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от Третия
национален конгрес
по клинична
психология
с международно
участие
София, 2020 г.

Под редакцията на
проф. **Ваня Матанова** д.пс.н.

МЕНТАЛИЗАЦИЯ И КЛИНИЧНА ПРАКТИКА



СТЕНО®

Ментализации и клинична практика

Доклади от Третия национален конгрес по клинична психология
с международно участие, София, 2020

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The Attitude to Loneliness Among Men and Women in Early Adulthood

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Abstract: *The problem of loneliness is a fundamental problem of human existence. Loneliness can be filled with despair, and can contribute to the spiritual development of a person (Osin, Leontyev, 2013). Different are both approaches to understanding loneliness, and subjective experiences of loneliness. The aim was to study the attitude to loneliness among men and women in early adulthood.*

Participants: 101 (56 – female, 45 – male) respondents (M = 19.14 years). Participants answered questions about loneliness in writing. The data was processed by content-analysis.

The study showed that most respondents mentioned the physical aspect of loneliness, representing it as solitude (46.5%) or as isolation (26.7%). Loneliness was considered as a positive resource state, necessary for each person. In loneliness, young people feel calm (53.5%) and comfort (16.8%), use this time for rest (23.8%), planning (40.6%) and reflection (50.5%). Women were more likely than men to feel unity with themselves ($p = 0.05$) and appeasement ($p = 0.05$). Women had negative thoughts about mistakes of the past, damage to themselves and loved ones, which was not found among men.

It is showed that 88.12% of people could not imagine their life without to be alone; 9.9% of people could live without this possibility, but it would be difficult. 90.1% of people answered that they could not be lonely.

Thus, the concept of loneliness among men and women in early adulthood has some differences, but, in general, loneliness is considered as a positive state of the resource that is necessary for each person. Support by RFBR project 19–513–18015.

Background. The problem of loneliness is one of the fundamental problems of human existence and has an interdisciplinary character. The origins of the study of loneliness can be found in the works of outstanding philosophers: A. Camus, S. Kierkegaard, F. Nietzsche, H. Ortega y Gasset, J.-P. Sartre, M. Heidegger, C. Jung, A. Schopenhauer. Not only philosophers, but also sociologists, psychologists, and representatives of other humanities have addressed and are addressing the problem of loneliness.

The problem of loneliness is becoming one of the most pressing problems of modern society. Loneliness is a complex set of constructive and destructive factors. On one hand, loneliness can significantly complicate the process of a one's successful building of constructive relationships with the outside world. In this sense, loneliness, is acting as a perceived deficit in interpersonal relationships, manifests itself at the level of the individual in unmet needs and is the result of an affective-cognitive assessment of qualitatively inadequate social connections and relationships (Kryukova, 2013). In addition,

loneliness can be experienced as a feeling of abandonment, uselessness, loss of emotional connection with others (isolation, alienation). On the other hand, loneliness can be viewed as a source of inspiration, creativity, as a time for reflection and reflection on life-meaning problems, can contribute to the spiritual development of a person (Osin, Leontiev, 2013). In this sense, loneliness is a value for self-determination and personal development (Leontiev, 2011).

Today the scientific literature is dominated by a pluralism of approaches to understanding loneliness (Labyrinths of loneliness, 1989), which indicates the complexity, versatility and inconsistency of the phenomenon under consideration.

As noted by the Russian researcher N.V. Grishina, from the position of the existential approach, loneliness has a universal character and a positive nature; the reasons for loneliness lie in the conditions of human existence and exist throughout one's life (Grishina, 2018, p. 162–163). A one's life is a constant choice between loneliness and being in contact with other people (Yalom, 1999). At the same time, loneliness is understood as „the experience of one's own non-involvement in contacts with other people” (Osin, Leontiev, 2013). N.V. Grishina understands loneliness as „the acute feeling of a one's experience of isolation from the environment and the world of people, a perceived abyss between one's inner world and them” (Grishina N.V., 2018, p. 151).

Loneliness is a multidimensional construct, it can be both voluntary and forced, objective and subjective. Loneliness as a positive, voluntary state is closely related to the concepts of freedom and independence, a one's personal space, the possibilities of reflection and self-knowledge.

N.V. Grishina distinguishes, in addition to loneliness as a phenomenon associated with negative experiences, loneliness as a fact of a one's existential separation from others (Grishina, 2018). According to the author, existential loneliness is „the recognition of the fact that a person is alone with his existential problems and with his life, that he himself experiences his life and lives it alone, no one can do it for him” (Grishina, 2018, p. 167). This is an objective fact of human existence, the same as death. Loneliness is characterized by a complex ambivalent nature that connects positive and negative aspects. A one's rejection of loneliness leads to the fear of loneliness and attempts to cope with it by establishing close and satisfying relationships with other people (Grishina, 2018, p. 177).

In modern society, the processes of self-development, self-expression and self-realization are becoming increasingly important against the background of the ever-increasing dynamism of social processes. Especially western societies are characterized by the increasing importance of the quality of life and the quality of relationships. In these conditions, loneliness can be not only a life situation, but also a conscious choice – a choice in favor of self-development and self-improvement (Averill, Sundararajan, 2014; Leontiev, 2011). Also, loneliness can become an alternative to social obligations and give freedom of choice, freeing up time for rest, recuperation and energy. Within the framework of the evolutionary model (Boomsma et al., 2006; Cacioppo et al., 2014), the authors suggest that loneliness can act as a special period in a one's life associated with the restructuring of the system of social ties, reassessment of relationships when old ties are broken, they are being replaced by new ones that provide closeness and

mutual understanding. However, this does not happen immediately, which leads to the emergence of such an intermediate period, when old ties have already been destroyed, and new ones have not yet been built, during this period a person can be called lonely, but this is a kind of dynamic loneliness necessary for building a new system of relations. These ideas are confirmed in other studies (Gardner et al., 2005), according to which, in moments of such loneliness, the processes of social perception and social intelligence are exacerbated, a person is in search of optimal contacts and becomes more sensitive to the surrounding social reality. At the same time, the evolutionary model also includes loneliness as a temporary state associated with self-preservation – a time when self-interest and focus on oneself increase (Matsuta, 2010; Averill, Sundararajan, 2014, etc.).

Bulgarian researchers (Alexandrova, 2015) mention three groups of factors that influence the experience of loneliness: social contacts (the number and quality of relationships); relationship standards and criteria (preferences, expectations and desires for personal relationships); factors affecting relationships (low self-esteem, poor health), etc. Also, researchers have shown that loneliness has a certain gender and age characteristics.

Most modern studies characterize loneliness from a negative side, considering it as a problem. Loneliness was associated with depression, cognitive decline and dementia (Cacioppo, Cacioppo, 2014; Weeks et al., 1980), with suicide (Stravynski, Boyer, 2001), poor sleep quality and daytime dysfunction (Hawkley, Cacioppo, 2010), with Internet addiction (Ryan, Xenos, 2011; Whang, Lee, Chang, 2004), with an increased risk cardiovascular diseases (Hawkley, Cacioppo, 2010), with the risk of acquiring Alzheimer's disease (Wilson et al., 2007) and with mortality (Holt-Lunstad, Smith, Layton, 2010; Holt-Lunstad et al., 2015). A database search for „loneliness” yields thousands of articles on the dangers of loneliness to human life and health. Nevertheless, the realities of modern life are such that more and more people voluntarily and consciously choose loneliness as a temporary or permanent solution. And gradually, interest in the resource component of this state appears. Methods are being developed that allow a diversified approach to the phenomenon of loneliness (Osin, Leontyev, 2013). Despite this, there are still few studies of „positive loneliness” (Long, Averill, 2003; Osin, Leontiev, 2013). In addition, there is a clear dichotomy of loneliness – positive – negative. However, it can be assumed that, depending on the life context, objective and subjective factors, one and the same person may experience loneliness in different ways. The time spent by a person alone can be filled with despair, or it can be used for creativity, internal dialogue, which allows one to truly experience the value of relationships with other people. As you can see, both approaches to understanding loneliness and its subjective experiences are different.

Human conditions in the modern world are characterized by the rapid development of information technology and mass communications. Such changes in the living conditions of a modern person are naturally reflected by the growing tendency to expand the age limits of the experiencing loneliness, which is manifested in a decrease in the age of persons facing this problem (Zadorozhnaya, 2005). At first glance, these changes represent great opportunities for personal and professional development and communication of a person with the whole world via the Internet without being tied to a specific place. Upon

closer examination, it becomes obvious that these possibilities not only do not eliminate the problem of loneliness, but also open up new aspects of it. At the same time, within the framework of developmental psychology, building close relationships is a normative need of a person in the period of early adulthood (here we can recall, for example, the development periodization of E. Erickson). The expectation of understanding and recognition, the need for love, acceptance and close (romantic) relationships, characteristic of this age period, lead to the experience of alienation and isolation. In this regard, we assume that young people at the stage of early adulthood are one of the most vulnerable groups in terms of experiencing loneliness; therefore, the study of attitudes towards loneliness among women and men in early adulthood seems to us especially relevant.

Based on the relevance of the problem under consideration, as well as based on personal interest, we conducted a study devoted to the study of attitudes towards loneliness among men and women in early adulthood.

Organization and methods. The study involved 101 people (56 women and 45 men) living in Russia. The average age of the subjects was 19.14 years (SD = 1.6). According to Bromley's periodization, the period of early adulthood includes the age range from 18 to 25 years. All respondents were students at the time of the study (specialties included psychology, medicine, philology, mathematics, history). Participation in the study was voluntary („sample as possible”). For all subjects, Russian was their native language. The study was conducted prior to self-isolation.

The respondents were asked to give detailed written answers to a number of open questions devoted to identifying ideas about loneliness and the respondents' attitude towards it, as well as the peculiarities of experiencing loneliness. The main method for processing the obtained data was Content-analysis. The selected categories were subject to expert assessment by two independent expert-psychologists.

Research results and their discussion. Content-analysis allowed us to identify three large groups of answers to the question of whether young people like the state of loneliness, as well as the question of what loneliness means for the respondents:

- (1) positive attitude to loneliness;
- (2) negative attitudes to loneliness;
- (3) ambivalent attitude to loneliness.

As the analysis of the respondents' answers has shown, the most represented group of answers was the group „positive attitude to loneliness” (Figure 1.).

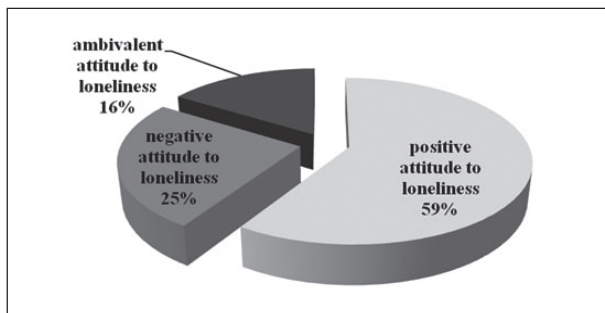


Figure 1. Attitude of young people to loneliness,%

Figure 2 shows the distribution in three groups of responses among men and women.

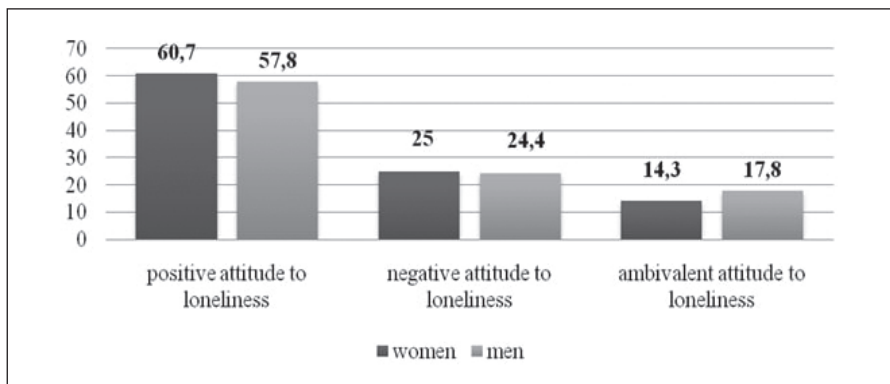


Figure 2. Attitude of men and women to loneliness, %

Thus, 60 (59.4%) respondents answered that they liked the state of loneliness, among them 34 women (60.7%) and 26 men (57.8%). Respondents who demonstrated a positive attitude to loneliness most often noted that for them loneliness was an opportunity to be alone with themselves, their thoughts, an opportunity to think about the future, a space for reflection and ideas, as well as a time to rest from contacts with other people, time for relaxation and energy replenishment. Young people noted that in a state of loneliness they most often experienced calmness and pacification, comfort, a sense of unity with themselves, happiness and joy.

About a quarter of all respondents – 25 people (24.8%) answered negatively to the question about their attitude to loneliness, among them there were 14 (25%) women and 11 (24.4%) men. Young people with a negative attitude to loneliness most often in their answers drew attention to the physical aspect of loneliness, noted that this is a state of isolation, separation from people, abandonment. Among the main emotional reactions that respondents usually experienced in a state of loneliness were sadness, longing, being lost and unnecessary, discomfort, fear and aggression.

Another 16 young people (15.8%) said that from time to time they liked to be in a state of loneliness, if this state was their own desire and did not last very long. The long-term state of loneliness was assessed by the respondents of this group as undesirable and associated with negative experiences. In other words, 15.8% of the young people showed an ambivalent attitude to loneliness (8 women (14.3%) and 8 men (17.8%)). The attitude to loneliness in this case largely depended on the duration of stay in this state. No differences were found between men and women.

Thus, the content-analysis of the respondents' answers regarding attitudes to loneliness allowed us to conclude that the majority of young people (both men and women) who took part in the study tend to evaluate loneliness mainly as a positive state associated with positive or neutral feelings and reflections, as well as to see in this state a resource component, the necessity and usefulness of loneliness for each person. In a state of loneliness, young people felt calm and serenity (53.47%), comfort (16.83%), used this time for rest, relaxation, recuperation (23.76%), planning (40.59 %) and reflection

(50.5%). Women, to a greater extent than men, tended to experience in a state of loneliness a sense of unity with themselves ($\varphi^* = 2.253$; $p = 0.05$) and peace ($\varphi^* = 2.043$; $p = 0.05$). Also, women were characterized by negative thoughts in a state of loneliness associated with mistakes of the past, damage to themselves and loved ones, which was not revealed in young people.

Particularly noteworthy is the fact that the majority of respondents (both men and women), when defining loneliness, more often spoke about its physical aspect than about subjective experience. That is, young people quite often associated loneliness with the physical absence of people (this also applies to young people with a positive attitude to loneliness, and to young people with a negative attitude to loneliness). So, some young people imagined loneliness as solitude (rest from people, being without people of their own accord) – 47 (46.54)%, another part – 27 respondents (26.73%) – as isolation – a state when a person is forced to separate from other people.

During the analysis of the respondents' answers to the question „*Do you think „being lonely” and „being alone” are the same thing? How would you characterize these two states?*” we found that for the majority of respondents „being lonely” and „being alone” were not identical concepts. So, „being alone” was a stable state that did not depend on the will of a person. „Being alone” was a positive short-term state that was associated with the will and desire of the person himself.

Next, let us consider in more detail the meaningful characteristics of the concepts „being lonely” and „being alone” received from the respondents.

So, the main characteristics of the concept of „being lonely” were the following: stability (56% of respondents) and depth of experience (6% of respondents) of the state (56% of respondents), lack of support from friends and family (27% of respondents); lack of understanding on the part of others, a sense of alienation (25% of respondents); feeling of uselessness (4% of respondents). The respondents noted that this state was a forced loneliness, independent of the will and desire of a person (27%), suggesting the absence of relatives, friends and family (21% of respondents). 2% of the respondents from the female sample also noted that this state was to a greater extent a subjectively experienced internal state.

Thus, defining the concept of „being lonely”, the majority of respondents, first of all, emphasized the stability, duration and static nature of this state (some respondents in their answers defined the concept through the word „lifelong”), noted at the same time alienation, misunderstanding on the part of others and lack of support.

With regard to the concept of „being alone”, the research participants identified the following main characteristics of this concept: temporary and reversible nature of the state (63% of respondents); dependence on the desire of the person himself to be alone with himself (43% of the study participants). The respondents noted that this state was necessary (necessary, useful) and natural for a person (11%), it meant being connected with the world, being included in it (3%). Women were statistically significantly more likely ($p = 0.05$) than men to talk about the usefulness and necessity of this state, about the possibility of using it as a rest from the outside world.

Thus, in contrast to the state of „being lonely”, the state of „being alone”, according to the respondents, was less stable and deep, positive and necessary for every person.

The respondents noted that this condition was temporary and reversible, was important and useful for the regulation of the emotional state, rest and reboot, and also depended on the one's conscious choice and desire.

Interesting, in our opinion, are the data on the respondents' attitude to the impossibility of being alone (loneliness). Thus, 88.1% of respondents (N = 89) noted that they could not imagine their life without the opportunity to be alone from time to time, because otherwise a person accumulated fatigue from constant interaction with other people, since this was „sometimes very tiring” and person needed the opportunity to be alone, needed a break from communication, the opportunity to be alone with oneself, with one's thoughts. Separately, the respondents noted that without the opportunity to be alone, life would be defective. This opinion was shared by about 94.64% of women (N = 53) of the total number of the female sample and 80% (N = 36) of men of the total number of the male sample. Only 9.9% of respondents (N = 10) noted that they could live without the opportunity to be alone, but it would be very difficult for them and would bring them a lot of suffering, but they could adapt to such situation (7 men (15.6%) and 3 women (5.36%)).

If the lack of the opportunity to be alone seemed difficult for the respondents, then the lack of the opportunity to be lonely seemed quite real, since, in their opinion, any person needed communication and an understanding environment, therefore 90.1% of people (N = 91) unequivocally answered that they did not could be single (36 men (80%) and 55 women (98.21%)). And only 1 woman unequivocally expressed the opinion that she could not live without the opportunity to be lonely.

Thus, the results of our study showed that men and women in early adulthood, when assessed the state of loneliness, tended to talk about it as a positive state, necessary and useful for every person. The respondents emphasized that loneliness was a short-term state that depended on the will and desire of the person himself. Both men and women very often paid attention to physical aspect of loneliness (being away from other people), considered loneliness as an opportunity to take a break from the outside hustle and bustle, communication with people, and temporary isolation. Emotionally young people most often, being alone, experienced calmness, peace, a sense of oneness with themselves, relaxation and comfort. Among the negative emotional experiences of loneliness, young people named sadness, feelings of uselessness and discomfort associated with loneliness. In addition, women, to a greater extent than men, tended to experience in a state of loneliness a sense of unity with themselves and peace; and in a state of loneliness they could have negative thoughts associated with mistakes of the past, damage to themselves and loved ones not typical for men.

Despite some differences in attitudes and perceptions of loneliness among men and women in early adulthood, loneliness was generally seen as a positive state of the resource that every person needs. In this regard, it seems to us advisable to continue the study and find confirmation of the results obtained, identify the resource component of the state under consideration, expanding the diagnostic tools and increasing the research sample.

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