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## Does it hurt to be lonely?



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Loneliness is the subjective feeling of being without the type of relationships one desires; that is, loneliness lies upon the perception that there is a discrepancy between one's real and desired relationships (Weiss, 1973; Junttila, 2010).

- Even though the correlation between the objective state of being alone and the subjective feeling of loneliness is strong, the latter has more negative consequences on person's mental and physical health (Cacioppo, Cacioppo, Capitanio, & Cole, 2014).
- Weiss (1973) originally differentiated between two dimensions of loneliness: **emotional loneliness** referring to the absence of an intimate and close emotional attachment, such as a good friend, and **social loneliness** referring to the absence of a broader group of contacts or networks, such as peers or mates to spend time with (Hoza et al., 2000; Junttila & Vauras, 2009; Junttila et al., 2015).





## What does it feel like?

“I have nobody to talk to. I have been bullied and rejected and totally ignored. Everybody hates me. Sometimes I feel that all I want is to die, and that I´m tired of this life. Nobody wants to notice me. I´m living like a ghost and none will miss me.” *(letter by a 11-years-old girl)*

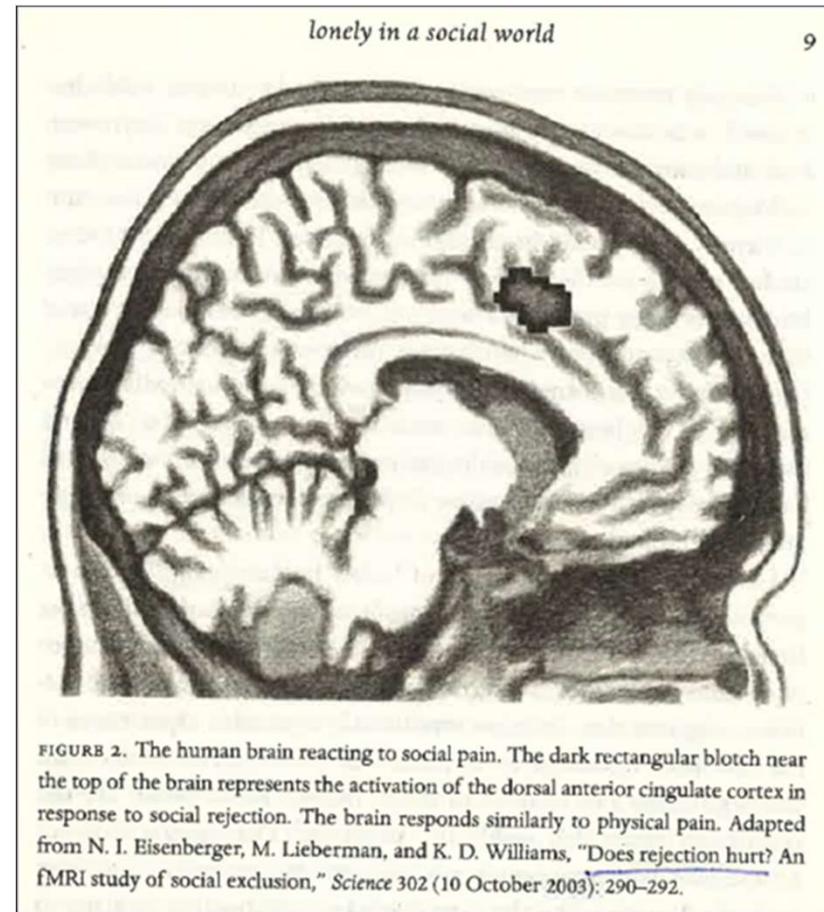
“If I have a choice I´ll rather be beaten but still have a friend, than feeling like nobody even notices me. I think that my classmates don´t even remember my name. Or, well, I know it since it just happened..” *(interview with a 12-years-old boy)*





## Does it hurt to be lonely?

"I'm too tired to carry on anymore. Loneliness is such an agony that I can't even describe it in words. I can't tell anyone how I feel since nobody understands me. I feel sick to my stomach yet nothing comes out. Every morning I try to find a reason for this. I'm practically already dead so what does it matter what I'll do with my life." (letter by a 17-years-old girl)





# Loneliness and friendships among eight-year-old children: time-trends over a 24-year period

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**Background:** Loneliness in childhood has a wide range of negative consequences for well-being and mental health later in life. This study reports time-trends in children's loneliness and the association between children's loneliness and psychiatric symptoms over a 24-year period. **Methods:** Information on 3,749 eight-year-old Finnish-speaking children born in 1981, 1991, 1997, and 2004 was gathered at four time points from the area covered by Turku University Hospital in southwest Finland. The actual numbers of participants at these time points were 986 (1989), 891 (1999), 930 (2005), and 942 (2013), with participation rates of 86%–95%. The study design and methods were similar at every time point. Information on children's loneliness and friendships was obtained from the children and also parents and teachers evaluated how many friends children had and their psychiatric symptoms. **Results:**

Approximately 20% of the children reported loneliness at each time point, 5% always felt lonely, and 25% wished they had more friends. Conduct and emotional problems, and hyperactivity were independently associated with loneliness in the multiple-regression analysis. The strength of these associations remained at similar levels over the 24-year study period. Living in a nonnuclear family, parents with a lower level of vocational education, and negative life events among the girls in the study were all associated with loneliness. **Conclusions:** Loneliness was a common phenomenon in childhood, and no notable changes were found during the 24-year study period. Psychiatric symptoms were strongly associated with loneliness. It is important to pay attention to children's loneliness and make it an integral part of school health care. Further epidemiological research is needed. **Keywords:** Cross-informant agreement; Friendships; Loneliness; mental health; psychiatric symptoms.



*"Loneliness resulted in isolation and self-deception, leading to depression, anxiety and panic disorder, and constant self-destruction."*

Loneliness at the age of 8 y.

- I feel lonely
- I have no friends
- I don't want to be with others
- Nobody cares about me



Loneliness at the age of 18 y.

- I feel lonely
- I don't work well with others
- Nobody loves me
- Other people don't like me

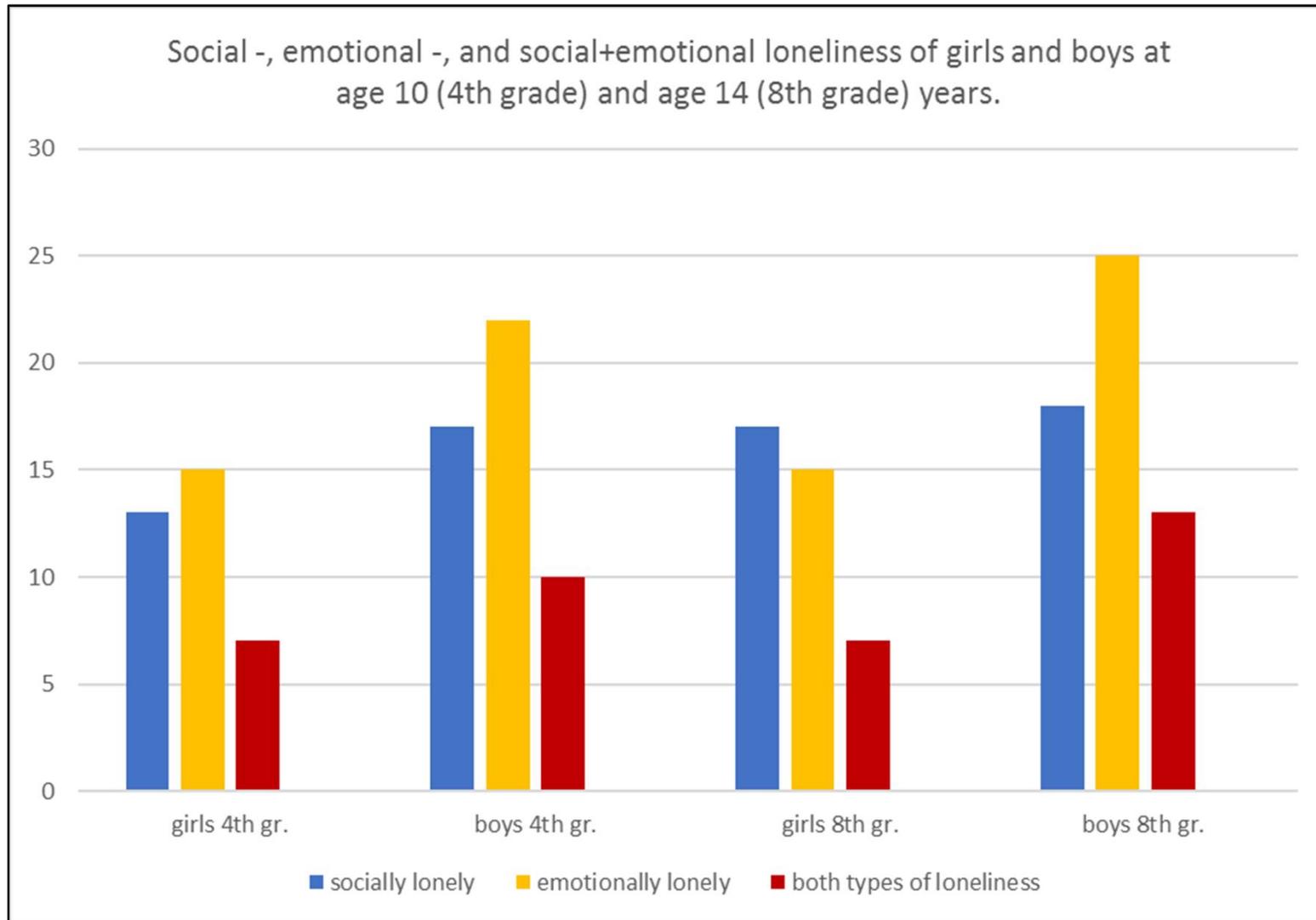
Psychiatric symptoms (YSR) / 18 y.

- Anxious, depressiveness
- Withdrawal
- Somatic complains
- Thought problems
- Aggressive behavior
- Delinquency

Suicidality at the age of 18 y.

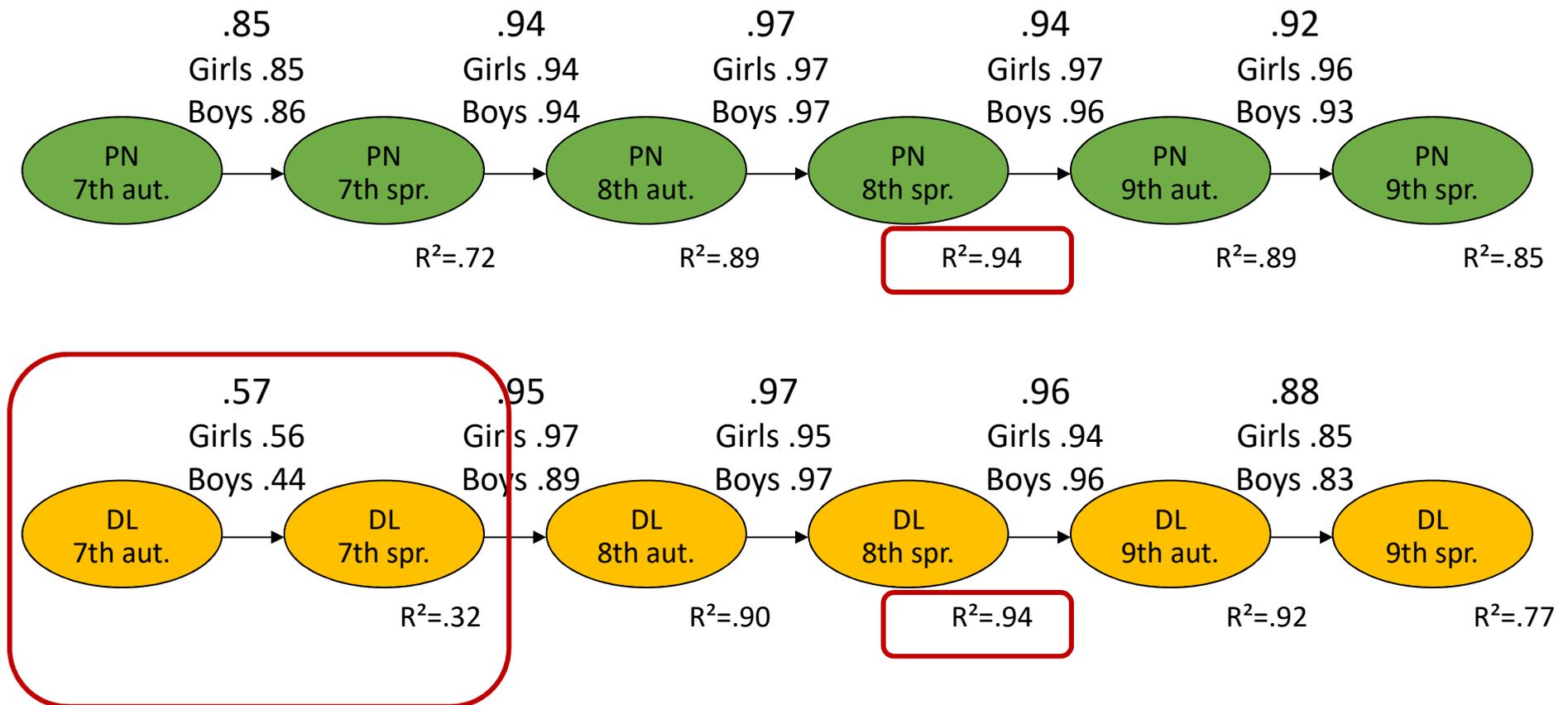
- I would kill myself if it were possible
- I harm myself intentionally
- I have thoughts about killing myself

**PEER NETWORK AND DYADIC LONELINESS SCALE** / Junttila, M., & Vauras, M. (2009). **Loneliness of school-aged children and their parents.** *Scandinavian Journal of Psychology*, 50, 211-219. / Junttila, N., Laakkonen, E., Niemi, P. M., & Ranta, K. (2010). **Modelling the interrelations of adolescents' loneliness, social anxiety and social phobia.** *Scientific Annals of the Psychological Society of Northern Greece*, vol 8.



Junttila, N. (2016). Lasten ja nuorten yksinäisyys. In J. Saari (toim.) *Yksinäisten Suomi*.

# The stability of girls' and boys' **social (PN)** and **emotional (DL)** loneliness during lower secondary school



Junttila, N., Laakkonen, E., & Niemi, P. M., (2009). Validity and Stability of the Scale Measuring Adolescents' Social and Emotional Loneliness. Paper presented in the 10th European Conference on Psychological Assessment. 16.-19. September 2009, Ghent, Belgium.

### **Lonely youth**

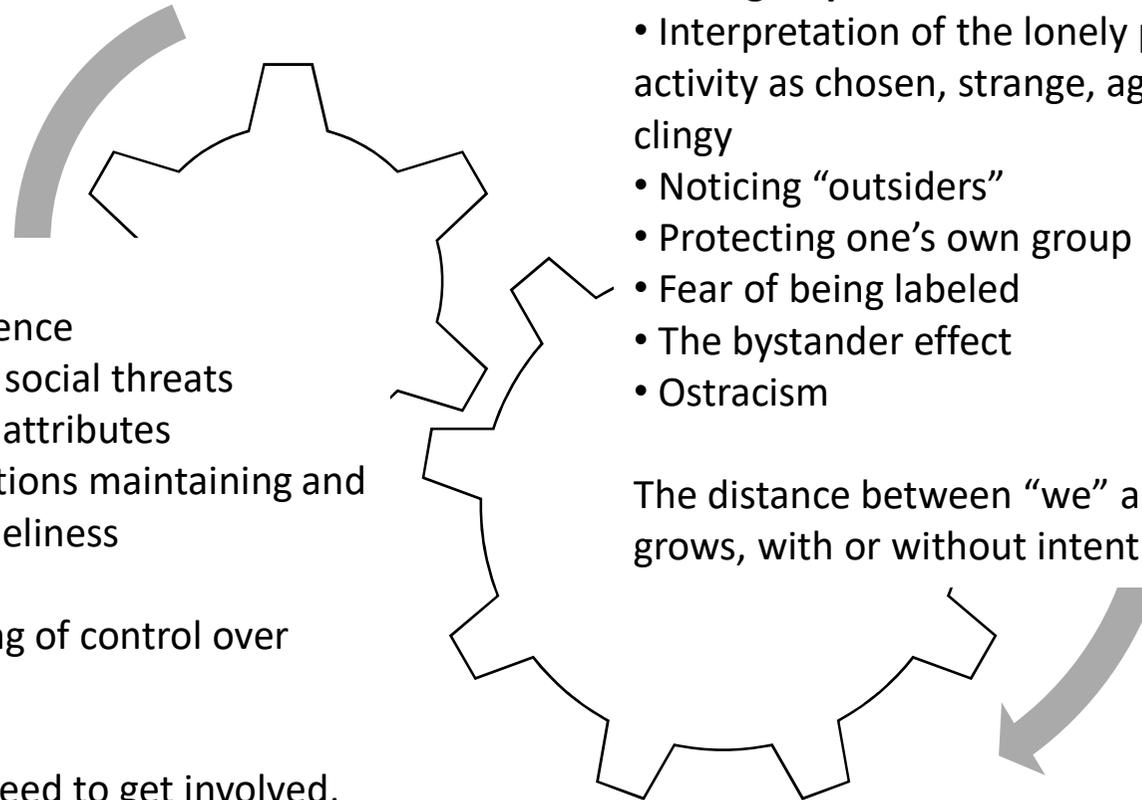
- Low social resilience
- Overreaction to social threats
- Self-destructive attributes
- Cognitive distortions maintaining and strengthening loneliness
- Social pain
- Losing the feeling of control over your own life

The compulsive need to get involved, to be accepted even in some group or at some level; frustration; bitterness; withdrawal, giving up.

### **Social groups**

- Interpretation of the lonely person's activity as chosen, strange, aggressive, clingy
- Noticing "outsiders"
- Protecting one's own group
- Fear of being labeled
- The bystander effect
- Ostracism

The distance between "we" and "others" grows, with or without intent to do so.





The growing costs of loneliness have led to a number of loneliness reduction interventions, which can be divided into four main categories (Masi et al, 2011):



✓ **Improving social skills**

- May prevent the cycle of loneliness. Useful for children and young adolescents, especially in multicultural contexts.

✓ **Enhancing social support**

- Creating positive atmosphere by socio-ecological interventions and innovations.

✓ **Increasing opportunities for social contacts**

- Creating possibilities for lonely people to connect with other lonely or better yet, non-lonely people.

✓ **Addressing maladaptive social cognitions**

- This has been shown to be the most successful approach and may be the only effective cure for chronic and deep loneliness linked with depressive and anxious symptoms or suicidal ideation and/or behavior.





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## How does it feel to have a friend..



- ✓ "I feel that whatever happens I can cope with it. That I'm not going to break anymore. Because I have them. My friends"
- ✓ "It feels like winning in a lottery or something. Or maybe not – it is far more better than that. That someone is proud of you and wants to be your friend."
- ✓ "Sometimes, when I have a bad day, I envision that I will call her after school. And that she would understand me perfectly. And in my mind I can already imagine what she is going to say and it already helps me so much that sometimes I don't even have to call her since I already know how good it would make me feel. The feeling that no matter what, she would understand me and be my friend."
- ✓ **"It feels that everything is possible. Just everything."**



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