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## WHY AND HOW TO TALK ABOUT LONELINESS

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### ABSTRACT

This paper discusses why talking about loneliness is important, what topics should be talked about and offers points of attention for bringing up the topic of loneliness. There are three reasons why talking about loneliness is important. First, conversation is the only way to assess loneliness at the individual level. Second, conversations help gathering rich information about an individual's loneliness and thus are essential in determining appropriate follow-up action. Third, conversation helps individuals in structuring their thoughts, which results in more agency for the lonely individual. Four topic areas to discuss regarding loneliness are specified, i.e. how loneliness feels,

what causes loneliness, what consequences of loneliness are, and how loneliness is addressed. Furthermore, three points of attention for bringing up the topic of loneliness are presented, i.e. how loneliness influences the ability to build and maintain relationships, that loneliness should not be a taboo, but an everyday topic to discuss, and the possible pitfall of talking about easy solutions. As talking about loneliness is important, developing, implementing and evaluating training to talk about loneliness is an important step for future development.

## **KEY WORDS**

Loneliness, talking about loneliness, training on talking about loneliness, social loneliness, emotional loneliness, existential loneliness

## **SAMENVATTING**

Dit artikel gaat in op de vraag waarom praten over eenzaamheid belangrijk is, welke onderwerpen besproken zouden moeten worden en biedt aandachtspunten voor het ter sprake brengen van het onderwerp eenzaamheid. Er zijn drie redenen waarom praten over eenzaamheid belangrijk is. Ten eerste, gesprekken vormen de enige manier om eenzaamheid op individueel niveau vast te stellen. Ten tweede, gesprekken leveren rijke informatie op over de individuele beleving van eenzaamheid en zijn dus essentieel in het bepalen van vervolgacties. Ten derde, gesprekken helpen met het structuren van gedachten, hetgeen de eigen regie van het individu vergroot. Vier typen onderwerpen om te bespreken worden benoemd, namelijk hoe eenzaamheid voelt, oorzaken van eenzaamheid, gevolgen van eenzaamheid en hoe mensen omgaan met eenzaamheid. Daarnaast worden drie aandachtspunten voor het ter sprake brengen van eenzaamheid gepresenteerd, namelijk hoe eenzaamheid de mogelijkheden tot het aangaan van relaties beïnvloedt, dat eenzaamheid geen taboe onderwerp maar een alledaags gespreksonderwerp zou moeten zijn en de mogelijke valkuil van het praten over makkelijke oplossingen. Omdat praten over eenzaamheid belangrijk is, vormt het ontwikkelen, implementeren en evalueren van training met als onderwerp gespreksvoering over eenzaamheid een belangrijke stap voor toekomstige ontwikkeling.

## **TREFWOORDEN**

Eenzaamheid, praten over eenzaamheid, training in praten over eenzaamheid, sociale eenzaamheid, emotionele eenzaamheid, existentiële eenzaamheid

## INTRODUCTION

In recent years, there has been a growing concern about the prevalence of loneliness in the Netherlands and other parts of the world. In response, the Dutch Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sports, launched an action program called 'Eén-tegen-eenzaamheid' (One against loneliness) in 2018, thus boosting the public attention for this topic. People of all age categories experience loneliness (Van Tilburg & Klok, 2018). In the Netherlands 30 to 45% of the adult population indicates feeling lonely (Dykstra, 2009; GGD, CBS, & RIVM, 2016). There are different reasons why the topic of loneliness receives attention. At the individual level, loneliness influences people's everyday life and is associated with poorer well-being (De Jong Gierveld, 1998). At the societal level, loneliness is associated with negative health outcomes (Hawkey & Cacioppo, 2003; Luanaigh & Lawlor, 2008), less social participation (Hawkey & Cacioppo, 2010), higher risk of mortality (Holwerda et al., 2016) and, as a consequence of these, high health costs (Gerst-Emerson & Jayawardhana, 2015; Mihalopoulos et al., 2019).

Loneliness is commonly defined as "the subjective experience of an unpleasant or inadmissible lack of (quantity and quality of) certain relationships" (De Jong Gierveld, 1998). Several aspects of this definition require further elaboration. First, loneliness is per definition a negative feeling, yet there is a large difference between loneliness as an 'unpleasant' or 'inadmissible' feeling. In other words, the intensity of the feeling can differ. The second aspect refers to the differences between 'quality' and 'quantity' of relationships and the word 'certain' that is used in the definition. This definition distinguishes two types of loneliness, i.e. emotional loneliness, which originates from the absence of an intimate figure or a close emotional attachment such as a partner or a best friend and social loneliness, which originates from the absence of a broader group of contacts or an engaging social network (De Jong Gierveld, 1998; Weiss, 1973). The distinction in two types of loneliness is useful, yet it is important to note that within these types there are finesses related to the aspect of 'certain relationships'. Emotional loneliness for instance, can be related to missing someone to have deeper discussions with, but also to missing someone to touch intimately. This is not necessarily the same person and if not, these separate persons are often not interchangeable. Social loneliness is also related to the lack of 'certain relationships' that are not always interchangeable, for instance, the lack of a network of neighbours to feel at home in the community, the missing of the home culture of the country and town one grew up in, or lack of a friendly group of co-workers at work. Furthermore, referring to 'quantity' of relationships, some people need more relationships than others. Relationship standards and expectations are thus essential with regard to loneliness. Finally, there is a difference in the timing of loneliness. Loneliness can be a continuous experience

throughout the day, week, and year, but it can also be fleeting and related to certain moments of the day, week, month or year. For instance, a study from the UK shows that older adults experience loneliness more during evenings, weekends, and summers, than during daytime, midweeks, and winters (Victor, Sullivan, Woodbridge, & Thomas, 2015).

In addition to social and emotional loneliness, a third type of loneliness is sometimes distinguished, i.e. existential loneliness. Existential loneliness is defined as “an intolerable emptiness, sadness, and longing, that results from the awareness of one’s fundamental separateness as a human being” (Ettema, Derksen, & Van Leeuwen, 2010). In a literature review, Bolmsjö, Tengland and Rämgård (2019) distinguished several key aspects of existential loneliness, i.e. not connecting with others and the world outside, alienation, feelings of isolation, emptiness, and abandonment. In addition, fear for mortality is identified to be associated with this type of loneliness, including the fear of disappearing from earth, the fear of being forgotten, and the fear of dying. Given the different types of loneliness and the range in intensity and timing, it is safe to assume that loneliness is not an exclusive feeling, reserved for some, but a feeling that is, in one way or another, familiar for many.

This paper addresses the topic of ‘talking about loneliness’. Professionals find it difficult to do so with their clients. Loneliness seems a taboo topic to discuss (Dahlberg, 2007; Michiels & De Wachter, 2019). There appears to be a shyness to bring up the topic, for instance because people don’t want to be considered as meddling, because they don’t want to become responsible for finding a solution, or because of a personal resistance against people that complain (Jonkers & Machielse, 2012). This difficulty to talk about loneliness is illustrated by a study performed by the Dutch organization for nurses and caregivers (V&VN) among their members (N = 1021). Most professionals indicated working with lonely patients daily (53%) or weekly (30%). They perceive a role for themselves in signalling loneliness, discussing loneliness, activating and organizing the social network, stimulating social contacts and listening. However, professionals indicate that they find it difficult to address the topic of loneliness themselves (86%), that patients find it hard to talk about loneliness also (71%), and that they need more tools concerning loneliness (73%) (V&VN, 2018). This suggests that there is a need for ‘tools’ and training on talking about loneliness among professionals. Assumingly, this is not limited to the care domain but also applies to the domain of wellbeing. In the next part of this paper the question ‘why it is important to talk about loneliness’ is addressed. The question ‘how to talk about loneliness’ in terms of possible topics to address and how to bring up the topic of loneliness is addressed in the following paragraphs. In this paper there is a focus on elements that are specific for conversations about loneliness.

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General conversational skills are essential for having good conversations about loneliness, but for the sake of focus not included in this paper.

### **WHY TALKING ABOUT LONELINESS IS IMPORTANT**

Talking with persons who experience loneliness about these feelings is important. This has three main reasons. First, conversations are essential in assessing loneliness. At present, there is no instrument to assess loneliness at the individual level. Questionnaires to assess loneliness at a population level exist (De Jong Gierveld & Van Tilburg, 1999; Russell, Peplau, & Cutrona, 1980), but are not exact enough to determine loneliness at the individual level (De Jong Gierveld & Van Tilburg, 1999). Loneliness is not a visible trait. Given the subjective nature of loneliness (De Jong Gierveld, 1998), assumptions about who is lonely and who is not are often inaccurate. In a recent study, Ten Bruggencate and colleagues (2019) asked professionals from a social work organisation to connect them with individuals whom they considered to be lonely. When studied, many of these individuals did not indicate feeling lonely themselves. This illustrates how difficult assessment of loneliness can be. To date, having a conversation and asking someone about their feelings of loneliness is the only accurate way to assess loneliness at the individual level.

Second, conversations about loneliness are essential in determining if follow up action is possible and needed, and if so, what action would be appropriate for the lonely individual. Loneliness is an individual experience and it is essential to connect to the individual's specific feelings, needs, and possibilities. In other words, one needs to know the individual to be able to understand the nature of her loneliness and to meticulously consider how to adequately react to that. Conversations about loneliness help gathering information about the other and thus provides information to help lonely individuals in a tailor-made fashion. There are many existing interventions with regard to loneliness. A conversation can have a bridging function between the lonely individual and the appropriate intervention.

Third, conversation may help in structuring thoughts and being reflective about one's own situation. Talking about their loneliness might provide individuals with insights in their own actions, behaviours, possibilities and limits. This may help put one's experiences into perspective, which is a form of regulative coping with loneliness (Bouwman, Aartsen, van Tilburg, & Stevens, 2017; Schoenmakers, Van Tilburg, & Fokkema, 2012). Conversations might thus help in coping with loneliness, in asking the right questions for help, and in maintaining or gaining agency over one's own situation.

## TOPICS TO DISCUSS

From literature about loneliness, four topic areas to discuss about loneliness arise, i.e. how loneliness feels, what causes of loneliness are, what consequences of loneliness are, and how loneliness is addressed. Table 1 shows these topic areas, including supporting questions. Supporting questions serve as examples of questions related to subtopics, rather than as a fixed set of questions. In the following part, the four topic areas are elaborated on. These topics allow the lonely individual to express and possibly better understand their feelings regarding loneliness. Furthermore, they allow the professional to assess the existence of loneliness in their client and explore the nature of this loneliness, thus providing the necessary insights to consider appropriate, possible follow-up action.

**Table 1 Topics to discuss and supporting questions**

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### How loneliness feels

- How do you feel when you feel lonely?
- How intense does your loneliness feel?
- Who or what in your social relationships is lacking?
- When exactly and how often do you feel lonely (month, week, time of day)?

### What causes loneliness

- What triggered your lonely feelings?
- Have you previously felt lonely? What caused these feelings? Are they related to your current feelings?
- What skills or resources might help you, but are lacking?
- What do your current social relationships look like?

### What consequences of loneliness are

- Are there things you do not do because your feeling lonely?
- (How) does loneliness affect your current social relationships?
- Do you feel connected to others and yourself?
- Are you taking good care of yourself (food, exercise, etc.)? Is this related to your lonely feelings?

### How loneliness is addressed

- Do you want to address your feelings of loneliness at this time? Why?
  - Do you know what to do when you feel lonely?
  - What do you normally do when you feel or felt lonely?
-

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The first topic concerns questions about how loneliness feels and what loneliness is to the lonely individual. Loneliness is not a unidimensional construct. Earlier, different types of loneliness (i.e. social, emotional, and existential loneliness) are presented and it is argued that feeling lonely can come with different intensity, timing, and different 'certain relationships' that are lacking. A glimpse into how diverse loneliness can be perceived is presented in the work of Dahlberg (2007). Dahlberg interviewed older adults about their feelings of loneliness and distinguished different 'meanings of loneliness', ranging from feeling "rejected, excluded, forgotten, abandoned, unwanted or unnecessary" (Dahlberg, 2007; 198) to feeling lonely when "someone lives with a partner who does not "see" the other" (Dahlberg, 2007; 198) and to feeling as someone with a "lower status" because of the loneliness (Dahlberg, 2007; 202). Questions about how loneliness feels can be about the nature, intensity, and timing of the feeling, as well as about the experienced lack in the social network.

The second topic to discuss are causes of loneliness. Loneliness is the result of the sum of life course experiences, available resources and opportunities, and often, one or more events triggering loneliness, thus making loneliness a highly personal experience. It may be tempting to attribute loneliness to a sole event, e.g. bereavement, divorce, or loss of health. While these events are of course often related to the onset of loneliness (De Jong Gierveld, 1998; Savikko, Routasalo, Tilvis, Strandberg, & Pitkälä, 2005), they do not tell the complete story. Not all feelings of loneliness persist over a longer periods of time (Jylhä, 2004; Newall, Chipperfield, & Bailis, 2014). Some individuals who become lonely enter a downward spiral, making it increasingly difficult for them to overcome loneliness, while others do not and recover from periods of loneliness (Cacioppo & Hawkley, 2009; Dykstra, Van Tilburg & De Jong Gierveld, 2005). This is due to people having different resources and opportunities available, e.g. previous experiences with loneliness, dispositions towards life, social networks, psychological resources such as self-esteem (Leary, 1990) and mastery (Guiaux, 2010), and coping preferences (Bouwman et al., 2017; Schoenmakers et al., 2012). Questions related to the causes of loneliness can be about previous experiences with loneliness, life events that may be related to loneliness in the recent or distant past, existing and missing social networks, personal resources that may be lacking.

In the third topic to discuss, consequences of loneliness are addressed. In worst cases, loneliness results in negative social and health behaviour, where lonely persons participate less and take poor care of themselves, resulting in negative health outcomes (Hawkley & Cacioppo, 2010; Routasalo & Pitkala, 2003) and poorer wellbeing and quality of life. However, this is not always the case to the same extent. Despite feeling lonely, some lonely individuals do participate as before and take

good care of themselves. Questions with regard to consequences of loneliness can be about the things someone does not do because of his loneliness, how loneliness affects current relationships, the feeling of connectedness with oneself and others, and about whether someone takes good care of himself.

The fourth topic relates to the things that people do when they feel lonely. A possible, stereotypical image of loneliness might be that of a person doing nothing other than staring out of the window. While this may be true in some cases, most people react to the feeling of loneliness by taking up activities, either to address the feeling of loneliness or to avoid or ignore it. Studies among older adults show a wide array of activities, ranging from praying to walking and from gardening to going out (Rokach & Brock, 1998; Schoenmakers & Tindemans, 2019). Other activities can be working (too hard), exercising, shopping, and so on. In order to find a fitting way to address loneliness, it is important to know what individuals have already tried and how this worked for them. This provides insight in coping preferences and effects and allows to expand on or differ from previous attempts.

Furthermore, even though loneliness is by definition a negative feeling (De Jong Gierveld, 1998) changing this feeling may be emotionally challenging and time consuming. Some would prefer acceptance or distraction over other coping options. It is important to know if individuals want to change the feeling at the current time. Questions about how loneliness is addressed can be about this willingness to change the current situation at this time, about the extent to which someone knows what to do when feeling lonely, and about what people normally do when they feel lonely.

## **POINTS OF ATTENTION FOR BRINGING UP THE TOPIC OF LONELINESS**

### **Building and maintaining a relationship with someone who feels lonely**

As in any conversation, it is important to connect with your conversational partner who feels lonely. There are two sets of reasons why building and maintaining a relationship with a lonely conversation partner may prove to be more difficult than with a non-lonely partner. The first set of reasons relates to lonely persons' social skills. Loneliness is found to be related to low social



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skills (Cacioppo et al., 2006; Jin & Park, 2013). More specific, studies show that lonely persons are less conversable than non-lonely persons. They interfere in conversations less often and have less attention for others in the conversations (Bell, 1985; Jones, Hobbs & Hockenbury, 1982). Furthermore, lonely persons consider themselves to be less capable of conversation (Spitzberg & Canary, 1985). An underlying factor regarding lower social skills of lonely persons, is that lonely persons are known to experience (social) anxiety (Cacioppo et al., 2006; Fees, Martin, & Poon, 1999). Lonely persons have been shown to hold negative perceptions of new acquaintances and people in general (Wittenberg & Reis, 1986).

The second set of reasons why building and maintaining a relationship with a lonely conversation partner may prove to be difficult is related to how we perceive others who we consider to be lonely. Conversational partners perceive persons who they consider to be lonely as less involved and less appealing as a friend than non-lonely persons (Bell, 1985; Lau & Gruen, 1992). They are considered to be less sociable and conversational than others by their conversation partners (Rotenberg, Gruman, & Ariganello, 2002; Spitzberg & Canary, 1985) and in return, conversational partners are less sociable in their conversations with others whom they consider to be lonely (Rotenberg et al., 2002). Most of the mentioned findings are dated and relate to findings in experimental settings with students. While we have to be cautious to extrapolate these findings too broadly, they do indicate that building and maintaining a relationship with lonely persons, or those who we consider to be lonely is not easy. This is both due to lack of social skills by lonely individuals and to perceptions of people towards conversation partners whom we consider to be lonely. The advice stemming from this is to accept that conversations may be more difficult with someone who feels lonely. Don't give up when there is no personal 'click'. Acknowledge that building and maintaining a relationship might take time and reserve this time.

### **Loneliness as an everyday topic to discuss**

Talking about loneliness is not considered to be easy. People may feel ashamed about feeling lonely or have negative experiences with or expectations about discussing loneliness with others. Lonely persons might try to avoid talking about loneliness, due to expected negative reactions from others. This may be a valid concern. Hauge and Kirkevold (2010) found that older adults who were not lonely themselves blamed those who gave in to loneliness for doing so. This complicates talking about loneliness. It is important to break through the taboo (Dahlberg, 2007; Michiels & De Wachter, 2019). In order to do so, loneliness should not be addressed as a difficult topic, as this would confirm the taboo nature of the topic and the perception that loneliness is a deviant feeling

that one should be ashamed of. Instead is advised to introduce loneliness as a normal, everyday topic to discuss with others.

### **Possible pitfall: talking about easy solutions for loneliness**

When individuals have felt lonely for a longer time, they may need help in coping with that loneliness. However, even though well intended, bringing up 'easy solutions' may work counter effective. Loneliness is per definition a negative feeling (De Jong Gierveld, 1998). Nobody wants to feel lonely. Therefore, individuals who have felt lonely for a long time are likely to have attempted alleviating their loneliness one way or the other and have obviously not succeeded. This may hamper them in trying again. Moreover, if there were easy solutions for alleviating their loneliness, lonely persons most likely could have come up with those themselves. In many cases, there are no easy solutions for loneliness. Feeling lonely for a longer time makes people interpret social information wrong, e.g. gives them the idea that nobody likes them, and withdraw from social interaction (Cacioppo et al., 2015; Movisie, 2020). Coming up with possible solutions too early or with solutions that are not aligned with the problem at hand, however well-intended this may be, might make people withdraw. They may feel misunderstood, or not taken seriously. This will work counterproductive in establishing a relationship in which there is trust that someone may be able to help. Instead, it is better to talk about the lonely individual's situation, listen carefully, and try to make the client come up with possible coping activities to alleviate loneliness.

## **CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION**

Talking about loneliness is important. It is needed in order to assess who is lonely and who is not. It provides insight and background information about an individuals' loneliness, which is essential to determine what appropriate action, if necessary, would consist of. Finally, it helps structure one's thoughts, thus improving understanding of the situation and possibilities for applying agency.

Four further specified topics to talk about regarding loneliness are presented, i.e. how loneliness feels, what causes loneliness, what consequences of loneliness are, and how loneliness is addressed. Furthermore, specific points of attention regarding how to have a conversation about loneliness regarding building relationships, not adding to the taboo of loneliness (Dahlberg, 2007; Michiels & De Wachter, 2019), and not falling in the pitfall of offering easy solutions too early, are discussed. Despite the importance of talking about loneliness, professionals indicate finding it difficult to address this topic with their clients (Jonkers & Machielse, 2012; V&VN, 2018). For future development, it is

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important to train professionals in talking about loneliness in order for them to feel better prepared to engage in conversations about this topic. These trainings should incorporate the tips and topics discussed in this paper, however, it is important to note that good communication skills are essential as well. Currently, Movisie is offering a training regarding talking about loneliness (Movisie, 2020), yet it is of importance to have different options for different contexts and preferences.

There is not one correct way to have a conversation. Conversations can and should differ because the individuals who are involved and their ways of conversation and conversation skills differ. The presented topics and points of attention are meant as 'indicative', not 'directive'. Differences in the contexts of conversations also exist. One such difference is related to the available amount of time. This ranges between professionals of different domains and between professionals within domains. In some cases there might be a large amount of time available to build a relationship and to introduce the topic of loneliness slowly, e.g. in long-term home care situations where the professional pays home visits a couple of times per week for a longer period of time. In other cases the topic of loneliness needs to be addressed almost immediately without the opportunity to build a relationship first, e.g. when a social worker does a home visit in order to discuss and assess the individuals' situation and the possible need for intervention there.

Another contextual difference in conversations relates to the actor that takes the initiative for the conversation about loneliness. In many cases this will be the professional, but in some cases it may be the client. When the client addresses the topic, this will affect the conversation, for instance by lessening the tension related to discussing this topic. While the presented points for attention and topics are relevant in different conversation settings, the context of these settings is an important factor to keep in mind. Trainings for talking about loneliness should acknowledge differences in opportunities for different professionals.

There is a large number of existing interventions regarding loneliness. Together, they cost a lot of time, effort and money. Yet, studies have found many existing loneliness interventions to be unsuccessful (Fokkema & Van Tilburg, 2007; Masi et al., 2011). A possible explanation is that many interventions target a too generic group of participants (Schoenmakers, 2013). In other words, the match between the participant's specific problem and the intervention may in many cases be imperfect. Talking about loneliness can help in making a better match between the individual and the intervention and thus has the potential to considerably improve interventions effectiveness. Considering that selection of participants is essential for effectiveness, interventions found to be unsuccessful in past studies, may be incorrectly evaluated as such, given that effectiveness partly

depends on attracting the right participants. It can be argued though that addressing the right participants is part of the intervention process.

One of the goals of this paper was to convince that talking about loneliness is important and to offer tips and guidelines that may help in engaging in conversations about loneliness. For the future, it is important to study whether conversations help in assessing and addressing loneliness and to further elaborate on tips and guidelines in order to improve the knowledge about talking about loneliness. While the four topics described in this paper derive from studies regarding loneliness, additional topics may be possible and the questions formulated per topic are exemplar, meaning that other questions regarding the topic may serve equally well. Studying the effects of conversation on assessing and addressing loneliness would ask for a layered approach of developing and performing training options in combination with a research design that allows for testing the effects of conversations. Building a research design capable of proving the given claims will form a challenge. To conclude, talking about loneliness is human work and a certain amount of 'sensing the situation' will always be needed. Basic conversation skills are essential as well. However, gaining more information about what works and what does not in talking about loneliness and training those who are in the position that they can talk about loneliness with lonely individuals will contribute to better options for assistance in coping with loneliness.

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