Connecting Against Loneliness

Background Readings

July 23, 2020
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Dear Participants,

We’re thrilled that you can join us for the final roundtable in a series jointly hosted by Aspen Digital and Facebook.

There has been growing concern about loneliness and social isolation since the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic and the ensuing disruption in meaningful social relationships. And there is still so much to learn about loneliness, including its potential causes and solutions. In an effort to deepen our understanding, we formed this collaboration in order to talk to, support, and engage with the various communities who best understand this topic. Our intent is to listen and learn.

Why does this matter to institutions such as Aspen Digital and Facebook? In many ways, we converged on this topic from separate paths. Aspen Digital’s mission is to inspire social change through the responsible stewardship of technology. Facebook’s mission is to give people the power to build community and bring the world closer together. Addressing loneliness and the associated feelings of disempowerment and disconnection is core to achieving both of our goals.

The research on social media’s impact on loneliness is mixed, there is a strong perception amongst consumers and experts that social media is both a contributor to and solution for loneliness. Hence, our goal with this roundtable discussion is to dive into these questions and to draw upon a cross-sector global group of experts like yourselves to inform both in-person and online solutions to help people navigate moments of loneliness, as well as advance our collective understanding of loneliness and social connection. Outcomes from past expert conversations have resulted in Facebook making product changes and building new features that encourage people to set limits on their use of social media, protecting people from online bullying and harassment, and giving parents even more control to protect their kids in Messenger Kids.

In the Aspen tradition, the following collection provides a common starting point for discussion by highlighting trends and emerging issues, and providing contrasting viewpoints for how to approach the topic. Additionally, we have included recaps from the previous two roundtables in order to provide context and insight into the key issues already discussed.

We recognize the tremendous amount of work already being done, and your expertise in these discussions is critical in helping us identify opportunities to further our understanding. Most importantly, we hope that these conversations will promote cross-sector collaboration for the field at large.

Best,

Vivian Schiller, Executive Director of Aspen Digital
Naomi Gleit, Vice President of Product & Social Impact at Facebook
The Psychology of Loneliness

Why it matters and what we can do
How internal and external factors cause loneliness

Perlman and Peplau\(^7\) described their model of loneliness with the graphic below.

**Figure 1**

**Model for the causes of loneliness**

In this model of loneliness we can see that there are predisposing factors, a precipitating event, a mismatch of needed and actual social relations alongside cognitions and attributions leading to an experience of loneliness.

Predisposing factors include:

**Personal characteristics**
This describes how the person’s psychological tendencies manifest in their thoughts, feelings and behaviours. These psychological factors are the main focus of this report. Other personal characteristics include health and mobility. These are not included in this report as their relationship with loneliness has been widely reported.

**Characteristics of the situation**
In essence these are sociological and demographic factors such as socio-economic status, gender, ethnicity, living situation and family circumstances. While important, we have not addressed them in this report because they have already been so extensively analysed in many of the core texts and reports on loneliness.

**Cultural values or norms**
These include social roles, status and identity. All of which influence how people interpret their situations and judge their satisfaction or otherwise with family and friends.
What we can do

The insights of psychology are already being used to tackle loneliness.

These can be grouped into three key approaches:

1. **Public campaigns to promote an awareness of loneliness**, how it affects people and what can be done to prevent loneliness becoming severe.

2. **Organisations providing services** that reach people who may be lonely can **adjust their work to reflect the psychology of loneliness**.

3. **There is a group of people with chronic loneliness** who may be best helped by **support directly focused on helping them alleviate loneliness using psychological techniques**.

These approaches are presented as an inverted triangle to reflect:

- the size of population that the intervention is appropriate for
- the severity of loneliness
- the intensity of the intervention.

Examples are presented to illustrate each tier of the triangle along with case studies of innovative practice.
Population-level messaging and managing alone

The widest tier of the triangle targets the general population as loneliness is something everyone experiences. Population-level messaging on loneliness, including information on what you can do for yourself, can be used to prevent loneliness from becoming severe.

Population messaging needs to be better informed by the psychology of loneliness if it is to be comprehensive. The psychological and emotional aspects of loneliness need to be considered alongside the social and structural if we are to better understand the experience of loneliness, how it can be alleviated and challenge its stigma.

Public health campaigns about later life have focused more on looking after physical wellbeing than on emotional and mental wellbeing. Loneliness as an aspect of emotional and mental wellbeing is as important as physical wellbeing and needs better public awareness.

Messaging also needs to emphasise the importance of meaningful social relationships. This points to the quality of relationships as well as the quantity. Paying attention to our relationships as we age, particularly through life transitions, is key.

Focus group participants described how effort, reciprocity, acceptance and managing expectations were important features of maintaining relationships over time.

“If you don’t speak to people they won’t speak to you because this is the way life is.”

Whilst living alone is a risk factor for loneliness, greater awareness of the experience of loneliness within long-term relationships and whilst living with others is needed.
Loneliness within relationships may be due to the quality or the nature of the relationship which limits wider social connections and networks.

Population level public campaigning about loneliness is increasing; two case are included as examples of tackling the stigma of loneliness and encouraging people to talk.

The Campaign to End Loneliness’ Be More Us campaign included much needed evaluation which shows that loneliness is an issue that engages the public. The government’s #LetsTalkLoneliness campaign encourages people to talk openly about loneliness and offers advice on what to do for yourself.

Campaign to End Loneliness’ Be More Us campaign

A digital campaign based on small moments of connection

Be More Us is a digital campaign on loneliness created by the Campaign to End Loneliness in 2018. It has been massively successful in reaching over 100 million people with its messages about how small moments of connection can help with loneliness. It encourages people to celebrate the things people share and inspires people to take time to connect and to celebrate small moments of connection. The videos about loneliness and making connections have been key to the success of the campaign, exceeding the targets for reach and engagement.

How videos encourage people to connect

The main assets of Be More Us have been a series of awareness raising videos that were widely shared on social media. Evaluation has shown that the videos emotionally connect with their viewers. They are aimed at people of all ages and the campaign helps to reduce the stigma of loneliness and show how loneliness can affect anyone. Be More Us was helped to grow by people sharing and liking the campaign’s digital content on Facebook, Twitter and other social media platforms. Stakeholders who were interviewed explained that the video content was being used and shared with people as a way of explaining loneliness and to raise awareness.
#LetsTalkLoneliness campaign

Loneliness strategy prompts campaign

After the UK government published its Loneliness Strategy for England in October 2018 part of their goal was a commitment to tackling the stigma of loneliness and promoting the importance of social connections. In June 2019 the #LetsTalkLoneliness campaign was launched to help raise awareness and tackle stigma. As it says on its website, ‘All of us can experience loneliness at some point in our lives. It’s time we started talking about it.’ It seeks to encourage everyone to start the conversation and say it’s OK to feel lonely and it’s OK to talk about it.

Partnership approach

At the centre of the campaign is its website which brings together organisations, resources and inspirational stories that are united in a shared aim, to get more people talking about loneliness. The campaign is formed of eight partners: Marmalade Trust, Campaign to End Loneliness, Jo Cox Foundation, Public Health England, Co-op Foundation, British Red Cross, Community Fund, and HM Government. The #LetsTalkLoneliness campaign has helped to grow this conversation by bringing people, their stories and organisations together to tackle loneliness and create connections.

Together with their partners, including organisations like the Co-op Foundation who launched a youth focused aspect of the campaign, the campaign has seen the strategy come to life. Young animators have interpreted the stories of other young people experiencing loneliness and organisations across the UK have added themselves to the shared map, highlighting what support is available at a local level.

Sharing stories to destigmatise loneliness

This campaign encourages people to get involved by sharing their stories online in order to show how normal it is to feel lonely and highlight that no one should be ashamed or embarrassed to talk about their feelings.
Loneliness and managing alone

Research shows there are ways of managing the negative thoughts and feelings of loneliness that can be practiced alone. Our focus groups also suggest that many – though not all – people are receptive to the idea of managing loneliness through psychology suggesting that public campaigning along these lines could be effective.

Making time to reflect on personal triggers to loneliness or what has caused loneliness to persist is an important first step in helping to work out what might help shift these feelings. Writing thoughts down can be useful. It helps to slow down and work through the unhelpful thought patterns, which in itself can generate feelings of having greater control.

Whilst loneliness is often described as a lack of meaningful relationships with other people, there is also evidence of how our sense of connection with the environment affects us. Spending regular time outdoors, with or without other people, can help to ease feelings of loneliness. Going outdoors, stepping into a garden or balcony, or even looking out of a window can provide a sense of connection with nature or the outside world which has been shown to promote physical and mental wellbeing for older people.

Activities can provide distraction from negative thoughts. These vary enormously from simple pastimes like reading, listening to the radio, or doing puzzles to more creative interests like gardening, arts and crafts and singing.

There is increasing evidence to show that taking part in creative pastimes or an activity that gives a sense of purpose can help manage loneliness and improve wellbeing. Actively focusing on the positive and developing a sense of optimism can affect wellbeing and can be practised as a coping mechanism. This includes identifying what brings pleasure in your current situation as well as thinking back to the past with a focus on the good times.

A focus on the short-term future, including making plans, can also feel more manageable than focusing far into the future. Thoughts about the longer term can be further complicated by life events which may be harder to control. Short-term planning includes having a structure to the day or week. It also helps to identify times when loneliness may be felt more acutely to consider what specific strategies may help at these times.

Talking about loneliness as well as other emotions can be difficult. Knowing that loneliness is something everyone experiences at some point can help to normalise the feelings and make them easier to talk about. As can knowing loneliness can arise from circumstances out of our control rather than because of personal failure. Identifying a person that is trusted or phoning a support line (like The Silver Line, Age UK, Mind) can help. We also know that making the effort to initiate small moments of connection can distract from loneliness and have the potential to develop more meaningful connections or re-ignite old ones.
What older people say

Many of the strategies above were described by the focus group participants to cope with their loneliness. They described techniques which helped them challenge their negative thoughts and feelings, aid reflection, build their confidence and externalise their inner thoughts.

Examples of mindfulness activities to manage thoughts and to be in the moment were described and included using colouring books, deep breathing, visualisation and imagery. This participant who struggled with loneliness and depression after her husband died, described the way she maintained a connection with her husband and how writing things down helped her think things through.

“I just keep my husband’s photo there, and every morning I ask him, I’m going to do that, do you agree with me, or can you give me some advice. I put it down on the paper, I’m going to do this, that and that. So which is the best one? And I myself decide what to do, but actually he helps me.”

This participant who was lonely and lived alone described how her pastime provided a sense of purpose which was an important motivation for her.

“If you’ve got a purpose, it will keep you going, and that’s why I’m saying to you, knitting something for somebody, then you know you’ve got that purpose and it helps.”

The daily routine and effort involved was an important aspect of feeling well for this participant.

“I have a little routine every morning. I make myself do this and I feel better for it and I make myself have a walk to the garage every morning and back, and I feel better for it. I don’t always feel like doing it, but I do do it.”

[What made you set up that routine?] Well, it’s just I do a few exercises, showers, and I walk to get the paper and come back again. By the time I’ve walked to the garage and spoken to people, ‘Good morning’ and I get back in the house, I feel fine, you know? But I think if I got up and didn’t, I wouldn’t.”

Recommendations:

Population-level messaging needs to:

- include the psychological, social and structural aspects of loneliness in order to be comprehensive
- emphasise the importance of meaningful social relationships over the life course
- include strategies to manage alone
Findings from Previous Roundtables

This is the third of three roundtables that Aspen Digital is holding in collaboration with Facebook on the topic of loneliness. The recaps and notes from the first two are included below for your reference.

Roundtable 1: Loneliness in a Connected World
June 24, 2020

The following provides a high-level overview and potential outputs from the discussions held on June 24, 2020. The roundtable, Loneliness in a Connected World, sought to explore the challenges and opportunities at the intersection of loneliness, technology, and social connection. Specifically, participants discussed current research and measurement strategies, and examined specific characteristics of loneliness as it relates to technology and social media.

The roundtable featured 23 external participants from academia, research, industry, and government. The two-hour discussion was moderated by Vivian Schiller, Executive Director of Aspen Digital, and featured four sessions, including a set of breakout discussions to cover specific topics such as data gaps and ethics.

Overall key themes in the discussion included:

- Loneliness is highly contextual and situational.
  - Need to establish new frameworks and research questions that better align with context (e.g. behavioral, multi-factoral, and longitudinal).
    - As one participant noted: “How does loneliness affect how we come to social media (so, how we interpret information found there and how we engage with others)? How does this change or not over time? (state vs. trait)”
  - Need to consider how additional elements of social connection (e.g. polarization) relate to loneliness.

- Design of platforms likely matters.
  - Not all platforms are the same, offering different experiences and or support for loneliness.
  - One participant noted: “Decisions about design and means of access to online spaces reflect company and stakeholder values... But these values may sit in tension with others sets of values that would better help facilitate social connection for more users and do more to genuinely alleviate loneliness. Will tech companies be willing to prioritize the latter if/when they are found to be in tension with the former?”
Participants also discussed issues around current data gaps and tools for measuring loneliness. In general, key needs identified included:

- Need a better understanding of basic themes related to loneliness, such as change over time, external conditions related to social connection, etc.
- Need for a shared language to help inform research (and general public)
- Need to leverage current data streams (e.g. national longitudinal studies and prior scientific findings on causal relationships between loneliness and depression, or between loneliness and other mental or physical health issues.)
- Need for behavioral data (e.g. log data). What are the behaviors of people experiencing loneliness on social media?
- Need to be mindful of population representation and ethics in research and product design.

**Resources:**

Full Recap Notes
- Data Gaps and Needs Working Group Notes
- Measurements and Metrics Working Group Notes
- Ethics Working Group Notes
Roundtable 2: Loneliness in a Fractured World
July 9, 2020

The following provides a high-level overview and potential outputs from the discussions held on July 9, 2020. The second roundtable, *Loneliness in a Fractured World* turned its attention towards the impact loneliness and social isolation may have on our relationship with our communities. Specifically, the group explored how loneliness may or may not change our understanding of the self and how we then relate to others.

The roundtable featured 22 external participants from academia, research, industry, and government. The two-hour discussion was moderated by Vivian Schiller, Executive Director of Aspen Digital, and featured three sessions, which covered the following themes: 1) the innate need for humans to connect and how this informs how we build relationships and communities; 2) the relationship of loneliness in its ability to rupture social connection; and 3) how can we build bridges during times of loneliness and how technology can be helpful—or not.

The discussion traversed a variety of perspectives and significantly differed in insights and outcomes to the first roundtable. The focus centered primarily on the external drivers of loneliness – beyond mental illness – that include an intrinsic need to connect with others in order to survive, as well as the impact of systematic structures of oppression. The discussion flowed between the need to understand specific contexts – such as the pandemic and long-term impact of loneliness on conditions for community building that are associated with a loss of trust and control. The dialogue, particularly the chat, touched on notions of diversity and equity as key components to social connection. As one participant noted, “The question of loneliness does not exist in a vacuum.”

Key highlights from the discussion include:

- **Need for precision in understanding the effects of loneliness on specific communities.**
  - Research conducted by several participants shows no large increase in loneliness in the general population’s response to COVID-19 over-time; though there are increases in specific sub-groups.
    - The Trajectory of Loneliness in Response to COVID-19.
  - Alienation vs. loneliness is an important distinction to understand how this affects marginalized communities. Loneliness measures may not capture this and will not accurately represent what is happening for BIPOC and others.
    - Consider how exclusion directly and indirectly influences adverse and health promoting pathways and health outcomes, further complicated by intersectional social positionality.
    - Suggested reading: *Aloneness* by Gwendolyn Brooks
    - Important to consider social action and its role in mediating isolation.
- **Need to consider the dangers of loneliness and isolation on an acute versus long-term time scale.**
As one participant noted: “What has not been touched is the veracity that loneliness is a normative experience (everybody has it). The critical point here is where such experience turns into a pathological one.”

- For successful interventions to reduce loneliness, we need much more detailed understanding of the nature of the social interactions.
  - Need clearer definitions between loneliness, solitude, and ‘being alone’.
  - Need to understand how often individuals oscillate between modes of social connection. For example, what is that “hit rate” (aka frequency) for generating new social connections on social media?
    - This echoes back to insights from Roundtable 1 that advocate for a need to understand cross-platform behaviors and the impact of multiple modes of social connection.
  - As one participant noted: “Being connected is not the same as staving off loneliness.”

Another key component to the discussion centered around the stigma of “loneliness” in public discourse. As one participant highlighted, the pandemic has significantly changed the way we communicate in moments of vulnerability. Public facing positions, such as the Minister of Loneliness in the UK, raises not only awareness of loneliness but also gives people the language needed to make them “feel safe to talk about the issue that they might feel ashamed of.” One participant also suggested that there may be a way to encourage a “blended model” that encourages small acts of kindness (facilitated by technology) that may help build a sense of connection. Similarly, another participant challenged the group to consider the following: How do we tap into our own experiences of loneliness to understand how others are experiencing loneliness? How can this resonate with other perspectives and to highlight what are the shared experiences here (i.e. on a platform) of loneliness?

Additional questions and projects to consider:

- Need to develop tools that enable individuals to live more constructively in solitude rather than loneliness.
- Consider how to target interventions that focus on sharing experiences of loneliness with others in order to connect.
- How can interventions help the lonely find meaning and or the ability to connect to an identity greater themselves?
- Consider whether measurements of loneliness are conflated with measures of alienation; and how this distinction is key in understanding marginalized communities.
- Consider loneliness as a construct to evaluate power within social systems; to ask questions such as: “Who has built ‘capacity’ for loneliness, culturally, and why? What can we learn from those experiences?; Who benefits from the othering and alienation that marginalized communities are burdened by?; and what is the social responsibility of those in power?”
- To what extent does an individual’s expectation of control and trust impact their feelings of social connection and loneliness?
Interventions on loneliness typically are around: (a) social cognitive changes; (b) social access (opportunities for connection); (c) provision of social resources/support. Meta-analyses shows that the most successful interventions are around social cognitive changes; but these interventions seem to integrate (b) and (c) as well. Technologies will likely need to consider all three.

Resources:
Full Recap Notes

Shared resources:

- Mental Health and Behavior of College Students During the Early Phases of the COVID-19 Pandemic: Longitudinal Smartphone and Ecological Momentary Assessment Study
- Aloneness by Gwendolyn Brooks
- Emergent Strategy by Adrienne Maree Brown
- COVID-19 Social Study Principle Investigators Dr. Daisy Fancourt and Professor Andrew Steptoe (UK)
- How We Show Up: Reclaiming Family, Friendship, and Community by Mia Birdsong
- Facebook post on how we don’t benefit from hate
Optional Readings

**Historic Shift in Americans’ Happiness Amid Pandemic**
David Sterrett, NORC at the University of Chicago, June 2020

**The Trajectory of Loneliness in Response to COVID-19**

- Original Author Unknown
Shared by Flavio Nazario, Brazil