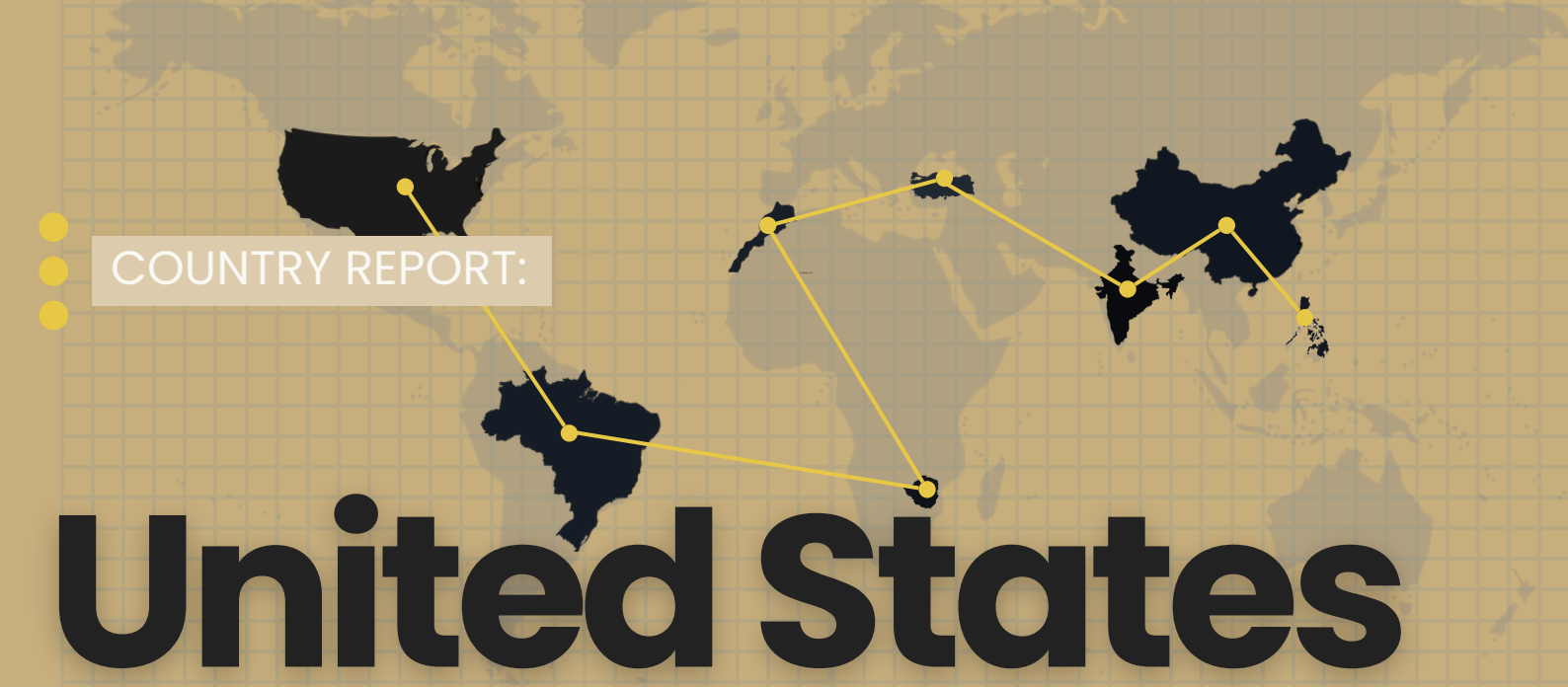




COUNTRY REPORT:

United States



Chosen
Families and
Belonging in
America

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Annecy Behavioral Science Lab

Templeton World Charity Foundation
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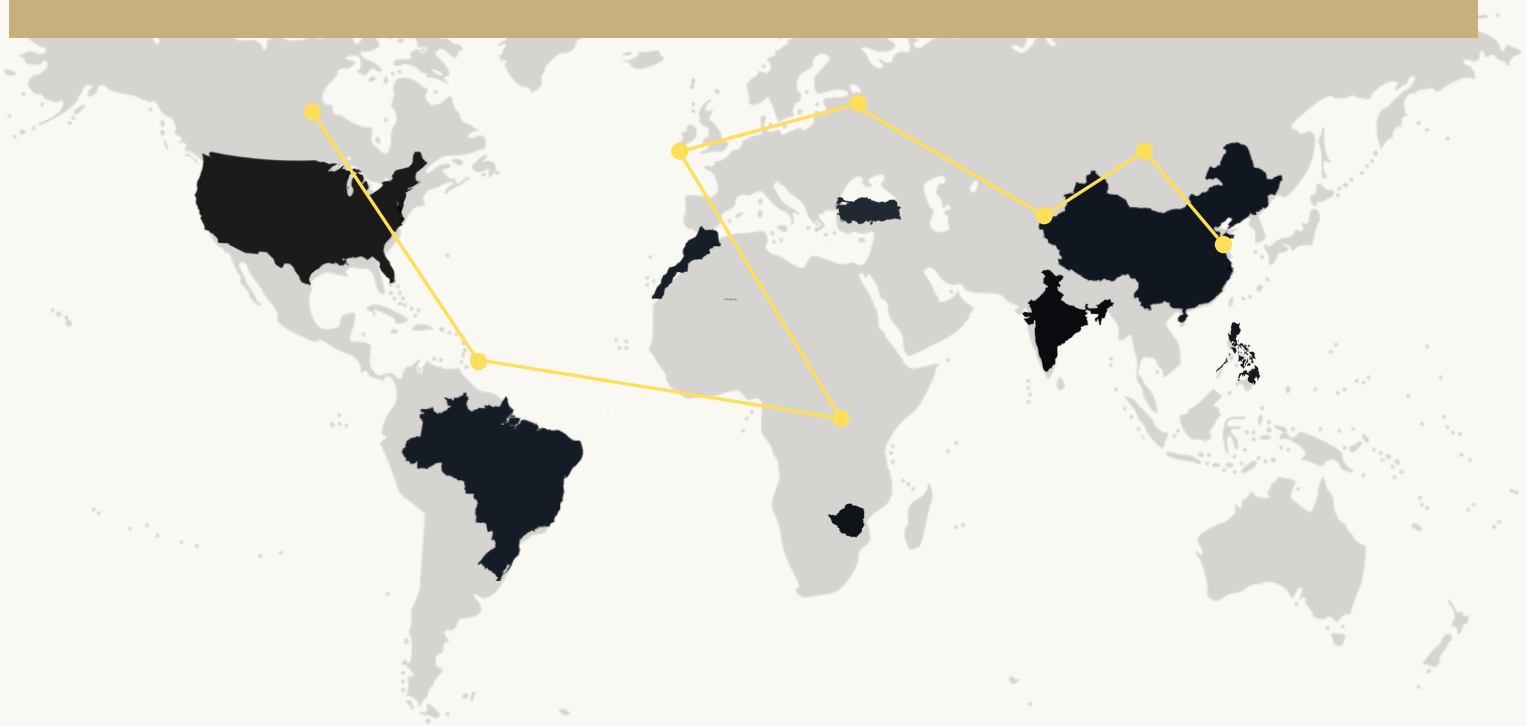


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A Multi-Country Investigation into the Conceptualization and Experience of Social Connection, Social Isolation, and Loneliness

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1. Summary Report

“It feels like my heart is being, like, wrapped, you know? Like someone’s like, kind of holding it, it’s like a warm feeling...”

– participant from the United States on belonging





Introduction

This report presents findings from a multi-country qualitative study examining how people across diverse cultural settings conceptualize and experience social connection, belonging, disconnection, and loneliness. The project engages with eight countries: Brazil, China, India, Morocco, the Philippines, Turkey, the United States, and Zimbabwe.

The goal is to provide actionable insights for monitoring and intervention for policymakers, practitioners, and researchers by highlighting both universal and culture-specific dimensions of social connection, disconnection and loneliness.

In the United States, individualism shapes social life, but participants highlighted the importance of chosen families, friendships, and digital networks as vital sources of belonging.

Methodology

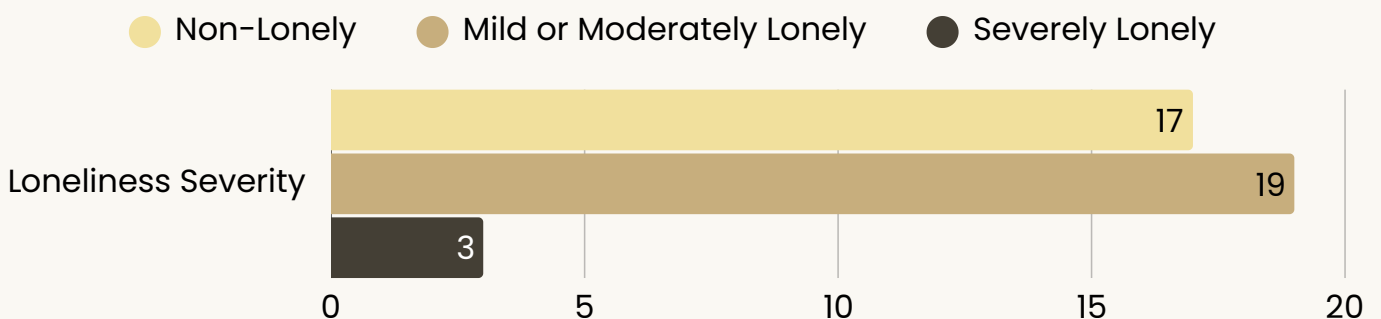
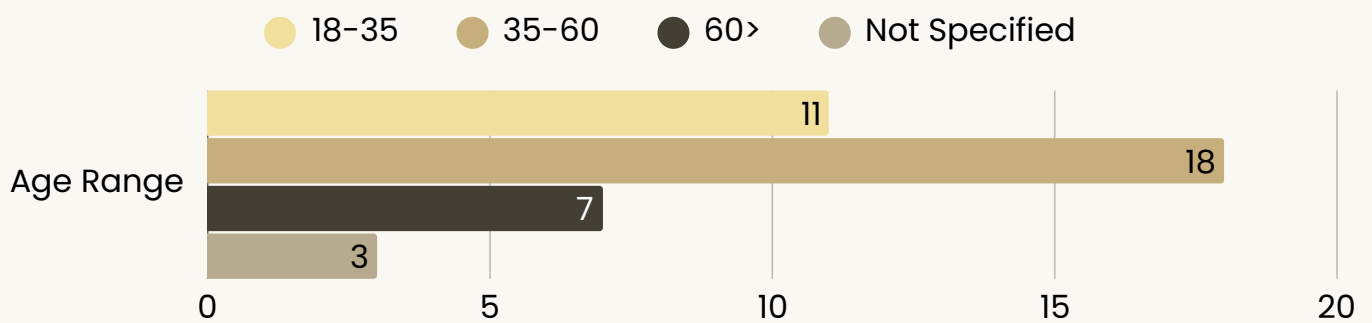
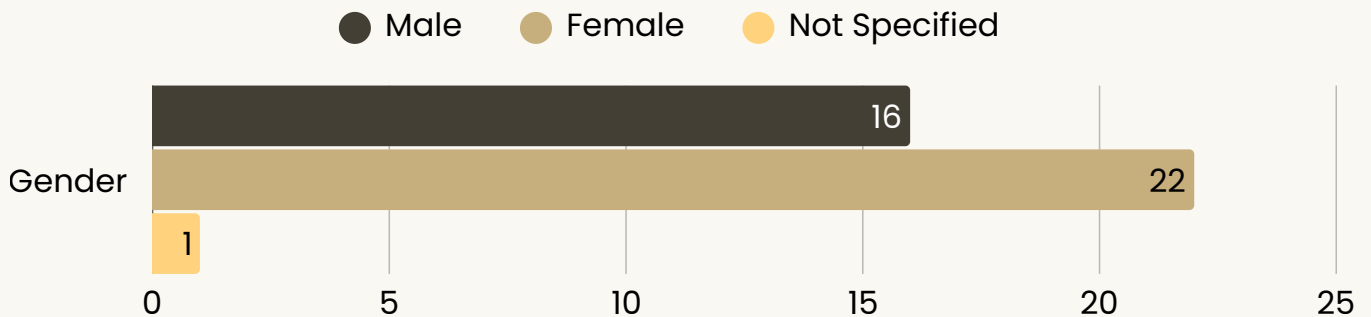
The study employed a stratified sampling design and recruited 354 participants aged 18 and older across eight countries. Stratification included age, gender, income, partnership status, loneliness severity, urban/rural residence, and region. Recruitment followed a drift sampling strategy, combining targeted outreach with participant referrals.

Semi-structured interviews (2–3 hours each) explored the individual's social map, functions of their social connections, definition and experiences of social connection, belonging, disconnection, and loneliness. The interview included a meta-cognitive portion where individuals reflected on how and why they have provided the answers that they have given. Data were then transcribed, translated into English, and de-identified. Country teams conducted inductive coding before iteratively synthesizing results into a shared framework. Thematic coding was supported by qualitative analysis tools (Quirkos, NVivo, Google Sheets).

Sample Demographics Overview

Participant Profile Summary

 Total Sample: 39



*Loneliness severity was determined during sampling using a single item from the Centre for Epidemiological Studies Depression scale (CES-D): "During the past week, have you felt lonely?" Responses were categorized as: Non-lonely: ≤1 day, Mild/Moderate: 1-4 days, Severe: 5-7 days.

Summary of Select Findings

Key Social Categories

In the United States, social life is shaped by family, friends, and intimate partnerships, but also by work, online networks, and community organizations. Family remains a core anchor, yet many participants emphasized the importance of friendships as chosen support systems. Digital technologies play a significant role, enabling both connection and disconnection.

Challenges and Quality of Connection

Connection in the US is often challenged by mobility, individualism, and work demands. Participants described geographic distance from family, busy schedules that limit time for friends, and a cultural expectation of self-reliance that can leave emotional needs unmet. While networks are broad, they can feel shallow or transactional.

Definitions of Connection and Belonging

Belonging in the US was often described in terms of authenticity and acceptance—being valued for who you truly are. For many, belonging was tied to identity-based groups, such as LGBTQ+ communities, faith

groups, or cultural organizations. Emotional honesty and reciprocity were cited as essential for genuine connection.

Cultural Specificity

American participants highlighted the double edge of individualism: it grants freedom to form diverse networks but often weakens long-term obligations. Mobility and digitalization mean people are connected to many but deeply tied to few. Belonging is often reconstructed through identity-based communities that offer stability where family or neighborhood ties fall short.

Disconnection and Loneliness

Loneliness in the US is often framed as invisibility—feeling unnoticed or unsupported despite being surrounded by people. It is compounded by stigma, where loneliness is equated with personal failure. Yet many also described therapy, peer groups, and online communities as ways to manage isolation and re-establish belonging.

Summary of Select Findings

Implications

Social connection assessment in the US would benefit from going beyond household or family ties to capture chosen families, identity-based groups, and digital connections. Tools should also reflect the ambivalence of American individualism—connection as a choice, but often at the cost of stability. Policy interventions should normalize conversations about loneliness and strengthen access to community-based and therapeutic supports.



Summary of Research Questions

This study was guided by a shared analytic framework and research questions* across eight participating countries:

SOCIAL MAPPING

- What are common social categories among the target population?
- What are common challenges/burdens of social connection among the target population?

SOCIAL CONNECTION

- Definition of social connection: how does the target population define social connection?
- Characteristics of a good (and deficient) social connection: what makes for a good social connection for the target population?
- Definition of belonging: what is belonging for the target population?
- What are culture specific aspects of social connection among the target population?
- What else does the target population feel connected to?

DISCONNECTION AND LONELINESS

- Experiences of disconnection: What are the experiences of disconnection among the target population?
- Definition of disconnection: How do the target population define disconnection?
- Experiences of loneliness: What are the experiences of loneliness among the target population?
- What is the physiology of loneliness among the target population?
- What are the effects of loneliness among the target population?
- How does the target population cope with loneliness?
- What factors affects loneliness for the target population?
- Definition of loneliness: How do the target population define and explain loneliness?

Summary of Research Questions

DISCONNECTION AND LONELINESS (*continued*)

- How are lonely individuals perceived among the target population?
- Why is loneliness difficult to be spoken about among the target population?
- What are culture specific aspects of loneliness among the target population?

META-COGNITION

- What are the response processes to leading to the participants answering their last instance of loneliness
- What are the response processes to leading to the participants answering what loneliness is for them
- What are the response processes to leading to the participants answering what makes for a good social connection for them
- What are the response processes leading to the participant answering the scale item of “I feel lonely” from 0-100

Summary of Project Resources



Project OSF

This project's materials are openly available on the Open Science Framework (OSF) at <https://osf.io/p3msu>, to ensure transparency, and accessibility.

- **Interview Guide:** A copy of the interview guide containing the questions asked across 8 countries
- **Deidentified Transcripts:** Interview transcripts (anonymized) from all participating countries
- **Ethics:** Documentation of institutional ethics approvals, consent processes, and ethical safeguards
- **Evidence Tables:** Verbatim transcript portions and summarized information per participant across different research questions
- **Codebook:** The codebook contains the codes, provisional code definitions and transcript portion examples across different research questions
- **Country Reports:** Country reports from the analysis of within-country data in Brazil, China, India, Morocco, the Philippines, Turkey, the United States, and Zimbabwe.
- **Main Publication:** Pre-print of the publication that features the cross-country comparisons across the global project.

DOI

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2. Analysis Report

“You know, that's the only time that I ever even think about loneliness.... when I'm alone in bed at night.”

– participant from the United States on loneliness



Common social categories

Most participants make a distinction between family, friends, work colleagues (e.g., P1, P2, P3) however, community wasn't frequently mentioned.

For participants in the US, two social groups emerged as the primary sources of socialization, support, self-esteem, and satisfaction: family and friends. Family was the most central social category mentioned. Spouses, parents, children, and siblings were most frequently noted, but a smaller subset of participants also reported relationships with cousins, grandparents, aunts, uncles, and other extended family members. Family members provided instrumental, emotional, and informational social support, acting as confidants (P1, P5, P7, P18, P25) and sources of advice (P6, P15, P34, P35).

They were also common socialization partners, who participants texted with or saw daily, got together with for fun activities like movies (P16, P20, P35), and spent holidays with (P32, P33, P34). Family members were sources of self esteem for participants through their provision of affirmations (P8, P33), compliments (P4, P27) and demonstrations of care (P18, P25). The overwhelming majority of participants reported satisfying relationships with family members, with few exceptions (P9, P11, P38). The pattern for friends, the other most frequently mentioned social group, was quite similar to family. Participants reported socializing with friends regularly, which included things like playing games (P5), exercising together (P4), and going out together for meals, movies, shopping, and coffee/drinks. Participants were especially likely to report friends to be sources of instrumental and emotional support (relative to informational support), and a source of self esteem.

Work colleagues were mentioned by a large number of participants, with some participants reporting that they socialize with coworkers on the job, but less so outside of the work environment. A few participants noted that work colleagues provided them with emotional support such as being supportive after the loss of one's spouse (P1) or bonding over shared complaints (P13).

Less frequently mentioned social categories included religious or spiritual social connections, acquaintances, neighbors. Religious and spiritual social connections included members of the congregation at their church (P15), priests and pastors (P11, P15), and youth ministry or bible study groups (P10). These relationships were satisfying sources of emotional, but not instrumental or informational, support.

Acquaintances (e.g., school or classmates [P8], or moms of other children in a homeschool co-op [P11]), neighbors, and volunteer groups or organizations also came up for a subset of participants, but these were seldom listed as sources of support, and more likely to be noted for superficial socialization experiences.

Common challenges/burdens of social connection

US participants described a number of challenges occurring in their social connections, primarily with family and friends. Two of the most common challenges were due to factors external to the relationships. The first was physical distance from both family (P2, P19, P26, P34) and friends (P7, P19, P35, P37). The second was time. Even when proximity was not the barrier, US participants discussed how having busy lives (P31, P34) whether due to parenting (P26), travel (P30), or work (P9) created conflict in their family and friend relationships.

Other challenges were about internal relationship dynamics or processes

For example, difficulty with communication (P20, P26), openness (P19), and vulnerability (P15) were common challenges with both family relationships and friendships. Issues of inequitable investment and effort also arose in which participants mentioned having hesitation to get in touch (P7) or putting in all the effort with friends (P10), and being “left on read” (P03) or feeling less loved (P36) by family members.

Some of the challenges could be considered in terms of asymmetric dependence such as being seen as a child by family (P7), having an immature or aimless partner (P5, P39), children wanting to spend more time with friends than family (P22), and not wanting to burden others because the participant is the source of support (P18). One asymmetric dependence challenge that was unique to participants’ relationships with their children was not wanting to burden them with adult problems (P16, P39).

Of note, some of the areas of conflict reflected an absence of positive qualities rather than the presence of negative experiences. For example, participants mentioned superficiality (P10), or lack of emotional depth (P14, P39) with family and friends. A few participants mentioned issues that reflected the presence of negative qualities such as lack of respect (P35), differing values (P7), and cultural differences (P5) as sources of strain. Participants rarely mentioned difficulties with other types of social relationships, and when they did, they were similar issues to those that came up with family and friends (e.g., communication difficulties with coworkers and acquaintances (P11, P20), fears of vulnerability with coworkers and community members (P15)).



Definition of social connection

A sizable portion (44%) of US participants defined social connection in simple terms of interacting or socializing with others (P2, P13, P14, P20, P27, P29, P33, P34, P39). This included talking to people, texting people, and hanging out with people. Some participants made a distinction between in-person contact and digitally mediated interaction (P3, P5, P8, P12, P17, P19, P25, P31) such as texting, video chat, and phone calls, but indicated both in-person and mediated forms constituted social connection. Another objective definition of social connection was knowing someone for a long time (P36).

Other participants defined social connection in more emotional terms, such as bonding and friendship (P20, P35), and intimacy and closeness (P21, P26, P39). Participants explicitly mentioned sharing things about themselves, their lives, their thoughts, and their feelings (P5, P20, P21, P23, P26). Beyond disclosing inner aspects of the self, participants felt that being yourself (P13, P15), seeing, understanding, and accepting each other (P7, P38), and mutuality (P9) were defining features of social connection. More behavioral characterizations of social connection included support provision (P28, P31), investments of time and effort (P38), and demonstrations of respect and care (P7). One participant also noted that the meaning of, and need for connection can differ from person to person (P12).

Some participants had difficulty elaborating on the definition and used terms like connection, belonging, and relating to define social connection but didn't provide further detail (P4, P18, P24, P30, P32).

Characteristics of good and deficient social connections

Among participants in the US, the most used code cluster in regards to what makes for a good social connection is the characterization of social others. Within this code cluster, the most used codes were 'shared characteristics', 'shared interests', 'authenticity', 'attention/caring', and 'honesty'. Participants expressed wanting a level of sameness within their social connections, whether that be similar morals and values, similar hobbies/interests, or similar humor (P1, P3, P5, P8, P12, P14, P17, P18, P26, P30, P32, P38, P39). One participant mentioned that sharing core beliefs and values with a person is what breeds that solid connection for them (P32).

Another described sharing morals more broadly, instead emphasizing that a good social connection is with someone who is a “good person.” They stated, “they don't have to be religious, they don't have to be rich, they don't have to be poor. That I don't care what their political beliefs are, as long as they're nice to other people” (P18). Humor stood out as a shared characteristic in this specific participant's response, “Laughter is the key to a great life. As far as I'm concerned” (P17). It is clear that a sense of sameness, no matter the specifics, is important to participants in the US, as well as a sense of comfortability and authenticity, which are two other themes that were highly discussed in their own right.



Many mentioned that being accepted for who they are was a huge factor in what makes for a good connection (P9, P13, P26). Being comfortable around those you make social connections with and the ability to be authentic to yourself were emphasized among many responses from those in the US (P11, P12, P16, P38).

One participant shared, “You know, being able to show up as you. The minute you have to show up, trying to figure out how I need to act, who I need to be, what I need to look like. That’s- that’s when relationships start to get very challenging... And then, you know, obviously, when you- you can be you and I can be me. There comes a connection and that- that grows in ways that can never- never grow if you know you’re always trying to, like, figure out what’s the next right thing to say...” (P16). Participants expressed that a factor that can lead to a deficient connection is feeling as though you aren’t being acknowledged or accepted for who you are, and rather, you are being critiqued and judged as soon as you meet someone. It seems a nonjudgmental and tolerant relationship is what is necessary for many participants in the US to form good connections (P10, P12).

Additionally, there were many instances where participants categorized a connection as good if the other is often “there for them.” This running theme of general support can be seen in this participant’s response: “Uh, being there for each other and supporting, supporting one another, I think, be it through either physical actions or even just acknowledgement and verbally giving your support.” (P7).

Participants also valued a connection that stood firm through both the good and the bad times, which overlaps with their emphasis on wanting a connection that is always there for them (P14, P23).

Interestingly, a code not used at all by participants in the US, but was present in the global list of codes, was moral duty/obligation. Many, if not all, of the codes present were reflective of participants’ own uninfluenced opinion on their relationships, such as sharing interests, feeling cared for, feeling accepted, being understood, etc., which is opposite of feeling obligated to build relationships with those who have supported you in the past. It seems reciprocity and loyalty are not deemed as important as the rest of these codes, as they were not mentioned at all within this dataset .

Definition of belonging: what is belonging for the target population?

Participants in the US defined belonging mostly as generating some kind of positive affect whether that is feeling protected, validated, or passionate (P8, P9, P16, P17, P34, P37) or feeling respected (P8, P17). One exemplary response goes as follows: “So, yeah, I always leave spaces like that feeling like, ‘Man, that was- that was awesome.’” (P16). This participant expressed feeling extreme satisfaction when they felt like they belonged.

Many participants also defined belonging as a general feeling of inclusion (P3, P4, P12, P23, P35). Some reflected on the duration of the belonging, communicating that it is hard to feel like they truly belong when there is limited time to cultivate their connections and nurture that sense of belonging (P14, P32, P36).

Belonging was also described as feeling cared for, as well as accepted for who one truly is. Some participants expressed they feel a sense of belonging when their needs and preferences are being accounted for (P13, P17, P30). Some participants described belonging as an environment that allows them to be authentic to themselves, feel accepted for who they are, and to not feel judged (P2, P15, P24, P25).

Participants also defined belonging in terms of the characterization of the group or the relationship themselves. Some detail having similar values, life experiences, and hobbies as those they feel they belong with (P7, P31, P34). Others define belonging as feeling they are one and the same with a group, as well as being able to move towards a certain goal together as a unit (P11, P18, P20, P26). For example, one participant shared, “I think belonging to me really represents a maybe a sense of identity.

As in, like, maybe that's like a shared identity, I think. Like, if I feel like I belong somewhere, I feel like the people that I'm with all kind of recognize each other as such" (P20).

Unlike in other countries, participants did not define belonging through the lens of feeling connected with their pets, religion, nature, or the city. They seemed to instead conjure feelings of belonging that arose from connecting with humans instead of more intangible concepts. However, participants in the US did define belonging twice in a metaphorical way. P5 expressed,

"It feels like my heart is being, like, wrapped, you know? Like someone's like, kind of holding it, it's like a warm feeling... I don't know. It's just like, it's a sense of familiarity" (P5).



Another participant shared, "I see it as like a two way street, like you want to be there, but also the people, the people like around you are trying to engage with you..." (P9). These two people described belonging in a more figurative sense, rather than the physical emotions they felt, like the participants discussed prior.

What are culture-specific aspects of social connection?

In the U.S. sample, participants emphasized that social connection is guided by emotional authenticity, personal alignment, and freedom of choice over obligation or familial duty. A notable cultural theme that emerged was the absence of any mention of "moral duty or obligation" in social relationships. This contrasts with collectivist cultures, where such obligations often define connection. Instead, Americans in this sample valued relationships that felt mutually affirming, emotionally safe, and chosen.

For example, P3 highlighted generational expectations: "In [the] US, kids are out of [the] house at 18 and expected to be independent; other cultures stay with parents until married." This suggests an early cultural push toward autonomy, where social connections are expected to evolve outside the nuclear family and are pursued independently. Similarly, P10 expressed, "expect to get something out of it, bail when connection is not fulfilling needs; giving of the self is less valued in American culture." The expectation for relationships to be emotionally or personally beneficial, rather than maintained out of obligation, was a recurring theme.

Participants also stressed the importance of shared values, personal comfort, and similarity in fostering connection. P32 explained, "Sharing core beliefs and values with a person is what breeds that solid connection for me," while P17 noted, "Laughter is the key to a great life. As far as I'm concerned," suggesting that personality resonance and humor are culturally relevant markers of social closeness. This indicates that in the U.S., emotional tone, compatibility, and ease take precedence over structured social ties like extended kinship networks or community obligations.

Social media and technology were also named as distinctly American features shaping social life. P2 shared, “In America, I feel like, for a lot of adults, especially, a lot of the interactions are involved, like at work, you know.

I think that's very unique to America, because, you know, there's a very strong work culture here.” They added, “Social media is definitely a unique aspect of America because so many people here use it.” The emphasis on career-driven interaction, networking, and digital forms of sociality was echoed across other responses.

In contrast to collectivist traditions, many participants shared discomfort with performative or socially expected roles. P16 explained, “You know, being able to show up as you... The minute you have to show up, trying to figure out how I need to act, who I need to be, what I need to look like—that’s when relationships start to get very challenging.” This reflects a deep desire for relational ease and authenticity without the emotional labor of adapting to social scripts.

Other participants, like P12, expressed that even when living in diverse communities, connection arose more from shared experience than obligation: “we were already bonded socially by being there and then experiencing other traditions.” Likewise, P1 stated that in the U.S., “people unlike them [are expected] to meet their own cultural norms or standards (i.e. assimilate),” reflecting an undercurrent of cultural conformity that contrasts with stated ideals of diversity and openness.

Overall, U.S. participants described social connection as something to be earned, mutually beneficial, and emotionally comfortable. The absence of duty-based connection, and the frequent mention of authenticity, emotional safety, and comfort as necessary for connection, highlight a uniquely American cultural model—one that values chosen connection over inherited obligation, and shared values over prescribed social roles.

What else does the target population feel connected to?

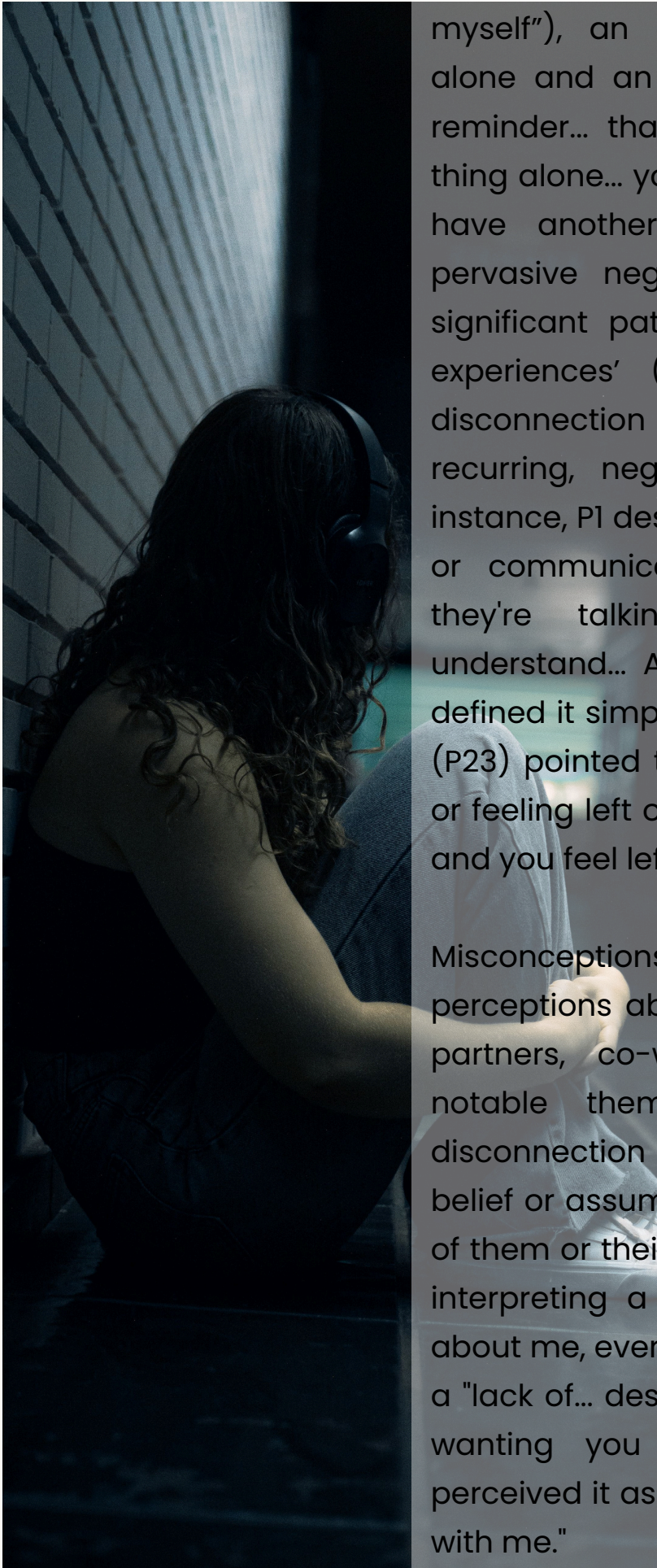
Beyond interpersonal relationships, participants in the U.S. dataset did not heavily reference alternative referents of connection such as spirituality, nation, community, or ancestry.

This absence is notable and itself culturally informative—connection appears highly individual and relational, rather than collective or institutional. Where connections were elaborated, they remained tightly centered on personal, reciprocal dynamics with specific others. There was little to no mention of broader societal referents like religion, tradition, or civic identity, which unlike those seen in India, Zimbabwe, Morocco and Turkey.

Experiences of disconnection

Experiences of disconnection manifest in diverse ways across individuals in the United States. While demographic factors such as age, gender, and relationship status may influence these experiences, analysis of participant definitions reveals several common patterns in how disconnection is perceived and felt. These patterns can be categorized into distinct codes, with some appearing more frequently than others. The most prevalent way participants defined disconnection was through generic 'general feelings of disconnection' (P2, P3, P4, P11, P12, P16, P17, P19, P20, P22, P28, P35, P37, P39).

This category encapsulates broad, often internal, senses of being disconnected (P39: "It's just a very, very unpleasant feeling. It distracts and interrupts... affects your health"), often accompanied by the perception of having lack of suitable support (P4: "not having anyone to call when you're alone... not quite the right fit"), a sense of not belonging or being out of place (P12: "I don't feel like I have a good place... in the group or a place within



myself”), an existential awareness of being alone and an unmet need for others (P16: “a reminder... that you are kind of in this whole thing alone... you need each other, but you don't have another”), often felt as a profound, pervasive negative emotional state. Another significant pattern involved ‘isolated negative experiences’ (P1, P8, P18, P23, P29), where disconnection was defined by specific, often recurring, negative events or scenarios. For instance, P1 described it as a situation of cultural or communicative misunderstanding (“When they're talking something that I don't understand... And I cannot follow”), while (P18) defined it simply as “like nobody's listening,” and (P23) pointed to experiences like being ignored or feeling left out (“when somebody ignores you and you feel left out”).

Misconceptions due to perceived negative perceptions about others (i.e., groups, relatives, partners, co-workers) also emerged as a notable theme (P5, P9, P10, P13). Here, disconnection stemmed from the participant's belief or assumption about what others thought of them or their intentions. (P5) illustrated this by interpreting a lack of texts as “no one cares about me, everyone hates me,” and (P9) felt it as a “lack of... desire of like The people around you wanting you to be there.” Similarly, (P10) perceived it as “people aren't interested in being with me.”

Furthermore, 'self-initiated disconnection' was identified as a distinct way some participants defined their experience (P14, P21, P36). This involves a conscious choice to withdraw or disengage, often for self-regulation or strategic reasons. (P14) described choosing not to connect to "not like to bother people," while (P21) detailed an intentional act of "initiating a response to move back... so that I could have a better view... and also to not have any expectations." (P36) expressed a desire for complete withdrawal: "Sometimes I just wanna... shut off all the lights and just sleep for four or five days."

Less frequently, disconnection was defined directly through 'Negative Interactions' (P7), focusing on an unpleasant or conflicting social exchange. P7 described it as "not understanding or not feeling the same emotions that others would be feeling... and a refusal to maybe adhere to the norm," which could lead to disconnecting from the conversation and the other person.

These defined types of disconnection manifest in various real-life contexts. For example, the feeling of being misunderstood, an aspect of 'Isolated Negative Experiences' or a trigger for 'General Feelings of Disconnection,' was shared by (P8) who "felt disconnected from family and partner when they don't understand the participant's struggles." A 'Negative Interaction' leading to disconnection was evident when (P12) described an argument with her husband: "Participant and her husband argued about what to do with the day... her husband wanted to do something else that wasn't seen as important to the participant." Similarly, (P25) reflected on a 'Negative Interaction' following a difficult conversation with family: "Yeah, it was a conversation with, you know, my son and his—my daughter in law, about a very important matter... we just didn't feel good about it."

While these overarching codes describe shared ways of defining disconnection, the nuances of these experiences can differ, for instance,

between non-lonely, moderately lonely, and severely lonely individuals in the US. Non-lonely individuals often described experiences with a focus on situational factors or specific functional aspects of connection. For example, P22 (non-lonely), reflecting a 'General Feeling of Disconnection,' stated, "if I was with my co workers, who were all really young, and occasionally I felt I was not part of it," linking the feeling to a specific context of age difference and not belonging in that particular workgroup.

Other themes for non-lonely individuals might include a fear of missing out (P19, defining disconnection as "missing out on a chance to build a relationship") or a temporary lack of communication (P35). Moderately lonely individuals demonstrated experiences across the full spectrum of codes. For instance, P1 (moderately lonely) highlighted cultural aspects contributing to an 'Isolated Negative Experience' of disconnection, feeling others expected adherence to their cultural norms. P16 (MML) felt a 'General Feeling of Disconnection' keenly during US holidays, finding them a difficult time for connection.

These examples show how common types of disconnection are contextualized by individual circumstances. Severely lonely participants also experienced disconnection through these common patterns, but often with a profound intensity or pervasiveness.

For example, P37 experienced a deep 'General Feeling of Disconnection' expressed as "Didn't feel like anybody really knew me, even though I was with them and trying." Another severely lonely individual, P39 also defined disconnection as an intensely impactful that disrupts daily life and health. While P36, a moderately lonely individual, described a desire for disconnection as a form of withdrawal, with such a desire, if acted upon frequently or stemming from despair, could reflect or contribute to a more severe state of loneliness.



How is disconnection understood?

The pattern of how US participants define disconnection is similar to how they describe their experiences of it, as discussed in the previous section. In the United States, participants' definitions of disconnection reveal several recurring patterns or codes, which provide a framework for understanding this multifaceted experience. While individual expressions vary, these codes capture the core ways disconnection is conceptualized. The most frequently identified pattern was generic 'general feelings of disconnection' (P2, P3, P4, P11, P12, P16, P17, P19, P20, P22, P28, P35, P37, P39). This code encompasses broad, often internal, senses of being disconnected. For instance P16 described it as "a reminder or a suggestion that you are kind of in this whole thing alone." This category also includes feelings of isolation, as P19 stated, "It feels almost like isolation," and P28 echoed, "...it's like isolation...feeling a little bit adrift." Another significant pattern involved 'isolated negative experiences' (P1, P8, P18, P23, P29), where disconnection was defined by specific, often recurring, negative events or scenarios. P1 described a scenario of cultural or communicative misunderstanding, while P8 pinpointed it as "not agreeing on certain viewpoints." P18 defined it simply as "like nobody's listening," and P23 noted moments such as when "somebody ignores you and you feel left out" or there's "nothing to talk to."

Misconceptions due to perceived negative perceptions about others' (P5, P9, P10, P13) also emerged. Here, disconnection stemmed from the participant's belief or assumption about what others thought of them. P5 illustrated this by interpreting a lack of texts as "no one cares about me, everyone hates me," highlighting the perceptual nature of this experience. Similarly, P10 shared, "disconnection I think would mean that people aren't interested in being with me... which, again, I don't think is like a real perception... but that's just like, what my perception is," directly acknowledging the subjective aspect.

Furthermore, 'self-initiated disconnection' was identified (P14, P21, P36), involving a conscious choice to withdraw or disengage. P14 described choosing not to connect to avoid bothering others, while P21 detailed an intentional act of "initiating a response to move back... so that I could have a better view." Less frequently, disconnection was defined directly through negative interactions (P7), focusing on a conflicting social exchange where there's a lack of mutual understanding or shared emotion.

These codes collectively illustrate that in the US, disconnection is often defined as a relational and communicative breakdown, a feeling of being unvalued or excluded, an internal state of isolation and negative emotion, or an intentional act. Many definitions emphasize what is missing or not present, highlighting disconnection as a deficit state where expected or desired elements of connection (understanding, care, interaction, being known) are absent. Essentially, it is a perceived or actual gap where the needs for understanding, belonging, care, and meaningful interaction are not met, leading to negative internal states or, at times, a deliberate withdrawal. When examining these definitions through the lens of participants' self-reported loneliness levels: non-lonely, mild or moderately lonely, and severely lonely, further nuances emerge, though there is a shared understanding of what disconnection can be.

The data largely supports distinctions in framing, with few, if any, stark 'negative cases' directly contradicting general observations for each group. Severely lonely participants (e.g., P37, P39) consistently defined disconnection by its most profound and impactful manifestations. Mild or moderately lonely individuals (e.g., P5, P9, P10, P1, P8) expressed a broad spectrum, with many definitions echoing the intensity of severe loneliness (often falling under "Misconceptions" or intense "General Feelings"), while others highlighted more specific or situational aspects (fitting "Isolated Negative Experiences" or milder "General Feelings"), illustrating the 'broad spectrum' characterization. Non-lonely participants (e.g., P19, P28, P20, P21, P35), while clearly understanding the concept often framed disconnection in terms of more manageable, temporary, or even intentional states or focused on specific functional aspects of connection.

Experiences of loneliness

Participants reported experiencing loneliness both when alone (P1, P3, P8, P10, P34, P36, P39) and when in groups (P23, P33) or even with their families (P4, P12, P17). They mentioned relationship losses, either through break-ups (P28), cutting ties with friends (P19), dissolution of social groups (P38), children leaving home (P25), or even deaths of those they were close to (P21, P35, P39) as events that they could tie their loneliness to. Geographic separation was cited by a few participants (P6, P20, P34), and others reported loneliness arising from either their busy-ness or the busy-ness of their close friends or partners (P2, P5, P27). Many reported that a lack of romantic partner made them feel lonely, especially when they were in situations where others around them were partnered (P4, P9, P17). While some cited a lack of partner/spouse as a loneliness trigger, others cited loneliness within unsupportive relationships (P9, P29). Being left out of group interactions or conversations (P5, P7, P23), or feeling poorly understood by those around them (P10, P37) were other triggers of lonely feelings.

Holidays were cited by several as memorable times when they felt a sense of loneliness, either because they were far from family, missing deceased family members, or just missing a family that would make them want to be together on the holidays (P16, P21, P26, P27). One participant poignantly mentioned that the loneliness was worse in bed alone at night, as there was nothing to distract them from their loneliness, stating, "really feel lonely is like late at night, okay, like whenever I'm by myself. You know, that's the only time that I ever even think about loneliness.... when I'm alone in bed at night." (P36). Others felt that their work travel and the accompanying isolation was a trigger (P20, P34). One participant was lonely from missing a deceased pet (P31), and another reported feeling like a servant in their own home as a cause of loneliness (P12). Several participants cited their most profound sense of loneliness came from work and a feeling that they didn't fit in or agree with their co-workers (P7, P15, P20, P22, P23). Four participants, all of whom were either mild-moderately lonely or non-lonely, could not recall any time in recent memory in which they experienced loneliness (P8, P18, P24, P30).

The most frequently seen codes were related to missing relationships that were desired, specifically lack of a romantic partner, or loneliness related to a recent or significant romantic breakup. Interestingly, these codes were seen in moderately/mildly-lonely and severely-lonely, but not in non-lonely participants. Non-lonely and moderately/mildly-lonely participants also frequently cited departure of friends/loved ones when relaying their experiences of loneliness.

Another salient code was general negative affect, with participants using words like "crippling," "tiring," "melancholy," and "emotionally hollow" to describe their experiences of loneliness. The general negative affect code was seen across the groups, with no distinction between different levels of loneliness.

The physiology of loneliness

The US participants experienced the physiology of loneliness through emotional, psychological and physical responses. Many reported feeling sadness (P2, P6, P18, P23, P26, P35) with some adding they experienced depressive symptoms (P2, P11) such as hopelessness (P26), low motivation (P2) and apathy (P19).

Some also reported changes in eating habits and losing weight (P14, P39) as well as feeling tired or difficulties with sleeping (P13, P32, P39). This emotional distress was further described as a heaviness in the chest, uneasiness in the heart (P26, P9). Furthermore, some participants reported feeling empty (P4, P6, P23, P33), with one reflecting they felt "emotionally hollow" (P11).

Many described crying as a physiological component of loneliness (P1, P14, P23) and experiencing pain (P4, P19). Other participants also report of "overthinking" (P8, P39) something that was described as a physiological component of loneliness. Overthinking was not the only internal struggle participants reported, with feelings of bleakness, despondency, (P26) and self-doubt (P20) also being experienced.



The effects of loneliness

The effects of loneliness across US participants span various physical, emotional, and social aspects of functioning as evidenced by one participant who shared, "Sad, anxiety, trouble sleeping, sadness, guilt.. um, overthinking. Desire to want to reach out, smother, to try to fix a problem that's not fixable. Frustration... Regret" (P39).

In considering the impact on mental health, many participants associated loneliness with sadness (P1, P4, P9, P18, P24, P26, P39) depression (P2, P9, P11, P19, P20, P26, P31) and various low states of affect like hopelessness, exhaustion, anxiety, and heaviness (P2, P6, P9, P10, P11, P26, P29, P39). Additional mood states described include apathy or numbness (P15, P19, P36), labile mood states (P26, P14, P19) and withdrawal (P2, P13, P15, P30). When discussing the impact of loneliness on eating patterns and body weight, responses are variable with some reporting a decrease in appetite or intake leading to weight loss (P2, P14, P20, P28, P35), while others report eating more in periods of distress or making unhealthy food choices (P5, P11, P19, P23, P26, P33).

Many lonely participants reported disrupted sleep either in the form of difficulty falling asleep or difficulty obtaining restful sleep (P1, P2, P5, P9, P18) or sleeping more than usual (P36, P38) while several non-lonely participants reported either no disruption in sleep (P22, P28) or feeling their sleep wasn't impacted by their loneliness status but instead by other worries (P33). Participants report that loneliness impacts their motivation and productivity and decreases their ability to focus or complete routine tasks (P2, P7, P9, P13, P16, P20, P23, P27, P36) with one participant reporting, "I don't do anything... I don't feel like cooking. I don't feel like talking to my kids or anyone" (P23). Participants reported engaging with social media, with one participant

stating "I probably make it worse by... scrolling on social media, instead of doing things that are productive" (P39), an activity another participant terms "doom scrolling" (P3).

In response to loneliness, participants do not describe physically harming self or others, but occasionally report emotional pain of self imposed or felt isolation (P2, P9) or harming others through lashing out or emotional lability (P2, P5, P10, P23, P26).

When discussing the duration of the effects of loneliness, participants offered a wide range from not long or minutes to hours (P6, P11, P17, P22, P23, P26) to days or weeks (P5, P7, P9, P28) while some participants indicate that the effects are situationally dependent (P2, P10, P14, P36).

Participants cited a variety of strategies for coping with lonely feelings when they occur. Non-lonely participants were more likely than their mild to moderately lonely or significantly lonely peers to speak about waiting for the lonely feelings to pass, to sit with those feelings until they faded or went away.

Coping with loneliness

Participants cited a variety of strategies for coping with lonely feelings when they occur. Non-lonely participants were more likely than their mild to moderately lonely or significantly lonely peers to speak about waiting for the lonely feelings to pass, to sit with those feelings until they faded or went away. A few participants mentioned that crying was a typical response to loneliness (P1, P23, P25). Most of the participants cited their families as support when coping with loneliness (P1, P2, P4, P5, P6, P7, P14, P15, P17, P18, P20, P22, P25, P26, P28, P32, P35, P36, P37, P38), whether they reached out to spend more time with them, spoke with them on the phone, or just reminded themselves of the blessing of family.

Many also found comfort in their friends and community during their lonely times (P2, P4, P8, P9, P10, P12, P15, P22, P25, P26, P28, P29, P32, P33, P35, P37). Seven participants report turning to professionals to help them cope (P2, P9, P13, P28, P31, P35, P38) and about twenty cited technology as a source of coping support, though their interactions with technology varied widely, from watching movies or cartoons (P1, P10, P23, P33), to scrolling through social media (P17, P19, P35, P39) or other apps (P5, P22, P29).

Almost half mentioned religion or spirituality when discussing how they cope with loneliness. They seek counsel from religious leaders or groups (P17, P39), read religious texts (P10, P14), or pray (P10, P21, P25, P37). Only one (P37) mentioned substances as a coping mechanism, though another did mention prescribed medications (P31). Thirteen mentioned activities, which varied. Several sought coping in physical exertion/exercise (P4, P9, P10, P13, P22, P25, P37, P39). Others found that nature was a source of comfort to them (P9, P33, P34), while reading, listening to music, or playing games was common for still others (P10, P14, P22, P25, P37, P39). Three considered work as a coping mechanism for loneliness, citing its value as a distraction (P2, P22, P25).

Factors affecting loneliness

Many factors were reported by the US participants as affecting loneliness. The role of others not being able to relate to what the individual is going through was highlighted by participants (P3, P4) which could be connected to feeling unsupported. Many reported a lack of social network was important in contributing to loneliness, especially during difficult times (P19, P3, P28, P34). The closeness of people to those in their network was perceived

as affecting loneliness (P35), with the closer people were to family and friends, the better their support would be. This reported limited social network was explained by an unwillingness to reach out to others (P13), others not reaching out to the individual (P30) or not knowing how to connect to others (P28).

Additionally, not being connected was a common factor of loneliness described by participants (P14, P26). Some reported how being busy affected their ability to interact with others which could create distance between friends and loved ones (P1, P2) while others described being envious of the connections other people had with each other and how this relationship might be longed for (P6). Yet connection was not just perceived as being with people, as one participant reported how connection was to nature as well as people (P26), implying the possibility of connection to transcend personal relationships with other humans.



Another factor that was perceived to affect loneliness was the ability to communicate. Not being able to talk to others or finding it hard to do so (e.g. making small talk) was reported by some participants (P16, P19, P22, P26). One participant reported how when feeling disconnected was due to something tangible, being able to talk about this could lead to stronger connections to others; "bringing about, where they maybe did lie, or something that leads to what may feel like a disconnection when they bring it up and there's an openness again, and there's an honesty can lead to an even stronger, when you press in and you push through" (P35). Being able to address issues therefore appears to be an important aspect of feeling connected. Alongside how openness and honesty could affect loneliness, disrespect and ignorance was perceived to negatively affect loneliness (P23).

Family and friends were also identified as affecting loneliness, through losing a loved one (P1, P39), not having a solid foundation of trust with family/friends (P34), experiencing "empty nest syndrome," (P15) and family members being absent due to addiction disorders (P18). Sometimes not being involved in activities (P30) or having no common purpose with people (P26) could affect feelings of loneliness, resulting in one participant perceiving how not feeling seen or recognised could impact an individual (P16). This could also occur if people felt different to others in their social group, with one participant describing how being different or not wanting to conform could be an isolating experience (P7).

Some participants reported how feeling overwhelmed and unhappy (P19), stressed (P2), depressed or suicidal (P12) could affect loneliness. This could result in a lack of motivation to connect to others (P13) resulting in people staying by themselves. This could create a cycle of loneliness, whereby not leaving a place to interact with others increases social awkwardness which reduces the ability to make friends which leads people back to staying by themselves (P5). Furthermore, being alone doing nothing could also make people feel lonely and highlight a lack of purpose (P17), something that could lead to future problems. This begins to highlight elements of internalised and personal factors in loneliness, acknowledged by one participant who described how attachment and personality could affect loneliness (P39).

Definition of Loneliness

In US participants defining and explaining loneliness the most commonly used codes are the 'sense of being alone', 'lack of sense of connection' and 'unavailability of support'. 'Longing for connection' was also frequently mentioned (P6, P11, P31, P36), with one participant stating, "like longing for connection that you don't have" (P6).

Many participants made a distinction between the presence of others and a sense of being understood or connected to those present. For example, one participant stated, "that's what loneliness feels like to me, that you're surrounded by activity but not part of it" (P30).

Several described having people present but not feeling like they are understood by those around them such as one participant who stated, "a sense of like either not having anyone that you can reach out to, or you have people you can reach out to, but you don't feel like they'd understand anything, yeah, and not necessarily it's like they're stupid, but like they wouldn't understand anything about, about you" (P4).

Another stated, "I would just maybe say, like, this feeling of like nobody, like you're completely like, emotionally by yourself. You know, nobody understands you feel like nobody understands and that there's no there's no person that maybe exists, that can, that can understand, and you just are longing for a social connection that just isn't happening" (P11).

While mildly or moderately lonely participants highlighted this longing for connection and the feeling of not being seen, known, or understood, non-lonely participants largely described loneliness as the absence of support or connection (P26, P27, P28, P30, P31, P33, P35).

One participant poignantly stated, "we all have some varying degree of need for people in our life, whether we'll acknowledge it or not, and when that need is unmet, I think the result is this feeling of- of loneliness" (P16).

The definition and description of loneliness among US participants was largely similar to the way disconnection was described. Both were described as a sense of isolation that extended beyond physical absence into feelings of not being accepted, valued, or understood.

The difference between loneliness and solitude



Participants drew distinctions between solitude and loneliness. For most, solitude was time alone that was appreciated, intentional, and needed.

Sometimes this alone time was planned, or necessary to accomplish a task (P2, P3, P4, P6, P9, P23, P25, P27, P38). Others talked about alone time as something needed to recharge, and this seemed especially true when they had just come from a large gathering or a busy time with others (P6, P10, P12, P15, P23, P26, P30, P34).

Still other participants talked about staying busy, or other tasks they busied themselves with to distract them from their state of being alone (P1, P5, P8, P14, P17, P31). Sometimes, participants mentioned making plans for social interactions as a way to not feel alone when they were by themselves (P17, P39).

Loneliness even in the midst of others was not uncommon in the participants. There were many potential drivers of this feeling of loneliness in a crowd. For some, it was feeling as if they did not have support or help (P1, P7), feeling a sense of disconnection with the group—ignored, disrespected, unappreciated (P11, P22, P23, P27, P30, P31), being with others who fail to meet expectations (P16), or in a group where there is a lot of tension or conflict (P24, P38).

One participant poignantly mentioned that loneliness was exacerbated if they knew others were having fun without them (P33).

While participants could be alone without feeling lonely, this was largely dependent on both choice and necessity. Loneliness was experienced by participants, both when they were alone and when they were with others. Most of the time the participants reported feeling lonely when not alone, they referred to disagreements, feeling unappreciated by the others in the group, or a lack of shared purpose.

Feeling like a part of something bigger was one way that participants avoided feeling lonely. "There's a feeling of connectedness there too is we're all— everything is on this earth alive, together, and we're all part of it, and that's not lonely even if you're alone.

So, so that's how I would describe [loneliness].. Ultimately, it's a lack of connectedness" (P26).

How are lonely individuals perceived among the target population?

Among U.S. participants, lonely individuals are most frequently described as vulnerable and to a lesser degree, stigmatized and lacking support. Vulnerability emerged as the single most frequently used descriptor when characterizing this population (P6, P8, P13, P19, P35, P29). As one participant said, "It's kind of vulnerable. And I think that maybe this is just me, but I think that people, when they feel lonely, kind of perceive all the people around them as not feeling that way. Because I think if they thought, "Oh, that person's lonely too," then they would kind of go to that person, if that makes sense. But I think part of loneliness is kind of like looking around you and going "Wow, like I'm the only one who doesn't have someone here" or something like that (P8).

Others expressed similar sentiments about lonely people feeling vulnerable (P13, P19, P35, P39) and having "general discomfort about being so vulnerable" (P19). Participants offered different ideas as to why this is the case, including the idea that openness is difficult (P4) or, as one participant put it, "people are afraid to communicate those feelings...[if you] ignore it, I feel like those feelings, you could convince yourself that those feelings are just in their head and that they're not true" (P9). Still others suggested denial ("I think because they don't want to admit that they are lonely, and so therefore they choose not to talk about it"; P17), ego (P3), embarrassment (P24, P28), a lack of courage to speak up (P30), or concerns about being misunderstood (P23, P25).

Apart from these individual difference descriptors of lonely individuals, participants also frequently brought up societal stigmas around loneliness (including being perceived as weak, needy, burdening others; P7, P10, P11, P12, P14, P16, P19, P26, P31, P32).

One participant highlighted that this may also have been exacerbated by COVID: "I think that, that is a cultural thing, and I think it's changed a lot, especially since COVID. I think COVID caused so many people to struggle that it was forced out into the open more. But I do feel that loneliness fits under that umbrella of mentally unwell or mentally struggling, that a lot of people don't" (P26). Still others attributed this to a lack of support (P20, P22).

Why is loneliness difficult to be spoken about among the target population?

Loneliness is difficult to speak about among U.S. Americans due to a convergence of themes that include awareness of American cultural values surrounding independence and the stigma associated with loneliness as a result (P22, P28, P16, P10, P11, P26, P20, P7), along with the issue of lacking individuals to confide in (P22, P8, P6, P5), and shame (P33, P25, P28, P31, P39, P17).

A number of participants reported being aware of Western cultural norms of self-reliance and independence, which discourages openness about emotional struggles and may view loneliness as potential weakness. For example, one participant drew the connection between individualistic values of focusing on the self with not seeking emotional support: "We're kind of forced to be...very inward, very selfish minded, and ...you're supposed to make something of yourself, and you're not allowed to get any help doing it" (P28).

Another participant expressed: "I think in the US, loneliness is seen as a...negative thing...you want to have...your group of people that you can constantly be around. And so if you're seen as lonely, you're seen as something must be wrong with you." (P7). A lack of people to confide in may also be a factor: one participant reported "missing people" as they struggled

to find meaningful connections (P6); similarly, another reported that because she didn't have any friends in middle or high school, it was difficult to be "vulnerable in that way" (P5).

Shame also emerged: as one participant explained, "Trust and maybe shame. Ashamed to admit that they are lonely. You know, those are probably... the two things that I would think would—would prevent someone from opening up (P25).

These perceptions are also accompanied by a "general discomfort about being so vulnerable with somebody" (P19). As one participant pointed out, "people are afraid to communicate those feelings... if you admit those things, then you really have to sit with the reality of it, whereas...if you kind of just bottle it and and you kind of ignore it... you could convince yourself that those feelings are just in their head and that they're not true" (P8).



These concerns about vulnerability also go along with a lack of awareness of others' similar experiences. One participant highlighted, "I don't like to feel vulnerable, and so I think it's hard to- to really ...talk about it and...work on that lonely feeling...sometimes you may try too hard... not to be lonely, where it just kind of isolates you a little bit more." (P27). As another participant confirmed, "it would be an ask of someone else" to help her if she feels lonely" (P30).

This stigma of being lonely is reinforced by fears of judgement, shame, and appearing as needy or a burden. Additionally, several participants stated that they had no one to talk to or struggled to find meaningful connections to confide in (P22, P8, P6, P5). American society is perceived to look down upon being lonely (P31). As a result, one participant observed that discussion loneliness may be avoided as a topic of conversation: "I think because they don't want to admit that they are lonely, and so therefore they choose not to talk about it" (P17).

However, not all participants reported that they had difficulty speaking about loneliness (P33, P31, P28). Some reported that loneliness is a common human experience (P33). Others expressed that they had no issues discussing it with others (P31). Another participant said, when asked about why it is difficult to speak about loneliness: "No, I love talking. I will talk about literally anything" (P28).

Culture-specific aspects of loneliness

U.S. participants frequently associated loneliness with Western individualism and the independent self (P1, P9, P17, P20, P21, P22, P26, P28, P38). As one participant put it, "People in the US are more alone, independent, more self-sufficient, and less dependent."

People tend to rely on themselves and the participant believes that that makes them less connection-seeking" (P9).

Another participant expressed a similar sentiment and pointed out how this manifests as a function of age: "I don't know if it's unique in comparison to other parts of the world, but I do think that families have become so scattered, not living in close unity is the way they used to ... I think it does enhance loneliness, especially in elderly family members who are isolated and don't have close family near them.

I think that it is becoming an issue for us" (P17). This sentiment is repeatedly mentioned "People in the U.S. have been trained to be independent and will 'just about worship independence.' But this can produce profound loneliness. Our culture doesn't value relationships" (P21).

Moreover, a number of participants report cultural norms against expressing loneliness (P2, P30). As one participant said, "Many Americans experience loneliness but don't discuss it openly. People may seem socially engaged but still feel lonely" (P2).

This appears to be exacerbated by social media (P11, P14, P19, P24, P32), which might make it easier to engage with one's devices "than with people" (P11). That said, the role of social media in exacerbating loneliness appears not to be specific to the U.S.: "Maybe social media like people are constantly comparing themselves to other people's like highlights, but it's like everyone's doing that..., I don't think there's anything unique to America" (P5; similar sentiments were expressed by P8; P33).

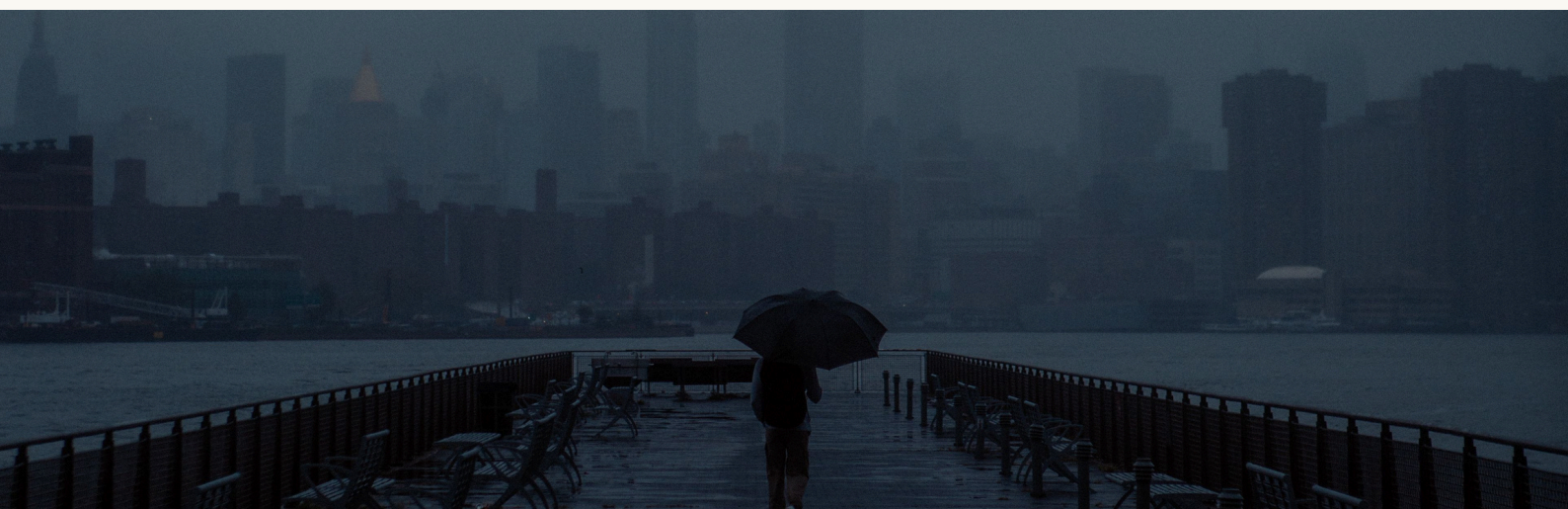
Still others thought that what started as an American trend may also extend to other cultural contexts: "The only thing that I could say about this in terms of the United States is, and I mean, other developed countries have the same issue now... we don't exist in a society where...everyone is taking care of

everyone anymore. It's more of a struggle now, where... we've got two working partners and everyone kind of lives their own parallel, busy lives, whereas ... if we go back in time, and it was the, you know, we're raised by the village, and we're all together in here, and there's all the elders, and we're all taking care of each other.

And so, I don't know, I you know, this is not a United States versus the rest of the world thing, but it's just the idea of how society has changed in many different cultures in terms of that...I think a lot of older people can probably start to feel lonely if they're more isolated and they can't get to places and and that, you know, that can really be a problem.

whereas, if this was in a society where we were all integrated generationally, and everyone, you know, tended the kids, and we didn't have two working parents and things like that" (P12).

Several participants also highlighted the fact that loneliness is perceived as highly negative in the U.S. (P6, P7, P15, P25, P39). As one person put it, "I think in the US, loneliness is seen... as a negative thing (P7). Part of this is driven by fear: "...it feels like a frenetic energy not to be alone for fear of loneliness, although I think that there's something that can be redemptive about it" (P15). As a metacognitive observation, one participant suggested that "there's probably more lonely people than we think there are... studies have been done toward it...[but] I think there's more" (P25).



What are the response processes to leading to the participants answering their last instance of loneliness

When recalling their last instance of loneliness, many participants went through a process of mental clarification, where they tried to understand what loneliness meant to them—i.e., unpacking the emotional and cognitive features of the experience before attaching it to a memory.

Some tried to distinguish loneliness from related feelings like being alone or feeling unimportant (P6, P26, P36), reflecting on their internal experiences, physical sensations, emotions, and thoughts that signaled loneliness.

As one participant put it: "I would say I feel lonely often when I'm with people, and then, if I'm alone, like in nature, I don't feel lonely at all... It probably has to do with connectedness. .. I can be in a group of people and not feel connected to anyone, feel no common purpose, feel no common passions. And that, to me, is lonely and it's work. It's work to be in that environment. You have to put effort into just keeping conversation going and being friendly and polite and all that. And in nature... we're all connected. I mean, you feel the air and you hear water, and you hear birds and animals and rustling leaves and all that stuff, and it's very instinctively soothing.

You know, I very much think that's a part of what the human experience is supposed to contain on a regular basis that we don't now. And I think part of that is connectedness, you know, connectedness to the whole thing, not just other people" (P26).

Although many participants didn't immediately recall a moment of loneliness, they searched through recent or meaningful life periods: scanning their memories, checking for emotional weight, and checking if a moment "qualified" as loneliness. Examples of such periods or moments included middle school (P5), recent trips (P17), or life disruptions, like moving,



holidays, or major transitions (P2, P8, P12, P16, P25). For example, one participant observed, "I was just remembering how I felt, you know, when I was when I was lonely on that trip" (P17). Another participant said similarly, "I searched for how I would define that and thought about what I...did that month" (P31).

One theme that emerged was the experience of feeling lonely even when around others. Participants made a clear distinction between being near people and feeling connected to them—suggesting that loneliness can be emotional invisibility, not just social absence. Several described feeling "unseen" or "unnoticed" even in the middle of social situations (P12, P7, P23). One participant put it poignantly: "It's not about physical bodies... it's about appreciation, connection, being seen" (P12). A number of participants also thought of their last instance of loneliness in the context of a loss or absence of intimate bonds, including recent breakups, long-term separation, or anticipated changes in relationships (P28, P29, P39). As one participant said (in relation to a relationship dissolution), "It's still fresh. I haven't healed... but it's relevant" (P39).

Another theme was participants' efforts to engage in cognitive coping and mental reframing. Rather than just reporting feelings, many participants showed signs of actively managing or reshaping their emotional experiences. They worked to reframe loneliness through mental strategies or positive reinterpretation.

Participants (e.g., P6, P9, P19, P36) focused on shifting perspective to reduce loneliness: "We have the capability of shifting our thought processes" (P9) and "I try to view words with negative connotations more objectively... to stay optimistic" (P19). Some participants assessed their level of social interaction, both in quantity and emotional depth, to check whether they felt lonely or not. To this end, high daily interaction and routine contact were frequently a buffer (P3, P23, P33) but screen-based connections didn't feel sufficient (P27, P36). As one participant said, "I feel connected often, but mostly through screens" (P36).

What are the response processes to leading to the participants answering what loneliness is for them

Participants' response processes were fairly evenly split between abstract ideas and concrete examples from their own lives. On the one hand, a number of them gave generalized definitions (P1, P3, P4, P9, P12, P19, P22, P23, P33, P35, P36, P38).

One of these participants explicitly mentioned that they thought about how to define it as you would see in a dictionary definition, including the difference between being alone and feeling lonely, and what "ingredient" makes someone actually feel lonely (P36). On the other hand, the other half of participants relied on personal or anecdotal experiences, including those of friends and family, to process the question of what loneliness is (P2, P5, P7, P8, P10, P11, P20, P24, P28, P30, P39).

For example, one participant remembered what it felt like to be a kid or teenager—specifically feeling unseen, unknown and alone (P24). As another participant put it, "I just thought about, like, my own personal experiences and like what it looks like for me" (P2).

What are the response processes to leading to the participants answering what makes for a good social connection for them

In response to the question, "What makes for a good social connection?" participants frequently relied on drawing similarities between themselves and other people (P1, P7, P17, P20, P23, P24, P29, P36). For example, one participant highlighted how they surveyed "... all my different relationships and seeing what was common for me, and that's the give and take and common interests, and view of the world" (P31). To this end, many participants recollected specific social interactions and the amount of care, effort, and time that went into these (P2, P4, P5, P8, P9, P14, P22, P27, P28, P33, P38) as well as how these made them feel (P3, P6, P11, P12, P26).

One participant said, "I was thinking about the friends who make me feel the most unlonely, you know. And it would be friends and people who kind of get me, who can...predict where I'm going with things and understand why I say the things and then not judge...based on what I do or what I say" (P12).

Many others expressed similar sentiments: "When I think about being connected, or...what's making a good social connection, I'm definitely remembering... those feelings...it's... a positive thing to dwell on in my mind" (P6); "Just trying to think of what it feels like when you feel like you have a good, strong social connection.

So there's a certain like lightness, there's an excitement to it, there's an optimism, like a joy to it, where you feel like whoever I'm talking with understands me, and we're both excited about the same thing, and we both

feel the same way about it, and we're both, you know, of a similar purpose. And so then I just thought back again, what does it feel like to be connected? What are those good feelings? And then, when do I notice that I have them? So I kind of went through and counted, counted back like, okay, that that circumstance and those feelings happen pretty often, in these– these kinds of situations." (P26)

What are the response processes leading to the participant answering the scale item of "I feel lonely" from 0-100

The response processes to the statement "I feel lonely" from a visual analog scale from 0–100 varied among U.S. participants but mostly appeared to be based on current assessments of their social networks and emotional states.

Those who reported low scores (i.e., in the bottom quartile) tended to report strong social connections. As one participant responded, "I would say a two. Again I don't feel lonely at all. I know I have a good support system" (P3). Other participants who scored similarly also reported having very strong social circle (P8), while still others acknowledged that they experienced fluctuating times of loneliness even with relatively low scores: "I feel lonely. I'm just gonna put it like 10. Um, oops.

Just because, while I feel largely connected, I know there's pockets of loneliness. It's just not all the time" (P24).

Participants who scored around the midpoint of the scale often did so because they highlighted both the positive and negative situational factors contributing to loneliness. For example, one participant pointed out how the modality of their social connection could change how they felt about their loneliness: "I'm gonna go middle of the road because... I don't feel lonely a lot. ... but definitely I feel lonely in person, if that makes sense. Like, connection wise, I don't feel lonely because I have tons of people that I can go to.

However... if we're talking like a physical presence of a human, yeah. I definitely have people I can count to listen to me, though...I do miss having people around me, for sure. It's not, like, horrible, because I am able to talk to them pretty regularly, but I definitely miss that" (P6). Another participant identified the role of therapy in dictating their response to this statement: "I'm going to answer at a forty-five ...just because I've had... therapy sessions for the last month every Monday, and they've just brought back some...some bad memories" (P13).

Given the limited sample who reported high scores, it may be difficult to draw conclusions, but the participant who fell in this category attributed their response to low access to a support system and a lack of individual(s) to communicate with: "I feel lonely... I'd say 75 just because of how my life's been, I only really was interacting with close people on the weekends" (P38).

Notes

P1 US_Elderlyminority_MML_Over65_Widowed_Female_REW.mp4
P2 US_Medicaid_MML_Female.mp4
P3 US_MML_18-35_Any_Female_Quetzi.mp4
P4 US_MML_18-35_Any_Male_Weston.mp4
P5 US_MML_18-35_Partnered_Female_Amanda.mp4
P6 US_MML_18-35_Partnered_Female_REW.mp4
P7 US_MML_18-35_Partnered_Male_Amanda.mp4
P8 US_MML_18-35_Partnered_Male_Anna-Celine.mp4
P9 US_MML_18-35_Single_Male_Anna-Celine.mp4
P10 US_MML_18-35_Single_Male_Eli.mp4
P11 US_MML_35-60_Partnered_Female_Eli_Part1.mp4
P12 US_MML_35-60_Partnered_Female_ET.m4a
P13 US_MML_35-60_Partnered_Female_JLE.mp4
P14 US_MML_35-60_Partnered_Female3_JLE.mp4
P15 US_MML_35-60_Partnered_Male_JLE.mp4
P16 US_MML_35-60_Single_Male_JLE.mp4
P17 US_MML_Over60_Any_Female_Jack.mp4
P18 US_MML_Over60_Partnered_Female_JLE.mp4
P19 US_NL_18-35_Partnered_Female_Karla.mp4
P20 US_NL_18-35_Partnered_Male_Anna-Celine_Part1.mp4
P21 US_NL_35-60_Any_Male_JLE.mp4
P22 US_NL_35-60_Partnered_Female_Marina
P23 US_NL_35-60_Partnered_Female_Poorvi.mp4
P24 US_NL_35-60_Partnered_Female2_JLE.mp4
P25 US_NL_35-60_Partnered_Male_JLE.mp4
P26 US_NL_35-60_Partnered_Male_Part1_Eli.mp4
P27 US_NL_35-60_Partnered_Male_REW.mp4
P28 US_NL_35-60_Single_Female_Jon_Part1.mp4
P29 US_NL_35-60_Single_Male_REW.mp4
P30 US_NL_Over60_Any_Female_JLE.mp4
P31 US_NL_Over60_Any_Female_Jon.mp4
P32 US_NL_Over60_Partnered_Female1_JLE.mp4
P33 US_NL_Over60_Partnered_Female2_JLE.mp4
P34 US_NL_veteran_male_JLE.mp4
P35 US_PeopleWithDisabilities_NL_Any_Any_Any_Jon.mp4
P36 US_Singleparent_MML_35-60_Any_Male_REW.mp4
P37 US_SL_18-35_Single_Female_JLE.mp4
P38 US_SL_35-60_Partnered_Female_JLE.mp4
P39 US_SL_35-60_Single_Male_Part1a_Eli.mp4