that there may be a concurrent development rather than one before the other.

1. Common early experiences and 2. simply Character traits.

And here's another.

### **3. Life events**

An incident that leaves someone with post-traumatic stress disorder, say, gang rape, or maybe being home during an aggravated burglary, could also be the start of them not being able to trust people. They withdraw and start being fearful of going out. The PTSD and the isolation could even start on the same day.

### **Can we map pathways?**

So now if we go back to thinking of it as a pathway: If there *are* pathways from Mental ill health to loneliness, because each diagnosis manifests differently as a human experience and behaviours, there will be different starting points. Starting the journey from different conditions means that mapping a pathway may need to be condition specific.

Loneliness and social isolation are different things, and I personally think there really is a strong case for developing new tools that measure each distinctly.

We know that you can have one without the other. So which is more harmful? Social isolation or loneliness?

Do we need to be studying people who have just one of these to compare them, rather than both?

If we are conducting longitudinal studies, which seems necessary to map the effects on health, how do we factor in the changes in circumstances over the years?

### **What do we even mean by loneliness?**

The feeling of loneliness.

We talk about it as if it were one thing, but we need to scrutinise this. What is a feeling of loneliness *from*? We need to look in both directions. Not just at the persons inner feelings, but back out into the world and ask “What do they feel they are apart from?”

What do they perceive as being missing from their lives? An intimate partner? A social life? A place they feel they belong? Purpose and direction? The absence of something or someone they once had? Or Something that they feel has always eluded them?

Is there even a difference between people who want something which is realistic, and those who pine for the impossible?

### **Is there both dynamic loneliness and passive loneliness?**

The desperately seeking versus the self isolating?

Being too eager to be someone's friend generally makes them back off and view you with suspicion, if not irritation. But if you have a defeatist, self denigrating and self isolating kind of loneliness then you are equally unlikely to form positive connections with people.

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Perhaps grouping people by their **types of loneliness** would help?

Should we develop a modern taxonomy of loneliness? One which is lay friendly, not pathologising, and considers the dystopian elements of society, rather than just blaming it all on the individual?

**If Loneliness is not one thing, then what are we mapping?** To devise a pathway from A to B you need to have a pair of single coordinates. We may have neither – just some frayed ends with common elements between.

I'd like you to do something for me now. Just close your eyes for a moment and summon up a feeling of loneliness.

Feel that feeling

Now where in your body does that feeling live? What shape is it? Does it move?

You might like to try this at home in a better environment.

Does that tell you anything? If we can set aside our our Western scientific mindset and relate what you just experienced to the corresponding chakra system, or maybe the Eastern acupuncture meridians, does that reveal any more when we know where it lives?

So just to finish up I'd like to keep another aspect on the agenda.

Dr Bound Alberti at our last event spoke about **the Embodiment of loneliness**.

Since then I found myself in a new thing called “Dance for Joy” at St Pancras Hospital It is a series of guided movements to music, on your own, in pairs, in threes, in a circle. There is a ‘no speaking’ rule, but it involves different types of connection to and being with people, and involves some eye contact, gestures of gratitude and breathing.

I didn't know any of the people, I didn't speak to anyone because no one was allowed to speak but I came away feeling uplifted, relaxed and connected, but to no one in

particular. It resolved any feeling of loneliness. And this feeling persisted for the next couple of days. It was not just being with people because I am with people often, so there is something there in the movement, and in the consciousness of our body as a means of expression. Perhaps a reunification of mind, body and spirit? And to what extent is the fragmentation of these 3 responsible for our feelings of loneliness? I'll leave that with you.

If anyone wants to try it, it is every Monday from 2.30-3.30 in The Well at St Pancras hospital and it is free.