

Childhood loneliness linked to stress and problem drinking in young adults

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Before the pandemic, over 1 in 10 children aged 10–12 years reported being lonely.

New research has shown that experiencing loneliness as a pre-adolescent child predicts problem drinking years later, in early adulthood.

Alcohol misuse is not the only health problem connected to loneliness. In older adults, loneliness contributes to poor physical health, including dementia, heart disease and stroke.

Researchers from Arizona State University have examined the effects of experiencing childhood loneliness on current [stress](#) levels and drinking behaviors in young adults. The study will be published in *Addictive Behaviors Reports*.

"In young adults, childhood loneliness before age 12 was associated with perceived stress right now and affected dysregulated drinking," said Julie Patock-Peckham, assistant research professor in the ASU Department of Psychology.

Because stress affects whether people drink to excess, [especially women](#), the research team tested whether past experiences with loneliness impacted the stress people feel today.

Over 300 college students participated in the study, completing assessments of childhood loneliness, current stress levels and drinking behaviors. Feeling lonely in the past was related to present-day stress levels and drinking behaviors.

Higher levels of loneliness before age 12 predicted more stress in early adulthood that was associated with greater alcohol use and [alcohol-related problems](#).

"The data used in this study were collected before the pandemic, and the findings suggest that we could have another [public health crisis](#) on our hands in a few years as today's children grow up," Patock-Peckham said.

"We need more research into whether mitigating childhood loneliness could be a way to disrupt the pathways that lead to alcohol use disorders in adults. Combating [childhood loneliness](#) should help to reduce impaired control over [drinking](#), especially among women."

The research team also included Sophia Berbian and Kiana Guarino, undergraduate students at ASU; Tanya Gupta, a recent graduate of the psychology doctoral program; and Federico Sanabria and Frank Infurna, associate professors of psychology.

More information: S. Berberian et al, Does loneliness before the age of twelve indirectly affect impaired control over drinking, alcohol use, and problems through perceived stress?, *Addictive Behaviors Reports* (2022). [DOI: 10.1016/j.abrep.2022.100448](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.abrep.2022.100448)

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