



Bella DePaulo Ph.D.
Living Single

LONELINESS

Have People Living Alone Become Lonelier Since COVID-19?

Lonelier since the onset of the coronavirus? Not so fast.

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We are supposed to be the vulnerable ones, those of us who are living alone. Under stay-at-home orders during the pandemic, our [assumed loneliness](#) has presumably deepened. “Ask Polly” advice columnist Heather Havrilesky, who has written so many thoughtful and multifaceted answers to her readers’ questions, tweeted to her 52,900 followers a few days ago:

“If you have good friends who live alone, you need to check in on them often. Set an alarm. They need you.”

I live alone—and I worry about the people who don’t. Maybe they are the ones who need help. They are dealing with the everyday irritation of having other people around all the time. Not to even mention the far more ominous possibilities of being trapped in place with someone who may be abusive.

It is kind and thoughtful to care about how others are faring during the pandemic, whether they live alone or with others. But none of us, myself included, should presume that any one person is doing well or poorly based solely on their living arrangements. We are all individuals.

Loneliness Before and After Stay-at-Home Orders: New Research

Enough with the speculation. We now have systematic research on the [loneliness](#) of a nationwide sample of 1,545 American adults. Their loneliness was first assessed before lockdown orders (late January and early February), and then again in late March, when social distancing measures were widely recommended, and then a third time in late April, when most state and local governments had had stay-at-home policies in place for nearly a month.

Martina Luchetti and six of her colleagues from the Florida State University College of Medicine recently [reported](#) their findings online in the journal *American Psychologist*.

They predicted that people who live alone “may be at higher risk of increases in loneliness because they do not have the immediate social interactions of living with another person.”

That’s not what they found. On the whole, people living alone did not report feeling any lonelier in March than they had in February, and they did not feel significantly lonelier in April than they had in March.

The same was true for those who lived with other people. Overall, they have not been getting any lonelier over time, either. Nor was there any difference between those who lived alone and those who lived with others in how their loneliness changed over time. That, of course, is not surprising since neither group was getting noticeably lonelier.

people. The isolation items asked, for example, how often the participants felt isolated from others or left out. The items assessing social connection asked participants, for example, how much of the time they felt that there were people who understood them or people they felt close to.

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It didn't make much of a difference. Although people in both groups (those who lived alone and those who lived with others) felt a little less connected in March than they had in February, they also felt a little less isolated in March. By April, they felt about the same as they had in February.

At each point in time, the researchers found that the people who lived alone were lonelier than the people who lived with others. So did other researchers, pre-pandemic, who studied 16,000 German people ranging in age from 18 to 103. But those researchers realized that people who live alone differ from people who live with others in important ways—for example, people who live alone are typically less secure financially. So they took the important additional step of comparing people in the two groups who were comparable in those ways. (In statistical terms, they controlled for those variables.) Then they found something truly remarkable: It was [the people who were living alone who were less lonely](#). The researchers in the current study did not take any additional factors into account.

One Thing Did Change Over Time, and It Wasn't Loneliness

The authors asked participants the extent to which they agreed with one additional statement that was not part of the loneliness scale: "I receive the social and emotional support I need."

On average, those feelings of social and emotional support increased from February, before the lockdown, to March; then they stayed at a relatively high level in April. Those increases in feelings of support over time were the same for the people who lived alone as for those who lived with others.

Anecdotally, the pandemic seems to have ushered in a special time of connecting with other people. Friends have told me about reaching out to people in their lives they have not contacted in ages. They have also been on the receiving end of such renewed ties. People are not seeing each other in person much, but the online possibilities have become so routine that it is now possible to find [how-to articles](#) about coming up with excuses for graciously bowing out of the latest invitations or the Zoom social hours that are going on for too long.

Some Words of Caution

Results of psychological research are [averaged across all the people](#) within each group. Among those who live alone, there are undoubtedly people who really have become more and more lonely over the course of the pandemic, as well as those who have been becoming less lonely. The same is true for those who live with others. What this research tells us is that if we are going to make an overall assessment of how people are generally doing, our best, most-informed answer at the moment is that people who live alone have generally not become lonelier, nor have people who are living with others.

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Another word of caution is that the experience of loneliness is not the only thing that may have changed since the [coronavirus](#) outbreak. Many people are at risk for serious problems. The weekly Household Pulse Survey conducted by the Census Bureau, for example, has shown that [single people are more likely to be going hungry](#) during the pandemic than married people, regardless of whether they have children. And, to add to the [singlism](#), even though single people are more in need of food, they are less likely to have received free groceries or a free meal than married people. (Here's even more on the [experiences of single people during the pandemic](#).)

Job losses, too, have been devastating, as have risks to health. Most frighteningly, the death toll in the U.S. from COVID-19 continues to rise precipitously.

It is a very good thing that, on average, loneliness has not been increasing to any striking degree, and that instead what has risen is the social and emotional support we are providing to one another. But that does not mean that all is well.



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About the Author



[Bella DePaulo, Ph.D.](#), an expert on single people, is the author of *Singled Out* and other books. She is an [Academic Affiliate in Psychological & Brain Sciences, UCSB](#).

Online: [Bella DePaulo's website](#), [Twitter](#), [Facebook](#), [LinkedIn](#)