PATTERNS OF CHANGE IN ADOLESCENT LONELINESS: ASSOCIATIONS WITH CONCOMITANT CHANGES IN FEAR OF NEGATIVE EVALUATION AND SELF-ESTEEM

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Background and aims. Various developmental patterns have been identified for adolescent loneliness (e.g., stable high, increasing, decreasing, and stable low), but the underlying processes for these patterns are still unclear. The present study concentrated on two variables conceptually related to loneliness, that is, fear of negative evaluation and self-esteem, and examined whether changes over time in loneliness were accompanied by changes in these variables in predictable ways. We expected to find changes in the same direction for fear of negative evaluation (e.g., increases in loneliness accompanied by increases in this type of fear) and changes in the opposite direction for self-esteem (e.g., increases in loneliness accompanied by decreases in positive self-regard).

Method. The sample (N = 1189; 50% girls) comprised Dutch adolescents from Grades 7 to 10. They completed measures of loneliness, fear of negative evaluation, and self-esteem on four occasions with a one-year interval. Loneliness trajectory classes were identified through a Latent Class Growth Analysis (LCGA). The developmental trajectory for fear of negative evaluation and self-esteem within each of these trajectory classes was then estimated through a multi-group Latent Growth Curve Model (LCGM).

Results. Four loneliness trajectory classes were identified: (a) stable low (67.0%), (b) moderate decreasing (17.5%), (c) low increasing (11.5%), and (d) stable high (4.0%). Changes in both fear of negative evaluation ($\Delta X^2 = 71.46$, $df = 2$, $p < .001$) and self-esteem ($\Delta X^2 = 61.508$, $df = 3$, $p < .001$) were significantly different across these classes. As expected, changes in loneliness were accompanied by changes in the same direction for fear of negative evaluation and changes in the opposite direction for self-esteem.

Conclusions. These findings suggest that increasing fear of negative evaluation and decreasing self-esteem may explain in part why some adolescents become lonelier over time. Implications for current understanding of adolescent loneliness are discussed.