

Study Finds



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June 29, 2020

Coronavirus, Happiness, Health & Medical, Psychological, Society & Culture

American fortitude: Loneliness hasn't increased during the pandemic, but resilience has



by John Anderer

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TALLAHASSEE, Fla. — Americans' social lives remain in limbo as the coronavirus pandemic lingers on. Weekends that would have been spent at parties, concerts, or bars are now spent firmly on the couch for many. Social distancing certainly isn't much fun, and mental health professionals warn that the country will likely see a big uptick in loneliness and mental health issues in the wake of COVID-19. A study conducted at Florida State University, however, concludes those warnings are entirely wrong.

Surprisingly, a new survey of more than 2,000 adults taken both before and after the pandemic finds that Americans really aren't feeling any more lonely than usual. In fact, the research indicates a remarkable amount of resilience and gumption in the face of this ordeal.

"There has been a lot of worry that loneliness would increase dramatically because of the social distancing guidelines and restrictions," says lead author Martina Luchetti, an assistant professor at the FSU College of Medicine, in a release. "Contrary to this fear, we found that overall loneliness did not increase. Instead, people felt more supported by others than before the pandemic. Even while physically isolated, the feeling of increased social support and of being in this together may help limit increases in loneliness."

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Survey respondents varied in age greatly (18-90 years old). Each person was initially polled in early February 2020, about a month before the coronavirus gripped the nation, on topics unrelated to **COVID-19**. Once it became apparent that the country was facing a once-in-a-century pandemic, researchers launched two more followup surveys. The second survey was administered in the middle of March, and the final survey was given in late April.

After collecting all the responses, the team at FSU looked specifically for signs of increased loneliness. Instead, they only noted a slight increase in feelings of isolation **among older adults**. However, even with that increase younger Americans still reported more overall loneliness than their older counterparts. Additionally, the observed uptick in loneliness among older respondents didn't last very long. In fact, it disappeared shortly after lockdown orders went into effect.

The survey taken before the pandemic revealed that Americans living alone, or dealing with at least one chronic illness, generally feel lonelier than other people. But, even lonely feelings among these groups have not increased **during lockdowns**.

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“Despite a small increase among some individuals, we found overall **remarkable** resilience in response to COVID-19,” comments senior author Angelina Sutin, associate professor of Behavioral Sciences and Social Medicine at FSU.

Hard times make Americans more resilient?

Loneliness, unfortunately, is quite common nowadays regardless of any virus. It's estimated that 35% of adults over the age of 45, and 43% of adults over the age of 60, feel lonely **quite often**.

“In the context of the coronavirus pandemic, it may be particularly difficult to reconnect with others given the restrictions on in-person social gatherings,” Luchetti says. “Even these transient feelings of loneliness can have a negative effect on health, meaning there could be dangerous unintended consequences if loneliness increases in response to the restrictive measures taken as a result of the pandemic.”

At face value, these conclusions are quite surprising. The study's authors hypothesize, though, that while the pandemic keeps us apart physically, it also **brings people together** on an emotional level.

“Just knowing that you are not alone and that everyone is going through the same restrictions and difficulties may be enough in the short term to keep feelings of loneliness down,” Sutin concludes.

The **study** is published in *American Psychologist*.