

## College students' experiences of and coping with loneliness - possibilities of peer support

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### **Abstract**

This study focused on the perceived loneliness of college students, and more specifically on the factors related to the emergence of the feeling of loneliness and ways of coping with loneliness. The research data were obtained from an internet forum functioning as a support network for children and adolescent called “Loneliness internet group”. Anonymous messages (N=276) from summer and fall 2011 were selected as the data. Analysis was qualitative content analysis. The findings revealed the dimensions of college students’ perceived loneliness and their coping methods. Also, the importance of the internet-based peer support was discussed.

**Keywords:** loneliness; adolescence; young adults; college students; coping; self-regulation

## College students' experiences of and coping with loneliness - possibilities of peer support

### 1. Introduction

Adolescence involves the construction of identity, and loneliness can have a significant influence (Cacioppo, Fowler, & Christakis, 2009; Jones, 1982). Young adults “break away from their families and prepare themselves for life vocationally, academically, and socially” (Rokach, 2000, p. 629). Usually, young adults already have created their network of friends or at least a few close friends: they have had time and possibility to build relationships. If one has not managed to do that, shame and frustration may emerge. Actually, the origin of loneliness can hark back faraway to the past, early experiences on the world and other people. On the other hand, the feeling of loneliness can step in one's life at any time and phase of life. The essence of loneliness has been studied for example in children (e.g., Goossens & Beyers, 2002; Jobe-Shields, Cohen, & Parra, 2011; Terrell-Deutsch, 1999) and in the elderly (e.g., Dykstra 2009; Luo, Hawkey, Waite, & Cacioppo, 2012; Theeke, 2009). Our study was focused on young adults.

College studies represent a phase of life when loneliness can step into a young adult's life (e.g., Pressman et al., 2005). Meaningful student involvement can be enhanced through the learning environment, classroom management and study climate, and extra-curricular activities in the campus life (Fletcher, 2005; Pintrich, 1999). These can improve students' engagement to studies and their feeling of belonging (Kuh et al., 2008) while the perceived feeling of insufficiency, teachers' inadequate guidance or disinterest and previous failure experiences increase insecurity, shyness, fears, or tension that may lead to extreme difficulties in performing exams, holding presentations, and addressing the study group, in other words becoming accepted and making friends (see Määttä & Uusiautti, 2012). Indeed, loneliness among college students has become an unfortunately common problem (Ponzetti, 1990; Wei, Russell & Zakalik, 2005; Özdemir & Tuncai, 2008).

#### *1.1 The definition and research of loneliness in adolescence*

Loneliness has many dimensions and it can be viewed from a variety of points of view (de Jong Gierveld, 1998). Still, there must be a common core of loneliness that everyone who identifies himself or herself lonely share (see e.g., Green et al., 2001; Russell et al., 1984). Basically, loneliness refers to an unpleasant and oppressive mental experience that is not dependent on the physical presence of other people (Aho & Laine, 1997; Cacioppo & Hawkey, 2009). It is a common, distressing experience that has deleterious effects on psychological functioning and physical health (Jackson, 2007; see also Cacioppo et al., 2002; Heinrich & Gullone, 2006). Chronic loneliness refers to a state that is preceded by incapability to create satisfactory social relationships for several years, whereas every human being experiences temporary loneliness at some point of life, such as during break-ups, moving, or when a loved one dies (Hawkey & Cacioppo, 2010). Actual theories of loneliness vary from the social dimension of the phenomenon to, for example, cognitive and existential dimensions (Russell et al., 1978), and they represent the viewpoints from which loneliness is defined or studied.

Loneliness in adolescents and young adults has been studied from various points of view (Goossens & Marcoen, 1999; Goossens et al., 2009). For example, its connection with peer victimization (Storch & Masia-Warner, 2004), attachment styles and social skills (DiTommaso et al., 2003; Segrin, 1993), self-presentation (Jackson, 2007), perfectionism (Chang et al., 2008), alcoholism (Page & Cole, 1991) and drug usage (Rokach, 2002), depression (Wei, Russell, & Zakalik, 2005), and problematic internet use and dating (Odaci & Kalkan, 2010) – just to name few. Loneliness in the youth has been explained by for example genetic factors (Van Roekel et al., 2011), gender (Avery, 1982), growth environment (Uruk & Demir, 2003), and personality traits (Vanhalst et al., 2012). In all, it is challenging to define the role of singular factors in loneliness (see, Marcoen, Goossens, & Caes, 1987).

The phenomenon of loneliness and its seriousness is therefore widely acknowledged and studied intensively for decades. While majority of studies are based on quantitative analyses and scale-based measurements of loneliness (Russell, 1996), qualitative description of loneliness has remained less studied (Heinrich & Gullone, 2006). This study contributes a new point of view on the perceived loneliness in college students, and more specifically on the factors related to the emergence of the feeling of loneliness and ways of coping with loneliness.

People react to loneliness differently. The fundamental reason for behavior is to direct one's action in a way that the sense of meaningfulness in life is kept up for as long time as possible (Eronen et al., 2009). Mental or psychological self-regulation tries to maintain mental balance: one can try to cope with one's situation through social coping methods, for example discussing the situation with friends. The most important coping method is mental work which refers to contemplation aiming at molding one's thoughts, self-image, emotions, and action to correspond better with the reality. In addition, people can use physical coping methods, such as exercising, healthy diet, or sufficient sleep.

Unconscious coping methods include repression, denial, and excuses, and instead of solving the situation, they narrow possibilities of handling problematic situations (Eronen et al., 2009). Likewise Rokach (1999) has defined ways of reacting to loneliness: denying and distancing oneself represent incapability to face the feeling of loneliness and the pain involved in it.

### *1.2 The purpose of this research*

How do Finnish college students cope with loneliness? This study sought for answers through analyzing college students' descriptions of the nature of their loneliness and their ways of coping with it. The purpose is to contribute to the less studied branch of loneliness studies by introducing a qualitative perspective on loneliness and giving space for the voices of the lonely. Furthermore, the study employs an extra-ordinary data by nature, namely college students' internet conversations about loneliness. Thus, the second purpose of the study is to also discuss the significance of online peer support.

## **2. Method**

This study focused on loneliness in college students at universities. Two main research questions were set for this study, and they were specified with two sub-questions:

1. How do students describe their loneliness?
  - 1.1 What are the personal factors connected with loneliness according to the students' descriptions?
  - 1.2 What outer factors are connected with loneliness according to the students' descriptions?
2. How do students describe coping with loneliness?
  - 2.1 What are their personal coping methods?
  - 2.2 What outer factors are connected with coping with loneliness according to the students' descriptions?

This study represents qualitative research paradigm as it aims at providing information about the experiences and coping of the lonely. As the actual recruiting of the lonely in this research appeared quite challenging, an innovative way of collecting the data was invented. Namely, the research data were obtained from an internet forum of Nyyti Ry (Nyyti Ry is a Finnish online support network for adolescent) called "Loneliness internet group". Therefore, the nature of the data can be considered personal. Instead of generalizations, the purpose was to draw a picture of the phenomenon based on the participants' descriptions and their own interpretations, and to discover what the students find worth sharing in this peer-support forum. Indeed,

Mead, Hilton, and Curtis (2001) define peer support as follows:

*Peer support is a system of giving and receiving help founded on key principles of respect, shared responsibility, and mutual agreement of what is helpful. - - It is about understanding another's situation empathically through the shared experience of emotional and psychological pain. (p.133)*

Nyyti Ry is funded mostly by the Finland's Slot Machine Association (RAY) which is to raise funds through gaming operations to promote Finnish health and welfare. Nyyti Ry is especially focused on promoting and supporting students' mental well-being and life management skills. The association organizes internet-based discussion groups, evening gatherings, and life management courses. Internet groups are meant for students in higher education, and their purpose is to not only increase mental well-being and life management but also provide peer support among people with similar life situations (see <http://www.nyyti.fi>). For many young people, internet discussions can be a functional and suitable way of talking about loneliness (Oldmeadow, Quinn, & Kowert, 2013).

People write to the discussion forum of Nyyti Ry anonymously. The contents of the web pages are free for use in; for example, research so that the authors' anonymity remains secured. The authors are also let know that if someone wants to use messages for research purposes from these web pages, he or she must ask for permission from Nyyti Ry, although the data in question is open access to everyone.

Anonymous messages from summer and fall 2011 were selected as the data. The selection of messages that eventually comprised the data went as follows: Altogether, the data from the aforementioned period of time covered 367 messages. 58 of them were written by the supervisor of the group, and were therefore omitted from the data. Likewise, messages that did not have relevant content in relation to the research questions were excluded. This means that in this study focused on such messages in which the author either directly told that he or she was lonely or loneliness became evident in some other manner in the message (e.g., the author could refer to lonely action), and in which factors related to loneliness, its reasons, or coping methods were discussed. After this selection process, the eventual data comprised 276 messages clearly discussing the nature of loneliness, reasons for loneliness, and coping with loneliness.

Students who wrote to the loneliness discussion use pseudonyms. These pseudonyms are also referred when selecting excerpts from the data in the results section. It is impossible to identify students from the pseudonyms. However, some background information (the number of authors, gender, study field, and place) were possible to obtain from Nyyti Ry: The group writing in the summer 2011 had 58 members (22 men and 36 women) aged between 19 and 37 years. Their study fields represented 12 fields of which the three largest were humanistic (15 members of the group), technical (14 members), and natural scientific (12 members). The fall 2011 group had 58 members (17 men and 41 women) aged 17 and 37 years (ages of two members not known). They represented 13 different study fields, three largest being natural scientific (11 members), humanistic (10 members), and social sciences (9 members). Altogether, students from spring and fall sets of data represented 16 study fields. As it was impossible to know the people behind pseudonyms, the interest in this research was focused on, instead of for example differences between genders, students' descriptions of the nature of loneliness.

The data were analyzed with qualitative content analysis (Mayring, 2000; Silverman, 2005). The analysis was guided by the theory as the empirical data were studied in the light of the theoretical concepts of loneliness, such as the emergence of and coping with loneliness. Although the analysis is based on themes found in theory, the purpose of the study was not to test theory but find new ways of describing loneliness and how to cope with it (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2009). After transcribing the messages, the data analysis proceeded by selective reading looking for descriptions of loneliness. Then, the descriptions were divided according to their contents into personal and outer factors. The main categories therefore were descriptions of the emergence of loneliness and descriptions of coping with loneliness. These main categories both had sub-categories of personal and outer factors.

When it comes to the reliability and validity of the data, certain points of view are worth discussing. This qualitative study aimed at describing the emergence of loneliness in college students and their survival. The purpose was to highlight the students' viewpoints, and internet discussions seemed to offer a functional way of acquiring data about this sensitive theme. One of the major advantages of this data collection method was that the data can be seen naturalistic (Potter, 2006). Therefore, the confirmability of the study can be considered high (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). This means that the messages were written on an open forum and exist regardless of the research. The authors of these messages were not affected by, for example, the researchers' preconceptions but the decision to write has emerged in the students themselves. Their purpose of writing was not to answer to a researcher's questions but to receive and provide peer-support through their own experiences. Naturally, the researcher cannot be certain about the backgrounds, intentions, and truthfulness of the people behind pseudonyms in internet forums. However, the nature of the forum is, as it discusses a very personal and sensitive topics and the people writing there are expected to share their experiences, that it was considered relevant to study what the students write in the forum, how they describe loneliness and their coping with it to their peers, in other words, what they find worth sharing.

In order to guarantee the credibility or internal validity of the study (DiTommaso, Brannen, & Best, 2004), the initial selection of messages was done carefully in the light of the research purposes (see Shenton, 2004). Description of the data and how the messages were selected in this research are to strengthen the dependability or trustworthiness of the study (see e.g., Borrego, Douglas, & Amelink, 2009; Shenton, 2004). In addition, excerpts from the data are added in the results section to support the researchers' interpretation and to provide the reader a picture of how the themes were discussed in and discovered from the data. Yet, it is relevant to notice that everyone experiences loneliness personally, and therefore, there is no objective measurement of loneliness (cf., Marangoni & Ickes, 1989). Although verbal expression of loneliness is ambiguous (e.g., Galanaki, 2004), still the written descriptions of the phenomenon from people who find themselves lonely provide a unique perspective on loneliness.

### 3. Results

#### 3.1 *The emergence of loneliness*

##### 3.1.1 Personal factors

Problems with social skills and interaction were categorized into two main factors that were difficulties in becoming acquainted with people and fear of social situations. For example, discussing with new people was experienced as mentally burdening due to constant need for self-observation. The next quote from one student illustrates the way students questioned their conversation skills:

*I think that I have been so infrequently in social contact with people that I have not developed in my verbal skills like my peers but have fallen behind. (Huu-huu)*

Several students wrote about their fear of social situations. They were nervous about social situations already beforehand, and being in the company with other people was perceived oppressive. In addition to social skills and interaction, students contemplated thoroughly their personalities and other personal factors that they connected with their loneliness. These factors were for example problems with self-esteem, introversion and unsociability, shyness, slowness in making friends, selectivity in relationships, lack of trust in people, self-related doubts, and depression.

Students also wrote about their own action and factors connected with their life-style that were connected with loneliness. These factors were abstinence from alcohol, different interests with others, and solitary hobbies. Abstinence from alcohol were described as the reason for loneliness because some students did not enjoy participating in students gatherings in bars, nightclubs, or other places in which drinking alcohol was involved.

Also their interests could differ from those of others, and they could prefer solitary hobbies. Some students told that because of their lonely hobbies, they do not necessary have anything in common to talk with other students. Although the fact of having these kinds of hobbies was not regarded as negative, students had become aware of how the hobbies influence their chances of having friends. On the other hand, some students wrote how they would like to have someone with who share the hobby and great moments related to it.

### 3.1.2 Outer factors

Students also wrote about factors that were not so much related to themselves as persons but to their current life situation. These factors were issues with studies and dating, economic reasons, moving from childhood home to one's own apartment, moving away from old friends or friends moving far away, or difficulties in getting in the ready circle of friends at one's college. They also thought that it was difficult to find a place where they could get to know people. Students also told that studies involve such issues that increase the feeling of loneliness or anxiety. Neither were changing of the major, mass lectures, and independent studies regarded as something that would enhance the social life of the lonely. For example, writing a Master's thesis was found challenging:

*I have tried to write the Master's thesis which has meant in practice that I spend my days next to the computer and piles of books without actually accomplishing anything. When I feel claustrophobic enough, I try to go to gym, store, or for a walk. (Sateenkaarikala)*

Dating was seen problematic in some cases. Dating had been disappointing and students' own inexperience in dating and relationships increased their uncertainty and feelings of loneliness. Also economic reasons could hinder finding friends and participating in social activities, as the following student wrote:

*Going to a bar requires money even if you took a cup of coffee or a coke. And this can be difficult sometimes. So, you would need ways of finding friends free of charge. (Nolla)*

Moving to a new place was referred often in students' writings. Given their life situation it is natural that various changes in life are stressed. Students talked about how their friends had moved around the country and thus the connection was slowly lost. Finding new friends from the new school was not necessarily easy.

Messages also described various events and circumstances from the past that were associated with the current feeling of loneliness. These were lonely childhood and adolescence, and other factors of home background, and bullying. The home background referred to, for example, the culture of silence and dumbness, and authoritative home upbringing. Likewise parents' alcoholism was mentioned as a factors restricting the students' social life in childhood. It was not easy to invite friends at home. Several students talked about bullying by peers and, in some cases, also by teachers at school:

*Although I was invisible, odorless, and tasteless, somehow teachers and some peers could take me as their target of bullying and embarrass me in front of the whole classroom. I could not have expected such behavior from teachers but they would always talk to me in a mean or angry way, and I do not know why. (Sunset)*

Bullying was influenced negatively on the students' self-esteem and trust in other people. Also media, such as TV and Facebook, were associated with the experience of loneliness. The media were seen as oppressive and causing the feeling of inferiority because of showing other people's exciting and interesting lives including wide networks of friends and relationships. Some students found the social medium, Facebook, positive while others were of quite opposite opinion: it had increased the feelings of loneliness, anxiety, and inferiority, and made social interaction matter of numbers of "likes", faceless encounters:

*Sometimes I feel that the number of friends is just a real number of people in my life who do not talk to me, ask me anywhere, or are not interested in me anyway. (Pöllö)*

The prevailing attitudes in society were seen connected with the way loneliness is taken, as the following data excerpt shows:

*I claim that no one really takes loneliness seriously in our society, and on the other hand, loneliness is a community-level problem that people keep silent and almost call for. This kind of society can sentence those apt for loneliness indoors under house arrest like a hunter catches a wild animal with a trap. (SinkkuSimeoni)*

### 3.1.3 Summary

Students' descriptions were analyzed to find out factors connected with loneliness. Six sub-categories that formed two main categories were discovered. Personal factors are problems with social skills and interaction, certain personality and personal characteristics, and the person's action. Outer factors included reasons that are related to the present life situation, past events, and other outer factors. A summary of factors related to loneliness according to college students' descriptions is presented in Table 1.

**Table 1**

*Factors connected with loneliness according to college students' descriptions*

Personal factors	Outer factors
Problems in social skills and interaction	Issues in current life situation
- problems in getting to know other people	- issues related to studies
- fear of social situations	- issues related to dating
	- economic factors
	- moving and friends' moving
	- ready circles of friends at the current place of residence
	- lack of places where to find friends
Personality and other personal factors	Factors related to past
- poor self-esteem	- lonely childhood and adolescence
- introversion	- upbringing
- shyness	- other issues related to home background
- slowly and selective in making friends	
- lack of trust in relationships	
- doubts about one's own self	
- depression	
Personal action	Other outer factors
- abstinence from alcohol	- media
- different interests	- society
- lonely hobbies	

## 3.2 Coping with loneliness

### 3.2.1 Personal coping methods

Students wrote about various practical measures that they had followed in their lives to cope with loneliness. These were getting out and participating in events, dating, hobbies, work, and studies, and doing initiatives and organizing meetings. The messages showed that sometimes loneliness can be eased just by going out, in bars, coffee shops, theaters, gym, library, downtown, or student gatherings and other events. Likewise, social hobbies, studies, and work helped. In addition, the internet group was used as a means of changing email addresses and finding friends. Although making the first move to make friends can be difficult, the outcome can be worth it, as the following data excerpt illustrates:

*I started (against my nature) gravitate to the company of a few persons that I happened to know by sight and who had said hello back during the first weeks... I finally managed to get friends*

*only because of having the courage to “obstinately” join the company.* (Jajiko)

Mental coping methods were also openness toward new people, self-acceptance, taking a new attitude to loneliness, setting realistic expectations for friendships, and positive, hopeful thinking. Students contemplated their attitude toward themselves, loneliness, and other people in a multi-dimensional manner. They had for example perceived that the number of contacts would also bring in quality and that it is not reasonable to be selective:

*It became easier for me when I realized that along with new contacts I could get also quality. Many of you described how other people were not the right for you. Unfortunately, I have noticed that if you avoid “wrong kinds of people”, many chances of finding friends are missed.* (knknknkn)

*I have also noticed that finding as many friendships as possible regardless of their number will eventually results in quality friendships. I just say “yeah” to this point!* (Sauerkrautz)

Students considered self-acceptance important: they evaluated their action and stated that they have the right to do things in a way they find the best. Loneliness is also a matter of attitude. One can have good moments alone, such as read a book or listen to music. Students had perceived that loneliness was easier to take when older than in childhood. Furthermore, as their self-knowledge increased along maturing, they also learned to set more realistic expectations on having friends and building relationships. Optimism and hope were found also in their young age:

*Failures hurt for sure but I always try to think that I am still young and I have plenty of time to find someone.* (popliini)

Positive thinking and appreciating little things in the everyday life were brought up in messages that discussed how to get strength and what can help when difficult. Students find the ability to recognize even one little good thing a day, no matter how mundane, and find the joy from it:

*I find joy from little things: the first snow, the sound of wind in foliage, and a beautiful sunrise.* (lintunen)

### 3.2.2 Outer coping methods

In addition to one's personal coping methods, support provided from others was seen important. This kind of support could be categorized into the support given by the internet group, close relationships, fellow students, and therapy. Sharing experiences in the loneliness internet group was important to many students, and the support provided by the group was regarded as positive:

*This has become an important forum for me. I do not know whether peer support can actually so-called heal the wound that this long-term loneliness has caused me at the emotional level but I still think that this group is a really good thing.* (friendshipisrespecting)

Loneliness does not necessarily mean total being alone. Thus, students told that close relationships with for example parents, siblings, acquaintances, roommates, fellow students, and old friends helped with coping with the feelings of loneliness. Those who had experienced social loneliness could be the most appreciative when having a partner. This is how one student wrote:

*At the moment, I tolerate loneliness better because I have a man who understands how much I have suffered from it.* (active but alone)

Some of the students had turned to professional help, some had considered it. Professional therapists had helped students discuss the reasons of loneliness and low spirits and recognize factors from the past and present



that make finding friends more difficult.

### 3.2.3 Summary

Coping methods were divided into personal coping methods and support from outside. Table 2 represents the summary of coping methods mentioned in college students' messages.

**Table 2**

*College students' coping methods in loneliness*

Personal coping methods	Support received from others
Concrete actions to alleviate loneliness	- the internet support group
- going out, participating in events, dating	- close people
- hobbies	- fellow students
- studies and work	- therapy
- doing initiatives, organizing meetings	
Psychological means	
- openness	
- self-acceptance	
- adopting a new attitude toward loneliness	
- realistic expectations for friendships	
- positive thinking, optimism	

## 4. Discussion

The results of this study can be discussed in the light of Perlman and Peplau's (1982) illustration of trends in loneliness research. The illustration divides the reasons of loneliness into personal and outer ones, but in addition it includes the time dimension regarding whether loneliness is the outcome of events in the part of present and their influence on a person's behavior.

Table 3

*Four approaches to loneliness (adopted and retold from Perlman & Peplau, 1982, p. 130)*

Approach	Psycho-dynamic	Existential	Interactionist	Cognitive
Reasons	Personal inner factors, aptitudes, and mental inconsistencies	Human nature	Personal and situational factors	Personal and situational factors
Attributable to childhood vs. attributable to the present situation	Childhood	Eternal	Present situation	Present situation

According to the *psycho-dynamic approach*, loneliness harks back to the effect of childhood experiences (see Qualter, Brown, Munn, & Rotenberg, 2010). Yet, the personal or inner factors, in other words one's tendencies and psyche, are connected with how loneliness is experienced. In this study, several students described issues and happenings in their childhood and adolescence that were perceived related to loneliness (see also Marcoen & Brumagne, 1985; Rotenberg et al., 2010). Thus, the psycho-dynamic theory supports the results of this research when it comes to the reasons of loneliness.

According to *the existential approach*, separation from others is a salient part of life, and when understanding this fact opens the road to oneself (see Moore, 1987). This approach include two qualitatively different kinds of loneliness: the fear of loneliness perceives loneliness negative while true loneliness is positive by nature (Goossens et al., 2009). Positive loneliness, solitude, is also a way of coping with the fear of loneliness so that it does not try to deny loneliness but accepts it as a part of life. Loneliness can be con-fronted, thus, by

accepting it (see also Tiikkainen, 2011). Because existential theory does not focus just on factors causing loneliness, the results of this study can be seen through this approach when it comes to coping with loneliness. Students talked about their attitude to loneliness, and it was not always seen as negative or shameful when looked at from another angle. Indeed, in students' messages, healthy loneliness was distinguished from loneliness not longed for. For this part, the data had similarities with the idea of solitude in the existential theory (Larson, 1990).

*The interactionist approach* distinguishes two forms of loneliness: emotional and social. The former refers to the lack of close relationship and affection, such as lack of a partner, whereas the latter means unsuccessful entry to a social community (e.g., Cacioppo, Fowler, & Christakis, 2009). The interactionist theory is based on a thought that people need various kinds of interaction relationships to prevent loneliness. Various expectations are targeted at these relationships, and just one relationship cannot fulfil all these needs. When compared to this research, both forms of loneliness, emotional and social, were evident in students' messages. Students expressed their expectations and need for various relationships.

In *the cognitive approach*, personal and situational factors related to the success of establishing relationships are noticed. This also supports the findings of this study. Most importantly, when considering the methods of coping with loneliness, cognitive skills of mental self-regulation and its dimensions became expressed (e.g., Cacioppo & Hawkley, 2009). Mental work as a form of self-regulation was described in the data in versatile manner (see e.g., Liu & Rook, 2013). Concrete actions the students had taken to diminish their loneliness are examples of mental work. Physical methods of self-regulation were for example attempts of alleviating loneliness with physical exercising. Social coping methods included finding support from social channels, such as the internet group, peers, or professional help. The cognitive approach also includes molding of thoughts and feelings, and this was typical among students: learned openness to new people, self-acceptance, finding a new attitude toward loneliness, positive thinking and hopefulness (see, Goossens & Marcoen, 1999).

Cognitive self-regulation also cover unconscious coping methods, such as repression, denial, or making excuses. In this study, it was not possible to know to what extent students had tried to make their loneliness tolerable by using these unconscious methods. Moreover, the nature of this data is extra-ordinary because in order to write, students have had to identify themselves as lonely. They had become aware of the problem and tried to find a solution to it. Therefore, it was natural that the methods mentioned in the texts mainly represented conscious coping methods and attempts to solve problems.

## 5. Conclusion

Coping with loneliness is not just an issue the lonely have to deal with but it is everyone's business. According to several studies (e.g., de Jong Gierveld & Havens, 2004; Killeen, 1998; Saari, 2009), loneliness is a socio-political question, and therefore, communal methods, distribution of information, and holistic culture of caring should be considered salient societal means of preventing problems such as loneliness. Although it is possible to arrange expensive and large societal and educational interventions to prevent loneliness (see e.g., Masi, Chen, Hawkley, & Cacioppo, 2011; VanderWeele et al., 2011), often the roots of loneliness can be found in childhood, friendships, and families (Uruk & Demir, 2003). Therefore, we want to spend a moment discussing the role of peer support. This is natural due to the nature of the data of this research, as the data were obtained from an internet forum functioning as a means of peer support, and thus the study as such represents a form of manifestation of (online) peer support. Of course, not everyone finds internet communities natural places for talking about loneliness, and someone can even find them increasing the feeling of loneliness. We realize this fact, but inspired by these extra-ordinary data, it is relevant to discuss the possibilities of internet.

The benefits of peer support have been recognized in various connections. According to Hodges et al. (1999), peer support may improve self-esteem and social skills, and provide emotional and cognitive support (see also Green et al., 2001). The significance of perceived social support in young adults has also been proven by Mahon,

Yarcheski, and Yarcheski (1998). According to Solomon (2004), interactions with peers who are successfully coping with their problems are more likely to result in positive behavior change. Therefore, the significance of peer support for the lonely cannot be undervalued either. In today's society of online communication, the possibilities of the internet-based peer support should be further studied (cf. Odaci & Kalkan, 2010). This study contributed to the knowledge about the way an anonymous peer discussion forum can be of help.

This study showed that sharing experiences with others in the internet-based anonymous discussion group was important to many students. In a situation in which loneliness can seem over-whelming, peer support from the internet can become important as it provides a way of discussing emotions with people in the same situation. Students also brought out that although internet discussions may not take out loneliness, sharing still reveals the lonely feelings.

As the results showed, the lonely can find natural ways of making friends difficult and suffer from the fear of social situations. In the internet, they can familiarize with the discussion group little by little and social interaction does not necessarily cause similar anxiety than face-to-face encounters do. It is important to note that peer groups can function as the platforms of finding a true friend (Solomon, 2004). Furthermore, it is also worth pointing out that finding one close friend or a partner can be more important for these individuals than for example becoming widely accepted in college student groups. Indeed, Parker and Asher (1993) call for the distinction between acceptance and friendship adjustment referring to the need for having one very best friend versus being accepted in a group but having no close friends. Therefore, the role of internet seems interesting, as there the process of interacting and finding a possible friend happens in one-to-one conversations that begin based on mutual interest or shared opinions (Przybylski & Weinstein, 2012).

Indeed, finding a friend or a partner via internet is more and more common. For example, according to one recent study conducted among over 19,000 Americans, already a third of couples find each other via internet (Cacioppo et al., 2013). Therefore, the possibilities of internet and social media should be given more thought also when it comes helping the lonely: finding friends and romantic partners via internet is the modern-day way of socializing (e.g., McAndrew & Jeong, 2012). Internet represents a way of expressing oneself safely. What is worth realizing about the communication in the internet is that it gives time for interaction but is simultaneously free from restrictive factors, such as the student group or one's looks. People can think what they write and therefore, finding a friend via internet-based conversations is merely based on liking the other's thoughts, the innermost, instead of outer appearance (cf. Langlois et al., 2000). This can help the lonely to start interaction with a person they find interesting and keep up and build the relationship.

It is necessary to contemplate ways of enhancing social relationships and interaction skills, and preventing exclusion among the youth. Peer support contributes to positive adjustment and to buffer against stressors and adversities, including medical as well as psychiatric problems (Solomon, 2004). However, the development of social skills necessitates actual encounters in real life situations, too. Internet-based peer groups and online conversation forums—both anonymous ones and other social media—can function as the initial help (Bryant & Marmo, 2012). Yet, further studies are needed to discover more and innovative ways of making also the lonely flourish and to be able to promote subjective well-being (VanderWeele, Hawkey, & Cacioppo, 2012).

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