



Loneliness, Social Connectedness, and Human Behavior: A Review of Psychological Mechanisms and Contemporary Social Influences

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Abstract

Loneliness and social connectedness are multidimensional social-psychological constructs that have significant implications for human behaviour, well-being, and social participation and are increasingly being understood. This review synthesizes contemporary evidence on the conceptual foundations, psychological mechanisms, behavioral consequences, and social contexts associated with loneliness and connectedness. It suggests that loneliness is associated with a lack of meaningful relationships and not simply with a lack of social contact, and that connectedness is grounded in feelings of belonging, attachment, social identity, trust, and quality of interpersonal relationships. Psychological mechanisms related to social cognition, rejection sensitivity, emotion regulation, self-evaluation and interpersonal trust can help account for withdrawal, avoidance, and/or altered decision-making as a response to disconnection. Digital communication, hybrid work, mobility, social comparison, and evolving family and friend networks are other processes influenced by a contemporary environment. There is sufficient evidence to support a multi-level approach to intervention with a mix of psychological, relational, community, digital and population-sensitive strategies. Future studies are needed to establish the role of loneliness throughout the life course, as well as to understand which social relationships are more or less likely to buffer against loneliness under varying social circumstances, and to provide cross-cultural and comparative designs.

Keywords: loneliness, social connectedness, human behavior, social psychology, interpersonal relationships

1. Introduction

The concept of loneliness has gained in importance in social psychology due to its significance as more than a physical lack of social contact. It's a personal feeling that current relationships are not fulfilling the social or emotional needs of the individual. Studies at the population level suggest that loneliness is experienced by people across countries and across demographic groups, but the prevalence and experience of loneliness depend on age, gender, and social contexts, so that social disconnection is influenced by individual contexts and social environments (Barreto et al., 2021). Social connection, in contrast, refers to the structural, functional and qualitative aspects that people use to forge meaningful relationships and engage with social networks. This extends beyond the satisfaction of interpersonal relationships, as the quality and availability of social relationships have become a growing concern as a social determinant of health and well-being (Holt-Lunstad, 2022).

Loneliness-Connectedness is crucial in the understanding of contemporary patterns of psychological functioning. Long-standing social disconnections might impact emotional experiences, perceptions of interpersonal relationships, and reactions to the social environment. Loneliness and social connectedness have therefore been understood in recent scholarship to be intertwined and to have a significant impact on mental health and psychosocial functioning (Bellomo & Ventriglio, 2026). There also might be aspects of connectedness via protective interpersonal resources. For international students, for instance, social connectedness has been shown to have a positive link to psychological wellbeing via loneliness and perceived stress, and social support has been found to regulate these links (Tang et al., 2025). These highlight the need to consider loneliness less as an internal state and more as a dynamic process that evolves and is embedded within networks of interpersonal relationships and social encounters.

Social-psychological explanations of these processes should be helpful because people's actions are driven by motives related to belonging, understanding, control, self-enhancement and trust in others (Fiske, 2018). Human behaviour also occurs in social systems, which are interrelated, and whose interactions are constantly influenced by other social systems and the environment (Carter, 2017). These perspectives have special relevance throughout the developmental stages. Peer friendship in childhood and adolescence is linked to loneliness and depression, highlighting the significance of peer relations at developmental stages in social life (Schwartz-Mette et al., 2020). Loneliness also differs across the adult lifespan, with age-specific correlates of loneliness in terms of demographics, social and health characteristics not being evenly distributed but varying across the adult lifespan (Franssen et al., 2020).

Although there has been significant research on loneliness, the literature is scattered across developmental, psychological, behavioral, and social areas. Research often looks at loneliness as a mental health correlate and/or isolates specific populations, but there is limited attention paid to incorporating the psychological processes that link perceived social disconnection with behavioral responses and rapidly changing social contexts. There is also a need for greater synthesis to explain individual psychological processes within the context of friendship networks, social support, cultural conditions and current modalities of interaction. This review is therefore designed to bring together the evidence on loneliness, social connectedness, and human behaviour, to review the psychological mechanisms by which social connection and disconnection impact behavioural functioning, to explore the role of modern social influences, and to outline conceptual and empirical priorities for social-psychological research and interventions.

2. Conceptual and Theoretical Foundations of Loneliness and Social Connectedness

Loneliness is understood as a multidimensional experience, in which there is an imbalance between the people one wants to connect with and the people one has, in the sense of a perceived lack. Its complexity is a result of relationships, social factors, subjective perceptions of belonging and personal expectations. Some people have a large social circle, but they can still feel lonely if that social network does not offer them the emotional support that they need (Yanguas et al., 2018). A phenomenological approach also conceptualises loneliness as a feeling of social absence where a person, relationship or type of interpersonal interaction is felt to be missing, thus lending loneliness a unique emotional and relational dimension (Roberts & Krueger, 2021).

Loneliness is also not a fixed psychological state, but is dynamic throughout the lifespan. Loneliness has been found to shift in course and is linked with developmental contexts, interpersonal experiences, and subsequent psychosocial consequences throughout the entire course of adolescence and young adulthood. This can therefore have consequences that can last throughout adult life, which is why it is important to look at loneliness from a life course perspective (Von Soest et al., 2020). An alternative explanation is offered by evolutionary theory, in which loneliness is seen as an adaptive signal that is similar to other aversive signals. Perceived social disconnection may drive individuals to focus more on interpersonal threats and to pursue restoration of social bonds, but ongoing activation of these processes can amplify defensive thinking and social withdrawal, rather than reconnection (Cacioppo & Cacioppo, 2018).

Social connectedness is not solely equal to the absence of loneliness. It is a multidimensional concept which involves several aspects of relationality, such as interpersonal and perceived support, belonging and membership in larger social networks. The evidence from middle-aged African Americans shows that social connectedness has different aspects, with some being correlated with reduced psychological distress and others

showing no such association, suggesting the importance of considering both availability and quality of social relationships when assessing psychosocial functioning (Hsu et al., 2026). A theoretical account of this relationship is that belongingness is considered one of the basic motives in human functioning, and the drive to build and maintain a meaningful interpersonal relationship is seen to be a part of the concept. The expression of this need could change due to changes in social structures and modes of interaction, even though the psychological meaning of the need is not lost. (Gireesan, 2022)

Attachment theory can be useful because it brings an interpersonal-developmental approach that highlights that internal expectations on closeness, availability and security can influence subsequent interpersonal relationships. Relationship vulnerability is linked with perceived disconnection, and a relevant pathway for this relationship is the adult attachment style to interpersonal relationships that can be linked to relational orientations, which are insecure when facing interpersonal difficulties (Müllauer & Andreas, 2017). Social identity theory expands the analysis beyond interpersonal to group level. Belonging, shared meaning and social position can be found through identification with meaningful groups, illustrating that connectedness can be experienced through collective identities, in addition to close personal relationships (Scheepers & Ellemers, 2019).

Combined, these perspectives indicate a relationship between loneliness and social connectedness, but one that is conceptually distinct, as subjectively experienced, historically developed, and interpersonally structured, with regard to belonging and group identity. In order to account for the often quite different experience of connection and disconnection in similar social contexts, a multidimensional theory is required. Table 1 outlines the key theories that have been used to understand loneliness and social connectedness; some of the themes that emerged were to do with what it is to be a part of, attachment, belonging and subjective experience and how these themes relate to the experience of social connectedness.

Table 1. Theoretical Perspectives on Loneliness and Social Connectedness

Perspective	Core Focus	Relevance to Loneliness	Connectedness Pathway	Reference
Multidimensional view	Subjective relationship deficit	Explains perceived inadequacy of ties	Quality over contact quantity	Yanguas et al. (2018)
Emotional absence	Perceived loss or unavailability	Frames loneliness as relational absence	Restoration of valued bonds	Roberts & Krueger (2021)
Life-course perspective	Developmental change	Loneliness varies across stages	Social needs evolve over time	Von Soest et al. (2020)
Evolutionary theory	Adaptive social signal	Disconnection triggers vigilance	Motivates reconnection	Cacioppo & Cacioppo (2018)
Belongingness	Need for interpersonal bonds	Unmet belonging increases loneliness	Meaningful affiliation reduces disconnection	Gireesan (2022)
Attachment theory	Security and relational expectations	Insecurity may impair closeness	Secure bonds support connection	Müllauer & Andreas (2017)
Social identity theory	Group membership	Weak identification may reduce belonging	Group identification strengthens connection	Scheepers & Ellemers (2019)

3. Psychological Mechanisms Linking Loneliness, Social Connectedness, and Human Behavior

Loneliness affects human behaviour by interacting cognitive, emotional and interpersonal processes rather than social isolation. In modern research, relationship quality, perceived support, individual vulnerability and social factors are known to be significant correlates of loneliness. These factors can influence people's understanding of their social world and reactions to situations in which they feel a lack of connection (Lim et al., 2020). Mechanisms that integrate social information, reward, learning and interpersonal valuation play a role in social connection. These processes can enable people to identify experiences in their social environment that are rewarding and modify their actions to create and sustain social relationships (Delgado et al., 2023).

Perceived relationships are an important pathway to behavioral responses that is mediated by social cognition. The judgment of the intentions, emotions, acceptance and trustworthiness of others determines the interpretations of social encounters as supportive or threatening. These interpretations, in turn, shape interpersonal relations, such as affiliation, avoidance, cooperation and communication, and therefore social cognition is essential to the quality of real-life interpersonal relations (Irem et al., 2025). Disconnection patterns can be self-reinforcing, possibly due to distortions or increased sensitivity of these processes. This is especially important since rejection sensitivity can drive heightened awareness of negative interpersonal cues. Perceived peer acceptance is one source of evidence to show how subjective social evaluation can impact

psychological adjustment, as it was seen during the adolescent period that how well adolescents are accepted by their peers is a key factor in the link between RSR and depressive symptoms (Giovazolias, 2023).

Another pathway in which social experiences become behavioural outcomes is via emotions. People manage distress both within themselves and also by interacting with others in distressing ways, including seeking reassurance, expressing emotions and asking for support. Adaptive coping and emotion regulation can support constructive responses to challenging social situations, whereas ineffective strategies may intensify negative affect and interfere with interpersonal engagement (Marroquín et al., 2017). The relationship and emotional functioning may be a factor that contributes to the reasons why loneliness can still be felt despite the fact that there are still opportunities for them to be in contact with people.

Self-evaluative processes also help to shape the experiences of people's inclusion/exclusion. Self-esteem and perceived social competence can offer psychological resources to deal with interpersonal challenges in that they affect both the likelihood of initiating interpersonal interactions as well as the processing of social feedback and the ability to bounce back from interpersonal rejection. Self-esteem and perceived social competence have been shown to buffer against experiences of ostracism and experiences of loneliness among adolescents, highlighting the importance of personal perceptions of social competence when considering the vulnerability to disconnection (Sakız et al., 2021).

A further link between psychological expectations and social behaviour is interpersonal trust. Trust requires inferences of reliability and reciprocity (in terms of thinking, feeling, brain, and context) with a person. It helps to promote a sense of cooperation and long-term relationships by minimising uncertainty in social interactions. This can limit willingness to approach and rely on others, and a positive exchange can enhance feelings of social security and closeness (Krueger & Meyer-Lindenberg, 2019).

These mechanisms suggest an interconnected pattern of loneliness that involves social interpretation, emotional control, self-evaluation, rejection sensitivity and trust. However, social connectedness is not just about opportunities for social interactions; it's about psychological processes that enable these interactions to feel safe, rewarding, reciprocal, and personally meaningful. Loneliness has been connected to human behavior in a variety of interconnected cognitive, emotional, self-evaluative, and interpersonal processes that either facilitate or inhibit interaction with others, as summarized below in Table 2.

Table 2. Psychological Mechanisms Linking Loneliness With Human Behavior

Mechanism	Main Process	Behavioral Effect	Role in Connectedness	Reference
Social reward processing	Valuation of social interaction	Approach or avoidance	Supports relationship maintenance	Delgado et al. (2023)
Social cognition	Interpretation of social cues	Affiliation or withdrawal	Shapes interpersonal responses	Irem et al. (2025)
Rejection sensitivity	Expectation of rejection	Defensive responding	Can weaken peer acceptance	Giovazolias (2023)
Emotion regulation	Management of social distress	Adaptive or maladaptive coping	Supports interpersonal adjustment	Marroquín et al. (2017)
Self-evaluation	Self-esteem and competence	Confidence in interaction	Protects against isolation	Sakız et al. (2021)
Interpersonal trust	Expectation of reliability	Cooperation and dependence	Facilitates stable relationships	Krueger & Meyer-Lindenberg (2019)

4. Behavioral Consequences of Loneliness and Social Disconnection

Loneliness can affect the way people interact with others, with their community and their opportunities to participate in everyday activities. The significance of its behavior goes beyond emotional discomfort: chronic disconnection could impact social connectivity and connections to supportive relationships. As the issue has become more prominent, social connection has emerged as a key focus for improving people's health and society (World Health Organization, 2025). When people feel that they do not have much control and influence in interpersonal relationships, they tend to be socially withdrawn. A prior history of being helpless has been linked to a reduction in the sense of social proximity and an increase in disengagement, indicating that a sense of social position can influence interpersonal relations. Withdrawal can also put further limits on opportunities for supportive, rewarding interactions (Foulk et al., 2020). In contrast, pro-social behaviour is another way that links relationships together that can be kept alive or fostered. Emotional experiences can inspire helping, cooperation and actions that are aimed at supporting others, which will enable reciprocal social exchanges. The emotional underpinnings of prosociality highlight the ways in which affective processes can

motivate individuals to engage in socially constructive ways of acting instead of in interpersonal disengagement (Van Kleef & Lelieveld, 2022).

Social environments are also considered when making decisions. Others' decisions are often noticed and adopted by people when they make their own decisions, thus providing social influence. Research on sequential decision-making indicates that social influence can decrease independent information processing and therefore lower the collective accuracy in decision making, casting doubts on the idea that more reliance on social cues leads to better decisions (Frey & Van de Rijt, 2021). Attachment-related expectations also influence relationship behavior, including expectations for intimacy, security, and others' availability. The orientations in adult attachment research have proven to be relevant for the establishment and maintenance of close relationships. Variations in attachment can then perhaps be part of the explanation when it comes to how some people feel drawn to approach someone who feels withdrawn, and others feel pushed away and emotionally distant (Fraley, 2019).

Behavioral effects can also include variations in risk-taking behaviors. Calculated risk-taking is more deliberate, and spontaneous risk-taking is less planned. Understanding these differences is critical when looking at behavioral reactions to the negative effects of social experiences, since seemingly similar risky behaviors might stem from different decision processes (Zhang & Smith, 2025). Motivation to engage in social opportunities is especially crucial as it helps to clarify the social trajectory of loneliness: towards reconnection or further isolation. It has been suggested that people have different approach motivations and that this is correlated with loneliness as well as with variation in parasympathetic activity, suggesting that response to a social disconnection is both motivational and physiological. This decreased approach tendency could then make seeking out opportunities for renewed interpersonal engagement more difficult (Smith & Pollak, 2022).

Loneliness does not evoke one specific response. The effects may range from withdrawal to changes in social engagement, interpersonal decision-making, approach behavior, attachment, emotional processes, perceived power, and tendencies of individuals. This variability is important when trying to understand why some people stay lonely, and others are able to reestablish a more meaningful relationship with others. Figure 1 represents the suggested major behavioral pathways associated with loneliness and social disconnection, with withdrawal and prosocial responses, social decision-making, attachment-related behaviour, and risk and approach tendencies potentially contributing to either reconnection or further disconnection.

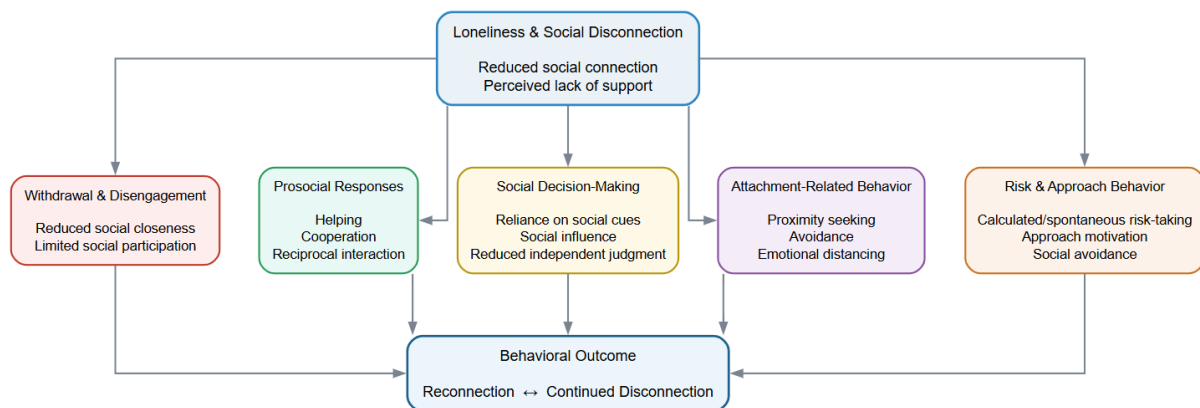


Figure 1. Behavioral Pathways of Loneliness and Social Disconnection

5. Contemporary Social Environments and Changing Patterns of Connectedness

The ways people initiate, sustain and experience relationships have changed in modern times. Social media enables regular communication irrespective of geographic location, but also enables situations where digital communication can be present alongside a sense of disconnection. Therefore, its impact on close relationships is not always positive or negative, and how platforms are used and how online communication interacts with the offline communication processes of close relationships are crucial factors (Taylor et al., 2022).

These changes are important as social connection is closely linked with psychological and physical well-being. The changing nature of the household, community involvement, technology and social interaction has raised awareness of the environment that facilitates meaningful relationships. Existing evidence highlights the importance of connection in ways beyond just how often people get in touch with one another (Holt-Lunstad, 2024).

Social comparison is also enhanced in digital environments. Exposure to selected images of others' lives can impact self-evaluation and social status, and positive relationships can moderate negative psychological reactions. Social comparison and perceived social support can be seen as exemplifying how online spaces can offer opportunities for connection while simultaneously creating social pressures important to psychological well-being (Wah, 2025).

Another context is that of changes in work arrangements. Hybrid working adjustments interpersonal contact

between people in both physical and virtual settings, which may impact informal contact, employee identification and sense of inclusion. Findings from research on belonging in hybrid working contexts highlight the need to focus on organizational and relational factors that foster the sense of belonging among employees within their working groups and teams, in addition to co-presence (Urrila et al., 2025).

However, the surroundings in which social relationships are formed are also transformed by urbanization and mobility of people. Migration and urbanization can reshape neighborhoods, family setups and the possibilities for frequent social contact within the community. Evidence of movement in the context of urban transition in India highlights the close linkages between movement and change in urban environments, and offers a key structural perspective on changing patterns of community attachment and social interaction (Randolph, 2024).

Despite these broader changes, families and friendships continue to be major providers of social capital. Relationship networks can offer information, support, norms and resources that are more than emotional companionship. Studies have shown links between social capital and family and friendship networks and intergenerational mobility, and that social relationships have an impact on perceptions of belonging and interpersonal support, as well as on who benefits from opportunities. Evidence on how family and friendship networks relate to social capital and intergenerational mobility illustrates that social relationships can shape access to opportunities, and that they can directly influence personal experiences of belonging and interpersonal support (Peterson et al., 2025).

The impact of technological change is not just on the location of interaction, but on the nature of interpersonal relationships as well. Although digital communication can broaden access to social networks and help maintain social connections, interaction using technology can also have different psychosocial effects as compared to in-person interactions. Awareness of the connectedness in the modern world, then, should be focused on the interplay between interpersonal behavior, communication technology and psychosocial wellbeing (Oluwatoyin, 2021).

Digital communication, work organization, mobility, social networks and family relationships are all intertwined and influence the nature of today's connectedness. The key question is not only one of the intensity of interaction, but one of the types of interaction, and whether it is interactions that offer relationships of belonging, support and reciprocity, and meaningful participation. Table 3 illustrates opportunities for social interaction and challenges for meaningful connectedness in the contemporary social environment, as they can occur at the same time depending on the quality and context of social engagement.

Table 3. Contemporary Social Environments Shaping Social Connectedness

Social Context	Main Change	Potential Benefit	Potential Challenge	Reference
Social media	Digitally mediated relationships	Maintains distant ties	Perceived disconnection	Taylor et al. (2022)
Digital comparison	Greater exposure to others	Access to social support	Negative self-evaluation	Wah (2025)
Hybrid work	Mixed virtual and physical contact	Flexible interaction	Reduced workplace belonging	Urrila et al. (2025)
Urban mobility	Population movement	New social opportunities	Weaker community continuity	Randolph (2024)
Family and friendship networks	Changing social capital	Support and resources	Unequal network access	Peterson et al. (2025)
Digital interaction	Technology-mediated communication	Expanded social access	Altered relationship quality	Oluwatoyin (2021)

6. Integrative Perspectives, Interventions, and Future Research

Loneliness needs a psychological, relational and social approach for effective responses. Understanding that loneliness can be mediated by different mechanisms (unmet belonging needs, perceived social threat, and disrupted relational expectations) through theoretical models can offer a more targeted approach to loneliness interventions (Goldman et al., 2025). An interdisciplinary perspective also acknowledges that social connection is built through relationships, communities, and social environments that involve people and relationships between people (Farmer et al., 2025). They can rely on community-based approaches to enhance connectedness and foster trust, participation, reciprocity, and meaningful interpersonal engagement. The relational approach to community engagement is especially important because interventions are introduced into a social context that is broader than loneliness itself, which is often considered as a personal problem (Redvers et al., 2024). These strategies can be enriched by digital interventions, which will broaden the opportunities for interactions between people affected by geographical or social barriers, but will depend on the extent to which technology will enable meaningful interactions, and not just contacts (Hansen et al., 2025). There are also differences in intervention needs among populations. The social, demographic and health determinants of loneliness vary with age, suggesting that similar interventions might not fully capture these

differences in vulnerability and social context (Franssen et al., 2020).

Longitudinal, cross-cultural and comparative research is desired in the future to better understand the processes by which loneliness emerges in the lifespan and in different social settings. More research is needed on culturally diverse populations, digitally mediated relationships, and contrasting individual, relational, community, and digital interventions to identify effective modes of intervention for various populations and social settings.

The evidence suggests a multilevel perspective on loneliness, so that effective interventions will consider psychological processes and enhance opportunities for meaningful social engagement and relationships. Figure 2 shows a multilevel framework on theoretical, interdisciplinary, community, digital and population-sensitive perspectives on social connection, alongside the key priorities for future research.

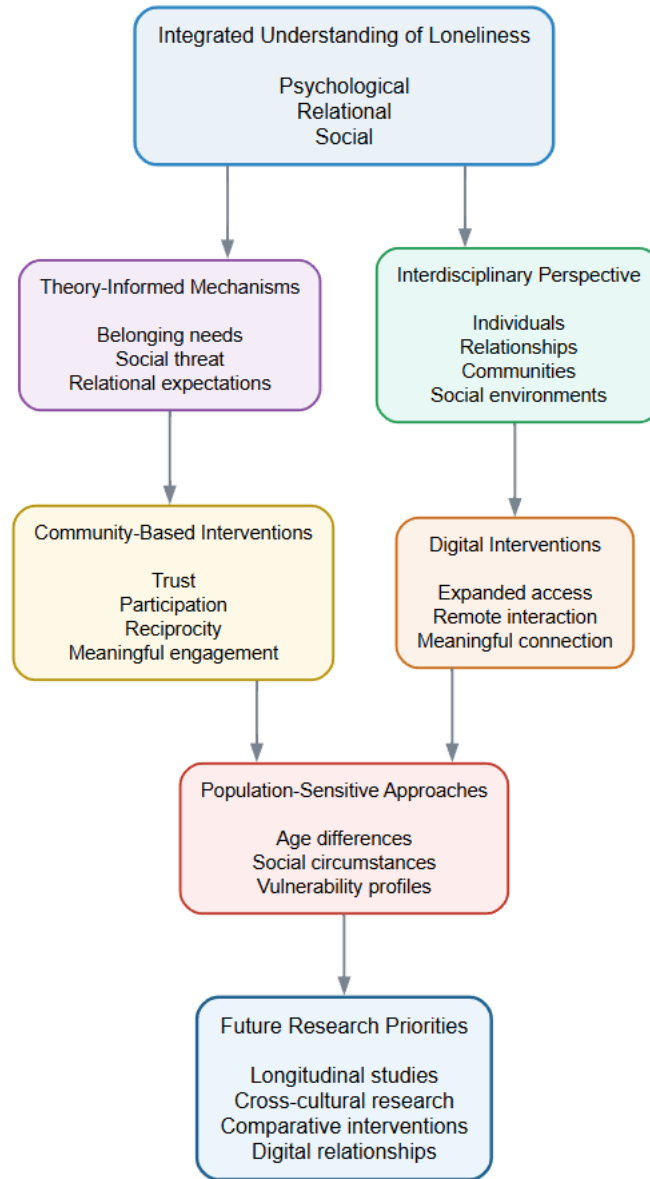


Figure 2. Multilevel Framework for Addressing Loneliness and Strengthening Social Connection

7. Conclusion

Loneliness and social connectedness are social-psychological constructs consisting of multiple dimensions that are influenced by subjective perceptions, interpersonal experiences, developmental contexts and social environments. Overall, the evidence presented in this article reflects that loneliness is more than a lack of contact; it is a felt lack of meaningful contact and can affect social cognition, emotion regulation, trust, self-evaluation, motivation, relationship behaviour and more. The behavioral reactions to disconnection vary and can involve withdrawal, decision making changes, attachment-related behavioral changes, and variations in approach motivation. In contemporary social contexts, these processes are further complicated by the digital world, hybrid working, mobility, and altering family and friendship structures, which can help to build connectedness, but also hinder it. The review also suggests that new solutions to loneliness must go beyond one-size-fits-all, individual-level solutions. More good practice will be achieved through integrated approaches

which combine psychological approaches with other strategies such as those that draw on relationships, community, the digital environment, and population. Longitudinal, cross-cultural, and comparative studies will be needed to understand which kinds of social relationships are most effective as protective factors at different ages and in various contexts, in order to make future progress.

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