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Absence makes the heart grow weaker

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Stu Hutson

Loneliness is bad for the heart, suggests a new study. It shows that loneliness increases the blood pressure of those nearing retirement age to the same degree as smoking or a sedentary lifestyle.

Chronic feelings of social isolation are associated with as much as a 30 mmHg rise in a person's systolic blood pressure by the age of 65, which could easily push their systolic blood pressure over 150 mmHg, the medical definition of hypertension. The study showed that this is independent of other confounding variables such as smoking, drinking, socioeconomic status and body mass index.

"While we haven't conclusively proven why this happens, the pieces are starting to fall into place," says John Cacioppo, a psychologist at the University of Chicago, US, who conducted the research.

"This shows that how we deal with isolation changes as we age on both emotional and physical levels," says Sarah Pressman, a health psychologist at Carnegie Mellon University. "This is not something that's all in your head."

Lonely youths

Previous work by Cacioppo showed that college students who felt socially isolated had increased vascular tension - a narrowing of blood vessels that increases resistance to blood flow. Their young bodies could compensate, so the condition did not lead to abnormally high blood pressure, but Cacioppo speculated that the same would not be true in older individuals.

The study drew data from the first year of the Chicago Health, Aging, and Social Relations Study (CHASRS), which ran the full gamut of physical and psychological examinations for 229 individuals born between 1935 and 1952.

These allowed the researchers to assess subjects' social life and glean their own thoughts on social isolation. Combined with a vast array of associated physiological and hormonal data, this could be the gateway to understanding what role loneliness plays in human health, Cacioppo says.

Social connections

"Loneliness isn't just stress or depression," he notes. "It's a unique physiological and psychological reaction."

But this physiological reaction is still clouded in mystery. The study confirmed previous findings that the number of social connections a person has can be predictive of whether or not that person is lonely. But

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it also shows that some of the most outgoing people can still display psychological symptoms of extreme social isolation.

Studies on twins have indicated that genetics probably plays a role in determining susceptibility to loneliness. Cacioppo believes the emotion is the result of evolutionary forces that drove us to form groups and thus increase our ability to survive.

“This isn’t a disease, it’s an important part of what draws us together,” he says. “We’ve gone from the selfish gene to the lonely brain.”

It is Cacioppo’s hope that further research will reveal a more complete picture of the physiological underpinnings of loneliness - and in doing so help find ways to moderate human feelings of isolation.

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