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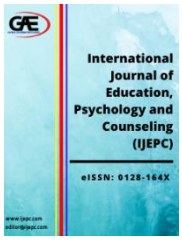

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UNRAVELING THE IMPACT OF LONELINESS ON BRAIN AND EMOTION: EXPLORING PATHWAYS FOR MEANINGFUL INTERVENTIONS

Alya Qistina Norshamsul Azmi[1], Nurfahirah Irdina Ahmad Razif[2], Nur Amirah Husna Ahmad[3], Nor Wadiah Zulkifli[4], Nur Qistina Zahirah Amran[5], Che Mohd Nasril Che Mohd Nassir[6], Mohamed Ayaaz Ahmed[7], Rahmah Ahmad Osman[8], Huriyyah Hamiemah Md Tajudin[9], Usman Jaffer[10*]

[1] AbdulHamid AbuSulayman Kulliyyah of Islamic Revealed Knowledge and Human Sciences, International Islamic University Malaysia, 50728 Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
Email: a.qistinaazmi@live.iium.edu.my
[2] AbdulHamid AbuSulayman Kulliyyah of Islamic Revealed Knowledge and Human Sciences, International Islamic University Malaysia, 50728 Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
Email: nurfahirah.i@live.iium.edu.my
[3] AbdulHamid AbuSulayman Kulliyyah of Islamic Revealed Knowledge and Human Sciences, International Islamic University Malaysia, 50728 Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
Email: amirahhusna.ahmad@live.iium.edu.my
[4] AbdulHamid AbuSulayman Kulliyyah of Islamic Revealed Knowledge and Human Sciences, International Islamic University Malaysia, 50728 Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
Email: nw.zulkifli@live.iium.edu.my
[5] AbdulHamid AbuSulayman Kulliyyah of Islamic Revealed Knowledge and Human Sciences, International Islamic University Malaysia, 50728 Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
Email: qistina.zahirah@live.iium.edu.my
[6] Department of Anatomy and Physiology, School of Basic Medical Sciences, Faculty of Medicine, Universiti Sultan Zainal Abidin (UniSZA), 20400 Kuala Terengganu, Terengganu, Malaysia
Email: nasrilnassir@unisza.edu.my
[7] Southern Ambition 473 CC, 7764, Cape Town, South Africa
Email: ayaaz@reamz.co.za
[8] AbdulHamid AbuSulayman Kulliyyah of Islamic Revealed Knowledge and Human Sciences, International Islamic University Malaysia, 50728 Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
Email: rahmahao@iium.edu.my
[9] AbdulHamid AbuSulayman Kulliyyah of Islamic Revealed Knowledge and Human Sciences, International Islamic University Malaysia, 50728 Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
Email: huriyyahamiemah02@gmail.com
[10] AbdulHamid AbuSulayman Kulliyyah of Islamic Revealed Knowledge and Human Sciences, International Islamic University Malaysia, 50728 Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
Email: jafferu@iium.edu.my
* Corresponding Author

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Abstract:

This paper aims to understand and explore the complex connections between loneliness, brain functions, the emotional regulations, along with the effects of loneliness on the brain and emotions. Besides, this study is addressing its implications for mental health and potential intervention strategies. The definition of loneliness is concluded as a subjective experience of social isolation, which has profound effects on the neural processes and impaired social cognition. Key findings of this paper have highlighted the role of stress-related neuropeptides and decreased activity in emotional processing regions such as the amygdala and impaired social cognition. This paper also reviews and examines potential interventions including mindfulness practices, social cognitive training, and community training that showed promising effects on mitigating loneliness. It is further explained by the integration of physiological psychology along with Islamic perspectives to emphasize the spiritual practices, feeling of gratitude, and social bonds in fostering emotional resilience for individuals. This study emphasizes the importance of holistic approaches to convey loneliness of individuals and even at the societal levels as well as offering such valuable implications for mental health practitioners.

Keywords:

Loneliness, Brain Functions, Emotions, Neural Processes

Introduction

Human beings in socializing are complex in nature and the complexity led to advancement of prefrontal brain functioning and specialization. Not only that, other cortical and subcortical structures are also involved in the processing of social stimuli. This is because social information enables activations of neural circuits that connect cortical and subcortical regions, including those to be involved in emotional processes, such as amygdala and involved in the cognitive processes of stimuli like temporo-occipital junction and the medial prefrontal cortex (Adenzato & Enrici, 2005; Van Overwalle, 2009).

Human beings are social animals, who live as intricate social networks and complex social cognition. As complex creatures, we can suffer through acute stress from perceived social isolation which is commonly referred to as loneliness (Finley & Schaefer, 2022). Loneliness defined by Perlman and Peplau (1981), is a negative affective state described as dissatisfaction along with the discrepancy between someone's actual and expected quality and quantity of social connections. Additionally, Weiss (1973) was the first author able to distinguish the difference between the meanings of social and emotional loneliness. Emotional loneliness refers to the perceived absence of close relationships, while social loneliness refers to the perceived absence of an available (quantity) and acceptable (quality) social network. Social relationships are commonly known as critical for an individual's health and well-being or for survival, knowing that humans are social animals. Thus, good social behaviors are valued and motivating, while social isolation is aversive and stressful for our own good. It is recognized widely that the loneliness issues worsen by the accumulated negative emotions regarding social relationship and emotions, which later causes the individuals to withdraw from social networking (Cacioppo et al., 2015).

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The relevance and importance of loneliness as a topic of study lies in its complex interplay with neural and emotional processes, which is further explained and explored in this paper. Loneliness is highly associated with an increase of inflammation and neural changes leading to increased sensitivity to social threat and disrupted emotion regulation which is highly related to social behavior and cognitive control (Finley & Schaefer, 2022). Lonely individuals show decreased MRI activity in brain regions, which is significant for emotional processes, such as the amygdala and nucleus accumbens (Lieberz et al., 2021). Siegel (2001) stated "human connections shape neural connections, and each contributes to mind. Relationships and neural linkages together shape the mind. It is more than the sum of its parts; this is the essence of emergence" which emphasizes how neural networks appear strongly influenced by relations with others, beyond genetic influences. The statement is supported by the process happening in the brain. Stress-related neuropeptides such as glucocorticoids and corticotropin releasing hormones are increased during social isolation, leading to negative emotions, anxiety and depressive-like behaviors and altering sociality in various ways (Vitale & Smith, 2022).

This paper aims to understand and explore the impacts of loneliness and its pathways in the brains and emotional regulations, which is focusing on the key mechanisms such as altered neural connectivity and impaired emotional resilience. The purpose of analyzing past literature is to seek and contextualize the importance of these findings towards the broader framework of physiological psychology and later, to explore and identify the significant potential intervention strategies. The past literature enables understanding of neural and emotional processes of loneliness, which is essential for developing appropriate interventions and promoting psychological well-being. Therefore, this exploration of this study will carry insight into the ways loneliness can be addressed to the individuals, or even to societal levels and provide meaningful as well as impactful solutions.

This study explores the impact of loneliness on the brain and emotion, and also examines the possible interventions to curb loneliness. By addressing these impacts and interventions, the research contributes to the broader knowledge of loneliness from a theoretical and practical perspective particularly in the context of mental health and emotional well-being. The findings offer valuable insights on the relationship between loneliness, brain function and emotional regulation, as well as ways to effectively address the emotional and neurological consequences of loneliness. With this understanding, it also can assist mental health practitioners in enabling them to design approaches to better support individuals experiencing loneliness.

Additionally, the study provides practical evidence for policy makers and community leaders to implement suitable initiatives that could be useful to reduce loneliness such as social programs and technological tools. These insights aim to foster social bonds and create a supportive environment to promote emotional well-being and mental health.

Methodology

This review underwent a comprehensive and structured search strategy utilizing academic research databases to ensure relevant compilation of literatures. The academic search engines used included Google Scholar, Frontiers and Oxford Academic. While searching for relevant papers, Boolean operators (AND, OR) were employed to establish a targeted field of interest. The keywords inserted included, "loneliness," "social isolation," "affective neuroscience" and "social isolation on emotion" which were related to the effects of loneliness and social isolation on neuropsychological mechanisms.

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Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

All papers included in this review were research papers with original findings and systematic review papers published from December 2020 to December 2024. Additionally, the review consisted of studies on both animal models and human participants to form an in-depth understanding on the neuropsychological effects of isolation. To avoid misinterpretation, papers using non-English language and with no full-text access were omitted from the review. Similarly, dissertation, theses and unpublished work were excluded from the review.

Data Extraction

A standardized form was developed to extract relevant information from each paper. The information, including author(s), significance of study, research findings as well as limitations and future direction was then synthesized into a meaningful discussion.

Findings

Loneliness

Loneliness has become increasingly recognised as a major public health issue, with growing evidence demonstrating its impact on emotional well-being, cognitive functioning, and brain health. Contemporary research continues to define loneliness as a subjective and distressing experience, arising from a perceived mismatch between desired and actual social relationships. This distinction is critical, as loneliness is not synonymous with social isolation; individuals may be socially connected yet still experience profound loneliness.

Recent conceptualisations describe loneliness as a relational and enduring psychological state, rather than a transient mood. Seemann (2022) characterised loneliness as a recurring emotional condition with cognitive and behavioural consequences, comparable to persistent affective states such as sadness. More recent work has reinforced this view, suggesting that loneliness involves maladaptive social expectations and heightened sensitivity to perceived social threat (Buecker & Horstmann, 2024).

It is also important to differentiate between subjective loneliness and objective social isolation. While objective isolation refers to limited social contact, subjective loneliness reflects the emotional appraisal of social relationships. Roberts and Krueger (2020) initially highlighted this distinction, and newer population-level analyses have confirmed that subjective loneliness is a stronger predictor of poor mental health outcomes than objective isolation alone (Office for National Statistics [ONS], 2024).

Intervention research has increasingly focused on psychological mechanisms underlying loneliness. Mindfulness-based interventions (MBIs) continue to show promise in reducing loneliness by improving emotional awareness and reducing maladaptive rumination. A recent systematic review found that MBIs delivered over 6–8 weeks were associated with moderate reductions in loneliness across non-clinical adult populations, particularly when interventions targeted self-compassion and social awareness (Teoh et al., 2021; Zhang et al., 2024).

Neuroscientific models further suggest that loneliness alters social information processing. Within a cognitive control framework, loneliness has been shown to bias attention towards negative social cues and perceived rejection, thereby reinforcing emotional distress and social withdrawal (Finley & Schaefer, 2022; Lieberz et al., 2024). These findings suggest that

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loneliness is maintained not only by social circumstances, but also by altered cognitive and emotional regulation processes.

Neuroscience and Emotional Well-Being

Emerging neuroscientific evidence highlights the profound impact of loneliness on both brain structure and emotional regulation. Loneliness is now recognised as a significant risk factor for depression, anxiety, and chronic stress, with effects comparable in magnitude to established psychosocial risk factors. Conversely, adaptive social functioning appears to buffer against these adverse outcomes (Holt-Lunstad, 2023).

Neuroimaging studies conducted over the past two years have demonstrated that loneliness is associated with alterations in white matter integrity, particularly in neural pathways involved in emotion regulation and executive functioning. Franco-O'Byrne et al. (2023) reported that individuals experiencing persistent loneliness showed reduced integrity in fronto-limbic tracts, which are critical for emotional control and cognitive flexibility. These findings are consistent with earlier work, but newer studies have strengthened the causal link between loneliness, depressive symptoms, and neuroanatomical change (Lieberz et al., 2024).

Loneliness has also been linked to functional changes in brain activity. Recent evidence indicates increased activation of the amygdala and insula, regions associated with threat detection and negative affect, alongside reduced activation in the ventromedial prefrontal cortex, which plays a key role in emotional regulation and reward processing (Luo & Shao, 2023; Lam et al., 2024). These neural patterns may help explain why lonely individuals experience heightened emotional reactivity and difficulty regulating negative emotions.

At a structural level, chronic loneliness has been associated with reduced neural plasticity, including decreased dendritic complexity in emotion-related brain regions. Vitale and Smith (2022) initially documented these changes, and more recent longitudinal evidence suggests that prolonged loneliness may accelerate age-related cognitive decline by compromising neural resilience (Yin et al., 2024).

Cognitively, loneliness affects social perception and emotional regulation. Lonely individuals demonstrate heightened stress responses, impaired emotion regulation, and altered attention to social stimuli, often interpreting ambiguous social cues as negative or rejecting (Finley & Schaefer, 2022; Lieberz et al., 2024). These findings support a bidirectional model in which loneliness both contributes to and is exacerbated by emotional dysregulation.

Interventions for Loneliness

A growing body of research has examined interventions aimed at reducing loneliness, with varying degrees of effectiveness. Current approaches typically fall into three broad categories: psychological interventions, social skill and cognitive training, and community-based social programmes. Among these, interventions that target maladaptive social cognition appear to produce more sustained benefits than those focused solely on increasing social contact (Buecker et al., 2024).

Mindfulness-based interventions continue to demonstrate efficacy, particularly when they address emotional regulation and self-compassion. Recent meta-analyses indicate that MBIs reduce loneliness by helping individuals disengage from negative self-referential thinking and

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improve awareness of social experiences (Zhang et al., 2024). However, effect sizes tend to diminish over time, highlighting the need for ongoing or integrated support.

Community-level interventions, including group-based educational and social activities, have shown positive outcomes for older adults and other vulnerable populations. UK-based evidence suggests that structured social prescribing programmes can reduce loneliness and improve emotional well-being when participation is sustained and tailored to individual needs (Holt-Lunstad, 2023; ONS, 2024). Nevertheless, the long-term effectiveness of these interventions remains inconsistent.

Significant research gaps persist. Much of the existing literature relies on cross-sectional designs and self-report measures, limiting causal inference and the ability to capture the multidimensional nature of loneliness. Recent authors have emphasised the need for longitudinal, mixed-methods research that integrates neurobiological, psychological, and social data (Lieberz et al., 2024; Yin et al., 2024). There is also limited evidence regarding which intervention components are most effective across different populations, underscoring the need for more targeted and theory-driven approaches.

Discussion

Conceptualising Loneliness as a Multidimensional Experience

The present discussion builds upon the findings by reinforcing the understanding of loneliness as a complex, multidimensional experience that extends beyond mere physical isolation. Loneliness emerges when individuals perceive a mismatch between desired and actual social or emotional connections, and it can persist even in the presence of others. This subjective experience is often accompanied by feelings of emptiness, sadness, and emotional disconnection, and affects individuals across age groups, cultures, and social contexts.

Consistent with recent empirical work, loneliness is increasingly recognised as a significant public health concern due to its associations with poor mental health, cognitive decline, and increased morbidity (Holt-Lunstad, 2023; Office for National Statistics [ONS], 2024). Despite its prevalence, loneliness remains under-recognised and under-treated, particularly when compared to other mental health conditions. The findings of this review support the growing consensus that loneliness should be conceptualised as a chronic psychosocial stressor with substantial emotional and neurobiological consequences.

Neurobiological Mechanisms Linking Loneliness and Emotional Well-Being

The findings demonstrate that loneliness is underpinned by identifiable neurobiological mechanisms that influence emotional regulation and social behaviour. Social interaction is inherently rewarding and is mediated by activation of the brain's reward circuitry, including dopaminergic pathways originating in the ventral tegmental area and projecting to the nucleus accumbens and prefrontal cortex. These pathways, alongside neuropeptides such as oxytocin and vasopressin, reinforce social bonding and emotional closeness (Vitale & Smith, 2022; Lieberz et al., 2024).

When social needs are unmet, this reward system becomes dysregulated, contributing to the distressing experience of loneliness. Neuroimaging evidence from recent studies indicates that loneliness is associated with heightened activity in limbic regions such as the amygdala and

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hippocampus, which are involved in threat detection and stress responsivity, alongside reduced regulatory control from prefrontal regions (Lam et al., 2024; Luo & Shao, 2023). This imbalance may explain why lonely individuals exhibit hypervigilance to social threat, heightened emotional reactivity, and difficulties in regulating negative affect.

Furthermore, loneliness has been linked to altered functional connectivity within and between large-scale brain networks, particularly the salience and frontoparietal networks. Increased connectivity within salience-related regions may contribute to excessive monitoring of social cues, reinforcing perceptions of rejection and exclusion (Lieberz et al., 2024). These neural alterations provide a plausible mechanism through which loneliness becomes self-maintaining, perpetuating emotional distress and social withdrawal.

Loneliness, Cognitive Control, And Accelerated Brain Ageing

Beyond emotional regulation, loneliness appears to exert detrimental effects on cognitive functioning and brain health. The findings support previous evidence that loneliness is associated with impairments in cognitive control, attention, and social cognition. Lonely individuals tend to interpret ambiguous social information more negatively, further reinforcing maladaptive social expectations (Finley & Schaefer, 2022; Buecker & Horstmann, 2024).

Importantly, recent longitudinal neuroimaging research has identified loneliness as a potential contributor to accelerated brain ageing. Structural MRI studies suggest that individuals experiencing chronic loneliness show greater discrepancies between chronological age and estimated brain age, indicating reduced neural resilience (Yin et al., 2024). This accelerated ageing may partially explain the observed associations between loneliness, cognitive decline, and increased risk of neurodegenerative conditions. These findings underscore the importance of early intervention to mitigate the long-term cognitive and neurological consequences of persistent loneliness.

Effectiveness Of Psychological and Social Interventions

The discussion of interventions highlights that approaches targeting maladaptive social cognition are generally more effective than those focused solely on increasing social contact. Psychological interventions, particularly cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT), have demonstrated consistent efficacy in reducing loneliness by addressing negative self-beliefs, rejection sensitivity, and distorted social expectations (Buecker et al., 2024).

Recent clinical trials have shown that internet-based CBT (ICBT) is effective in reducing loneliness, depressive symptoms, and associated physiological markers such as elevated blood pressure, especially among older adults and individuals with chronic health conditions (Morr et al., 2022; Zhang et al., 2024). Compared to internet-based interpersonal psychotherapy, ICBT appears to produce greater and more sustained reductions in loneliness, suggesting that cognitive restructuring plays a central role in alleviating loneliness-related distress.

Community-based interventions and social prescribing initiatives have also gained attention in the UK context. Evidence from national surveys indicates that structured group activities, volunteering, and community engagement programmes can reduce loneliness when they are sustained and tailored to individual needs (ONS, 2024). However, the long-term effectiveness of these interventions remains variable, highlighting the need for integrated, multimodal approaches that combine psychological, social, and behavioural strategies.

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Integrating Islamic Perspectives with Psychological and Neuroscientific Findings

Integrating Islamic perspectives into the discussion of loneliness offers a holistic framework that complements contemporary psychological and neuroscientific findings. From an Islamic viewpoint, emotional well-being is closely linked to spiritual balance, social connectedness, and purposeful living. These principles align closely with evidence-based mechanisms identified in loneliness research.

Spiritual practices such as *dhikr* (remembrance of God) have been associated with emotional calmness and psychological resilience. Emerging research suggests that contemplative and mindfulness-based practices can reduce amygdala hyperactivity and strengthen prefrontal regulatory control, thereby improving emotional regulation (Winda, 2023; Zhang et al., 2024). This aligns with neuroscientific findings that mindfulness-based interventions reduce loneliness by targeting maladaptive emotional and cognitive processes.

Islamic teachings also emphasise gratitude, compassion, and positive social engagement, all of which are associated with neuroplasticity and improved emotional health. Acts of kindness and community involvement have been shown to enhance dopaminergic and serotonergic activity, fostering positive affect and reducing perceived social isolation (Holt-Lunstad, 2023). These mechanisms mirror the neurobiological pathways implicated in loneliness and social reward.

Moreover, the emphasis on brotherhood, social responsibility, and communal support within Islamic teachings reinforces the protective role of social connection. Strong interpersonal bonds facilitate oxytocin release, promoting trust and emotional security, and mitigating the stress-related neural effects of loneliness (Lieberz et al., 2024). Integrating these spiritual and social principles into intervention frameworks may enhance their cultural relevance and effectiveness, particularly within Muslim communities.

Implications for Future Research and Practice

Despite growing evidence, significant gaps remain in the literature. Much of the existing research relies on cross-sectional designs and self-report measures, limiting causal inference and ecological validity. There is a pressing need for longitudinal and mixed-methods studies that integrate neuroimaging, behavioural, and qualitative data to capture the complexity of loneliness over time (Yin et al., 2024).

Future interventions should adopt integrative approaches that address cognitive, emotional, social, and spiritual dimensions of loneliness. Incorporating culturally informed frameworks, including religious and spiritual practices, may offer more comprehensive and sustainable solutions. Such approaches could enhance engagement, acceptability, and long-term effectiveness across diverse populations.

Conclusion

In conclusion, loneliness represents a pervasive and multifaceted phenomenon characterised by a perceived deficiency in meaningful social and emotional connections. The evidence discussed highlights that loneliness is not only a psychological experience but also a condition with measurable neurobiological and cognitive consequences, including emotional dysregulation, altered brain connectivity, and accelerated brain ageing. Understanding these underlying mechanisms is essential for developing effective, targeted interventions. Integrating psychological, neuroscientific, and Islamic perspectives provides a more holistic understanding

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of loneliness and offers valuable insights for promoting emotional well-being and social connectedness in contemporary society.

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