

Daniel Distefano

Loneliness as a Social Issue Transcript

00:00:00 - 00:00:23

[Voices overlapping and intro music.]

00:00:23 - 00:00:52

Daniel Distefano: You are listening to WMUA News, I'm Dan Distefano. The prevalence of loneliness has garnered great public attention in recent years. So much so that it was labeled as a worldwide epidemic by the US Surgeon General in 2023. Much of the urgency for addressing the issue stems from loneliness is linked to adverse health effects such as increased risk of cardiovascular diseases, Alzheimer's disease, and diminished immune response.

00:00:52 - 00:01:45

While loneliness has garnered wide public attention in recent years, many scholars have criticized the common approaches to loneliness for centering the actions of the lonely individual and their social shortcomings. Take, for example, the “crazy cat lady” often portrayed in popular media. While this character initially seems harmless, several scholars have noted that this portrayal perpetuates the narrative that women who do not get married will end up isolated and unhappy. This view of loneliness has been noted to individualize the issue, placing blame on the lonely individual and further exacerbating their struggle. Additionally, researchers have identified that by focusing on the actions of the lonely individual, we tend to overlook the societal contributions to loneliness such as discrimination and inadequate community structuring.

00:01:45 - 00:02:22

To discuss the topic further, I sat down with Angieannie Lefevre and Jessica Stephen, two senior

public health majors who had enrolled in the course titled “The Epidemic of Loneliness” taught by Dr. Gloria DiFulvio. The course covered the importance of social connectedness and explored how issues of identity, race, displacement, and aging can affect feelings of loneliness. In this interview, we discussed how their perception of loneliness has changed after taking the course. Additionally, we discussed several societal contributions to loneliness and what changes can be made to improve feelings of loneliness.

00:02:22 - 00:02:28

Distefano: So, if you would like to share your names, majors and pronouns if you're comfortable.

00:02:28 - 00:02:40

Jessica Stephen: Hi, my name is Jessica Stephen. I'm a senior public health major at UMass Amherst. Uh I use she/her pronouns and I took the epidemic of loneliness class um last year.

00:02:40 - 00:02:50

Angieannie Lefevre: Hi, I'm Angieannie Lefevre. I'm also a senior here at UMass, Public Health Major. My pronouns she/her and I am currently taking this course.

00:02:50 - 00:02:59

Distefano: So why did you want to take a course on loneliness? And what are some overall ways your views of loneliness have changed after taking this course?

00:02:59 - 00:03:23

Lefevre: For me, I really noticed that loneliness is embedded in a lot of injustice in um different communities, especially marginalized communities. Um, lack of access to public parks, lack of access to open spaces is really what uh makes loneliness a bigger issue than what I thought of it just being like a personal issue. So, that's something I, I definitely learned in this class.

00:03:23 - 00:04:19

Stephen: I mean, for me, I was just overall really curious in the idea of loneliness because coming into this class, I had heard a lot of good things, but I really didn't realize the impact that loneliness can have on our health. Like, it was really astonishing to me when we were learning the statistics on the first day um about loneliness and how it literally can be equivalent to like smoking cigarettes. And I was just like, really astonished about that because I, I pictured honestly, I had that stereotyped, like idea that loneliness was kind of like a, like an individual thing. But through this class, I've realized that it's kind of a systemic thing that's come from injustices in the way that our communities are structured um which I had like I had not realized. But like, after going like learning about it in this class, like it makes complete sense.

00:04:19 - 00:04:31

Distefano: So what do you think the dominant view surrounding loneliness is maybe in a public perception or maybe among even health officials? And how has this view been both useful and problematic?

00:04:31 - 00:04:53

Lefevre: I think the main thing, the main view on loneliness is that it's an individual issue. It's like these kids are on their phones and they're... lonely because they're not going outside or uh people aren't, you know, going out enough, but it's not like an individualistic issue. It, we really have to look at the community to understand it and to fix it ultimately.

00:04:53 - 00:05:38

Stephen: Yeah, for sure. I think that's like the prevalent issue that people don't realize is like, loneliness is a public health issue. It's not an individual issue at all. It's something that, especially as the years have gone on. And I, I think it's been prevalent in the past too, but we just didn't recognize it as something that's been the result of the way that our society is structured that, you

know, you, especially in the United States where you're kind of told that you have to do everything by yourself independently. Like I think has exacerbated what we've seen with loneliness in this country, especially where you have so many immigrants, so many people coming from different countries where you've been relying on like family connections and like it's very tight knit in those countries and then you come here and it's very isolating.

00:05:38 - 00:05:55

Distefano: So oftentimes, chronic loneliness is seen as something that can affect anyone. How do you think this view has maybe understated the prevalence of loneliness and how it differs between certain demographics, and what demographics are disproportionately affected by chronic loneliness?

00:05:55 - 00:06:56

Lefevre: To no one's surprise, mainly, mainly marginalized groups are affected by loneliness. We spent a lot of time talking about like LGBTQ youth, uh Black communities. We learned, I knew a little about it a little bit about it before this course but um like in the early 1900s, when Black communities started to like grow in wealth and grow in network. Um A lot of times the US government would have highways literally paved through like bustling Black communities completely like dismantling any form of connection, dismantling any form of, I don't know, I like, like any form of success in those communities. And now especially the Black communities um are dealing with the repercussions of that. Like now I don't live near a store and I don't live near like anything that can actually help me. Um So those are like the first people that come to mind when I think about loneliness and like, how they were structurally targeted.

00:06:56 - 00:07:49

Stephen: Yeah. For me, I definitely agree. I think marginalized communities for sure, especially

like migrants or immigrants too. Um because you're really, you're coming to a whole, whole new country with literally your family is like, like, like on another continent and you're trying to make it and like, how do you even find connection? Um So definitely marginalized groups as well as like the older adult population overall. I mean, that's something that, you know, I've been interested in. Um just with regards to how do we improve healthy. Um How do we make aging like a better process? Like, especially once you retire, like you have so much of your life and now you're like, what do I do? Like if your only purpose again with America being a very individualist focused culture, like once you retire in all your life, it's just been work, work, work well, then what do you do now?

00:07:49 - 00:08:33

Stephen: And I think we're seeing that a lot in terms of like loneliness um among older adults, especially like when they go to a nursing home. And that's kind of like without that connection, you're really like, that can be very detrimental to your health. And then, you know, it can lead to again chronic issues and and whatnot. Like a lot of people mentioned how after they left work, like there was really nowhere else that they could find connection. So like if you're not in a church or if you're not in a, I don't know other like community, like if you don't have a community center near you, if you leave work, there's really no other place to get connection.

Um And that's why another reason why older adults are at risk of loneliness as well.

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Distefano: So how do you think we can combat this prevalence of loneliness? And what changes either maybe at a more local or societal level, what changes can be made to improve such conditions?

00:08:47 - 00:09:53

Stephen: Well, for me, like something that really, I remember from class was learning about like the way that we structure our communities. Is there a way that we can make it so that there's increased walkability, there's more outdoor spaces for people to just um you know, get together and talk. And, you know, I think once I started learning about that and learning about different spaces like libraries and how can we make more spaces like a library? Like I realized that that's maybe one change that we can do on a local level to, you know, create more connection. I think I was thinking back to my hometown. How like, yes, we do have a lot of community, things like we have a library and stuff like that. But like, I feel like walkability is definitely an issue, especially because my town is so big. And so I think, yeah, just like thinking more about how we structure our communities and how we can improve connectedness. Um is definitely something that could be a way to combat um increasing loneliness.

00:09:53 - 00:09:58

Distefano: Do you think addressing loneliness requires further attention at our university?

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Lefevre: I definitely think making more spaces for marginalized groups on campus. You know, as this is a PWI I know, like as a Black student, I felt like the sense of belonging is kind of hard for me to get there. I feel like I was a part of the UMass community. So just having more spaces for people who are different to gather um and to connect with each other could really help with the sense of belongings and maybe grow their social connections and help combat loneliness, especially in those marginalized groups. A little bit more.

00:10:28 - 00:10:57

Distefano: Angieannie and Jessica shared with me that their class has been working on a podcast titled Alone Together and is likely to release several episodes in the summer of 2024. I

additionally met with title nine training specialist and sociology lecturer, Jules Purnell. In this interview, we discussed the usage of the term “loneliness epidemic,” loneliness’ relationship with the COVID-19 pandemic and the internet, and loneliness as a cultural issue rather than an individual issue.

00:10:57 - 00:11:05

Distefano: So thank you for meeting with me. If you would like to introduce yourself.

00:11:05 - 00:11:17

Jules Purnell: Sure. My name is Jules Purnell. My pronouns are they/them. I am the Title IX Training Specialist in equal opportunity and access. And I am also a lecturer in sociology, and this last semester, I just taught Gen Z culture.

00:11:17 - 00:11:41

Distefano: Awesome. Loneliness prevalence rates have risen over the past decades and has garnered much public attention such as being labeled like the loneliness epidemic by the US Surgeon General. I was wondering your opinion on labeling this as an epidemic because it can suggest urgency, but I was wondering if you think that it could also pathologize the issue and maybe provide some further stigma.

00:11:41 - 00:12:32

Purnell: It's a really good question. I think it's a good term because in many ways, I think it parallels the COVID-19 epidemic. Like I think that those two things go hand in hand. And I think that it does represent the level of urgency that we're seeing and I hope that it is considered a public health issue. And so I think if we weren't calling it that maybe we wouldn't be giving it the same kind of attention. So I do think that it's helpful in that way in terms of being able to say, how can we look at this as a more holistic societal problem rather than making it an individual

person's problem? Which I think is how we do a lot of public health stuff unfortunately. Like, you know, there's this, this outcry about obesity, but we don't look at like, what are our food systems doing that are making it hard for people to be healthier, right? So I think in that way, framing it as a public health issue actually is probably the most successful strategy.

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Distefano: So how do you think the COVID-19 pandemic influenced feelings of loneliness that we see today?

00:12:39 - 00:13:36

Purnell: Well, I think for so many people, we had to be quarantined, we couldn't be near our family and friends. I know one of my really good friends who's a colleague, she's from Belgium and she got marooned in the States and couldn't go back to see her family for almost two years. And so that made her feel incredibly lonely, not just as an individual, not just estranged from her family, but also estranged from her culture too. So I think there are a lot of ways in which just the quarantine itself had a lot to do with that. But then I also think on the other side of it, one thing we're seeing is that people are having a harder time getting back into social rhythms. People are having a hard time meeting new people, connecting with new friends or like forget how to connect in the ways that they used to. And I feel that individually. But I also see it in my students too. It just feels like there's a little bit of an awkwardness or a difficulty in getting back into social life. So I think that's part of it is there was the quarantine itself, but then we're also still seeing the effects that are ongoing now for the last couple of years.

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Distefano: What do you think is the relationship between loneliness and the internet? Because it's garnered a lot of public attention and a lot of people have been saying stuff like “get

off your phones” and things like that. So how do you think the internet has exacerbated or improved feelings of loneliness?

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Purnell: It is kind of a double-edged sword and this is something that we talked about in our class is that in some cases, social media can be fantastic because it can connect you to communities, you otherwise maybe wouldn't have access to. So for example, if you are a young queer person somewhere that's rural and doesn't have access to like a, you know, support group in your own neighborhood, maybe you can connect with people elsewhere, you know. So I think in that way, it can be an antidote to that kind of loneliness. But on the other hand, it doesn't always create depth of connection and there is something different about being in the same physical space with someone. And so I think that's one of the issues with only connecting with folks over social media. And one of the things that we're seeing interestingly is that the more time someone spends on social media, the worse that their mental health outcomes are and the worse that those feelings of loneliness are. So there does seem to be a kind of a one for one correlation on that.

00:14:45 - 00:14:52

Distefano: How do you think the individualizing view of loneliness has shaped the public perception of loneliness?

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Purnell: It's tough because we're in a weird place right now where people are not making as much money as they used to in terms of being able to keep up with cost of living. So things like being able to participate in different social clubs that require an entrance fee that's declined. That's actually what Robert Putnam talked about in *Bowling Alone* was we can't participate in

some of these social clubs anymore because it's more expensive, even though, you know, in some cases, we might have more access to leisure time. Sometimes we don't depending on how much we're working. So I really think that there's this more global view of we're working a lot more than we should be. We're not making as much as we should be when we do work.

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And so oftentimes we're very tired and broke and so we can't really socialize that much. So, that's the way that I think it's, it's not just an individual person's problem. It really is a cultural issue that we need to be thinking about. Um, and being more thoughtful about the ways that we talk about it too. So it doesn't just make individual people feel like, oh, I'm a loser because I have no friends, you know, but instead here are some ways that you can meet other people in your neighborhood or, you know, if you wanna, you know, say hi to your neighbors, just simple things like that even can help to alleviate some of those feelings of loneliness.

00:16:01 - 00:16:09

Distefano: Do you think there is enough being done on a maybe societal level to address and mitigate the issues associated with loneliness?

00:16:09 - 00:17:08

Purnell: In the Western world, probably not. We're not doing a whole lot to support each other on a number of fronts right now. I think that one of the issues and I talked about it a little bit before, but just the, the overworking that we're all doing, we're so busy that it feels to me anyway, like there's hardly any time to think about some of these other things that might seem more frivolous, right? So, if we don't take loneliness that seriously, it's not something that we're really thinking about. How do we resolve this or how do we come with remedies because we're just so busy doing whatever it is we're doing in our day to day life that we don't spend that much time looking

around saying like, hm, what's the bigger picture here? And I think we see that with a lot of other issues within society. I think there are some other cultures and community that are more collectivist where that's less of an issue where it just is a little bit easier to reach out to your neighbors or have, you know, more importance placed on your family rather than your working life. So I think in some other places, it's a little bit easier. But I think especially here in the States, we're not doing a great job at that.

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Distefano: So in what ways can we advocate for better solutions towards targeting feelings of loneliness?

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Purnell: I think on an individual level, we probably can just like check in on people more and just say to our friends, you know, how are you doing? I think those very simple things, a lot of times we can update people with like here's what's going on in my life. But we don't always say like, how are you feeling like, what's your experience day to day like? And that may feel awkward at first if you're not used to having those conversations. But I have friends that, you know, I've known since high school, even that I still will just check in on them every now and then and just say, like, how are you doing? Like, how's your day to day life going? And I think that some of those are, some of those little check ins are ways to just demonstrate care. But it also then gives people an opportunity to say, well, actually I've been feeling kind of lonely or I'm feeling isolated and I would love to do something – get me out of the house, please. So I think like those kinds of things are what we can do sort of on like an individual basis.

00:18:02 - 00:19:03

Distefano: Many scholars have emphasized for our society to shift away from the belief that

loneliness is a consequence of our lack of social relationships. The individualizing view of loneliness has been noted to lead to interventions that inadequately target feelings of loneliness such as suggestions of simply going outside, meeting new people and getting off your phone. Individualizing loneliness ignores the societal contributions to loneliness such as discrimination or inadequate structures of our communities. By recognizing systemic issues that contribute to feelings of loneliness. We may identify long term ways that address loneliness such as funding more accessible communal spaces or the passing of anti-discriminatory legislation. Such methods may adequately address the widespread loneliness. We see today improving both the physical and mental health of countless individuals for WMUA News, I'm Dan Distefano.

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