Expressive Arts Therapy and The Loneliness Epidemic- A Critical Review of Literature

Tiffany Crockett
Lesley University, tcrocke3@lesley.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.lesley.edu/expressive_theses

Part of the Social and Behavioral Sciences Commons

Recommended Citation
https://digitalcommons.lesley.edu/expressive_theses/325

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate School of Arts and Social Sciences (GSASS) at DigitalCommons@Lesley. It has been accepted for inclusion in Expressive Therapies Capstone Theses by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@Lesley. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@lesley.edu, cvrattos@lesley.edu.
Expressive Arts Therapy and The Loneliness Epidemic—A Critical Review of Literature

Capstone Thesis

Lesley University

Tiffany Crockett

May 5, 2020

Expressive Art Therapy

Donna C. Owens, PhD
Abstract

Loneliness has become a public health crisis in this country, and research is still fairly new. However, current research indicates that emerging and aging adults are most affected by loneliness and social isolation. With these populations, the most effective treatments to be found included connecting with others through conversation and volunteering, along with expressive arts. This thesis presents loneliness in a historical context and focuses on loneliness between three major groups: emerging adults, aging adults, and those in romantic dependent relationships. Specifically, this thesis aims to provide a thorough literature review of academic and non-academic resources offering interventions for loneliness using human connection through the medium of expressive arts. Although there is still not a lot of research provided with actual expressive art therapists implementing interventions for those suffering from loneliness, sufficient research exists using the arts in general with these populations.

*Keywords*: loneliness, young adults, aging adults, older adults, loneliness epidemic, expressive art therapy, art therapy
Expressive Arts Therapy and The Loneliness Epidemic - A Critical Review of the Literature

All the lonely people
Where do they all come from?
All the lonely people
Where do they all belong?

—The Beatles, “Eleanor Rigby”

In the United States people are becoming more and more independent and less likely to live with extended family or use them as support. There is even a Loneliness Epidemic occurring where 33% of American adults are affected by loneliness (The Foundation for Art & Healing, 2018, para. 2). American Surgeon General Vivek Murthy declared in 2017 that loneliness in the United States is now at “epidemic proportions” (DePaulo, 2018, para. 1).

Loneliness is something that is easy to talk about but hard to define since it is truly a personal experience for everyone. Loneliness became a research subject in the late 1970s in the United States but began as a subtheme to be studied (Nilsson et al., 2006, p. 93). Currently, doctors and psychologists are struggling to define what loneliness is but agree that it has become a health concern (Stein & Tuval-Maschiach, 2015, p. 210). The experience of loneliness can be of varying degrees, but one of the most common ones to be affecting Americans is a lack of meaningful relationships. At times, loneliness can be helpful by motivating the individual experiencing loneliness to find ways to reduce it, but unfortunately not all have the tools or resources to do so. This ongoing loneliness that has become a public health concern is the type of loneliness that will be discussed in this thesis (Mann et al., 2017, p. 627).

A study done by Broghammer, in 2019 reported that one in five Americans felt that they had no one to talk to when times became difficult (para.10). According to Stein and Tuval-
Maschiach, (2015) "much research is focused on quantifying loneliness into a number or mechanism that fits neatly into a research paper. This is despite much agreement that loneliness is a subjective experience that will differ from person to person,” (p. 211); this analysis supports my initial hypothesis on the grey scale of what loneliness can be.

Due to the uniqueness of each person's experience with loneliness and for the sake of continuity, I will be using Hasan’s and Clark’s (2017) definition which is as follows: “Loneliness is often defined as a subjective, negative experience that results from the discrepancy between the quality and quantity of existing social relationships and relationship standards” (Hasan & Clark, p. 429). There will also be three different categories of loneliness that I will be focusing on, for I found a pattern of these categories used throughout my research. These three categories of loneliness are family loneliness, social loneliness, and romantic loneliness.

While the loneliness epidemic has become a health crisis in the United States, it is not new in other countries; Canada has been brainstorming lately on whether they should act on a government level (Ratcliffe, 2018). The United Kingdom has become the first country to have their prime minister, Theresa May, launch a strategy to address their own loneliness epidemic (Office of Civil Society & May, 2018). Tracey Crouch, the Minister for Loneliness, decided that instead of administering more medications to folks that feel lonely, to prescribe them art activities with others, along with community work, instead. General practitioners can now give their clients prescriptions for socializing. The Minister for Loneliness is also connecting lonely seniors with lonely high schoolers due to the high reports of loneliness in both populations (Hannah, 2018). According to the Office of Civil Society and Theresa May (2018):

Three quarters of GPs surveyed have said they are seeing between one and five people a day suffering with loneliness, which is linked to a range of damaging health impacts, like
heart disease, strokes and Alzheimer’s disease. Around 200,000 older people have not had a conversation with a friend or relative in more than a month. (para. 3)

In Japan, they have created a word for people aged 15-39 who have become recluses; this label is *hikikomori* (Voiskounsky, 2019). These people have stayed in their home for at least 6 months and find going to school and working in public too much on their mental health. *Hikikomori* only covers young people, but there is also a phenomenon happening where older folks are committing small acts of crime to go to prison so they can experience a sense of community and even take art classes and sing karaoke with one another. An 85-year-old man named Kanichi Yamada explains in a BBC article (Butler, 2019) that some may steal because of poverty, but ultimately it is due to loneliness and that the relationships among others have changed (para. 23).

In this literature review, I discuss how expressive art therapy (EAT) can help with providing connections, even among those that are in relationships and still experiencing loneliness. This literature review is organized into five parts: emerging adults, aging adults, romantic dependency, loneliness in historical context, and how EAT can be used to help lonely individuals connect. For each part there is a follow-up on treatment options, including some EAT interventions.

It is my hope that this thesis will illuminate how expressive arts therapists can support present and future clients who are experiencing feelings of isolation and lack of connection in their community or life in general. With research on this subject being new and treatment limited, I believe that writing on this subject will help bring much-needed awareness and compassion to our fellow humans that may be silently fighting a battle of loneliness and social isolation. Now more than ever, we need alternatives to helping people with their intimate and
basic relationships. EAT is a bridge for connection and aiding folks to reach their essential needs for connection with others.

**Literature Review**

**Loneliness in Historical Context**

Modernism and capitalism can be looked at as driving forces that have been adding to the increase in isolation and loneliness in humans, and some, such as Sebastian Junger (2016), author of “Tribe,” (2016) believe alienation starts as early as childbirth. In the 1970s babies in the United States were only receiving about 16% of skin-to-skin contact with their mothers, and in the 80s about 85% of young children slept alone to encourage self-soothing (Junger, 2016, p. 24), which is opposite of human evolution. Humans are pack animals. Unlike modern humans, “Infants in hunter-gather societies are carried by their mothers as much as 90% of the time” (p. 23). Humans share 98% of our DNA with chimpanzees (p. 25), who rarely leave their babies alone, but can also be quite violent and territorial, often resulting in death, not too far different than human's behavior on their most uncivilized days.

In the theory of Self Determination, there are three basic needs for humans to feel content: “they need to feel competent at what they do; they need to feel authentic in their lives; and they need to feel connected to others” (Junger, 2016, p. 22). Tribes and communal living provide a fertile ground for this kind of connecting, whether it is intimate or platonic. Modern living in the United States is connected to “increased individualism, and independence mindedness along with the demand for time efficiency” (Nilsson, 2006, p. 99). While there has been an increase of dependence on others in modern times, it is only in relation to relying on technology (p. 99). This reliance of technology can cause modern societies to have low self-confidence and in return experience distrust, social isolation, and loneliness (p. 99). Modern
societies’ technological advances are promoting so much autonomy that anthropologist Sharon Abramowitz believes it is creating an “antihuman society” (Junger, 2016, p. 93). According to Stuckey and Nobel, (2010) “Given our nation’s ideal of individuality, the social support that can be derived from one’s community is an important but much ignored area of research” (p. 261). When helping others on a community level the helper will experience reward in the release of oxytocin a feel-good hormone in your brain (Junger, 2016, p. 26). Those hominids that engaged in group cooperation and punishment of those that did not cooperate and share in tribes are believed to have reproduced and make the humans we have now (p. 27). However, it seems that humans are starting to fall off the path of group cooperation and sharing of resources, due to modernity. Modernity is linked to depression in the United States and other developed countries. The greater the income inequality in the country one resides in, the higher risk of a mood disorder, such as depression (Hidaka, 2012, p. 19). Along with depression, Hidaka reported that “Modern populations are increasingly overfed, malnourished, sedentary, sunlight-deficient, and socially-isolated” (p. 1). Group reliance has decreased and social isolation has increased, leaving humans of all ages lonelier and more depressed than ever before (p. 9).

Loneliness and Emerging Adults

Emerging adults, aged 16-24, are now considered the world's loneliest group of people, followed by aging adults (Hammond, 2018, para. 1). A research study done by BBC (Hammond, 2018) discovered that 27% of adults over 75 reported feeling often or very often lonely, while 40% of 16-24-year-olds reported that they also feel often or very often lonely (para. 1). Not much research has been done, but more articles have been published recently in academic settings and in the media. Social media is generally looked at as the culprit, but there are more factors at play (Hood, Creed, & Mills, 2017). With around 40% of young adults going to college,
it is only natural that loneliness will occur (Simmons, 2018, para. 2). Although going to college is full of new freedoms and excitement, it is also a big transition—a transition where most young adults end up leaving home for the first time and even starting a new job away from their original network of friends and family. This transition, coupled with this age being a time of figuring out who one is and what one wants in life, is a perfect recipe for loneliness (Hammond, 2018, para. 2). University students were the focus of several research studies done on emerging adults and loneliness focusing on family, social, and romantic loneliness (Adamczyk, 2015, 2016; Hood, Creed, & Mills, 2017).

Emerging adulthood is an important window in which humans are expected to replace their primary parental figures with a new societal role of being a partner or spouse and creating stable intimate relationships (Adamczyk, 2015, p. 682). Young adults are moving further away from their foundations and families for education and starting connections in a new and strange place. In a Polish study titled “An Investigation of Loneliness and Perceived Social Support Among Single and Partnered Young Adults” (Adamczyk, 2015), it was discovered that it is not that young adults are feeling overall loneliness but only in particular areas such as social, family, and romantic loneliness. It was found that students who are single experienced more romantic and family loneliness but not more social loneliness, which goes against the common belief that single people generally are lonelier than coupled people (p. 674). In fact, single and partnered (non-marital romantic relationships) young adults experienced about the same levels of social loneliness (p. 682).

**Gender differences regarding loneliness in emerging adults.** Lack of gender differences in perceived loneliness in emerging adults was not as prevalent as I had originally assumed. Women have been generally noted for being traditionally more relationship-oriented
and have a higher drive for intimacy compared to men (Adamczyk, 2015, p. 676), which is only partially supported in the research. Men and women had little difference in levels of romantic and family loneliness, but men did have higher levels of perceived social loneliness (p. 680). Adamczyk (2015) argued that “it is possible that this pattern of findings is associated with changes observed in recent decades and related to a diminishing pattern of gender differences in the sphere of intimacy during young adulthood” (p. 683). More and more, women are deciding to stay single due to valuing their independence and success separate from men. It is also thought that perhaps women are now realizing that marriage does not have the same appeal it once did. Currently marriage is not needed as a safety net for women and is more recently considered “to represent more social, psychological and economic benefits for men than for women” (p. 684). Even with all this said, single women are still reporting similar levels of romantic loneliness as compared to single men. It is thought that men experience more social loneliness, due to not creating as much emotional intimacy as women, when they are single and therefore rely on romantic relationships to supply and decrease their social loneliness (p. 683).

**Emerging adults and social networking sites.** Due to the steadily rising usage of social media from young adults in just a short time span, it has sparked the question to educators and therapists if the internet is to blame for the loneliness young adults are experiencing or if it can actually help with connection (Yavich et al., 2019, p. 10). Social media has been an easy target for this disconnection and all that ails emerging adults, yet current studies show it is not that simple (Hood et al., 2017, p. 96). Hood et al. (2017) studied 1st year students, focusing on “relationships between loneliness, interpersonal motives for Internet use, online communication, and friendships on Social Networking Sites (SNS) in emerging adults” (p. 96). According to Adamczyk (2015), forming intimate relationships is a key focus for most emerging adults once
leaving the family nest, especially intimate romantic ones (p. 676). It is not surprising, then, that
the young adults who spent the most time on SNS, such as Facebook and Instagram, and who
were wanting to meet new people were those that were emotionally lonely and seeking romantic
connections (Hood et al., 2017, p. 101). Romantic loneliness was also the only type of loneliness
that was indirectly connected to making new friends online. Along with this it was found that
those experiencing romantic loneliness spent more time talking with others online overall and
had more friends on SNSs. There were also findings that social difficulties, such as social
anxiety, were shown to be connected to motivations to connect online with those that were
experiencing romantic and social loneliness. Additionally, “only 27% of SNS friends were
considered genuine or close friends. Further on average only 4 people on their SNS were
considered likely to provide support in a crisis” (p. 101). This study had complex findings in that
SNS is not a direct reflection of one’s loneliness but was indirectly related to social and romantic
loneliness (p. 100).

**Treatment of lonely emerging adults.**

It may seem easier to remain closed off in our private world, but we will not grow as a
person. Alone and isolated, our true potentiality cannot shine. Interaction with others
enriches our lives. (Bogen, 2019, para. 2)

There is a lack of research regarding treatment for lonely young adults, but there are
some local organizations that are trying to provide relief for these emerging adults. A Buddhist
center called the Ikeda Center in Cambridge, Massachusetts, founded in 1993 by Buddhist leader
Daisaku Ikeda, started “Dialogue Nights” in response to the loneliness epidemic this country is
experiencing. Of all the dialogue nights Ikeda Center has hosted, the most popular night was the
one themed “The Loneliness Epidemic” with an attendance of over 80 young professionals and
students in the Boston area (Bogen, 2019, para. 1). The center made a simulation of the subway.

In rows of chairs sitting across from one another, strangers were asked to be brave and attempt to make authentic connections. The final activity was presented by Center Events and Publications Coordinator Anri Tanabe who then asked what one thing was that everyone could do in their daily life as a pledge to belonging. Below are just a few of the answers from participants regarding the question on belonging:

- Check in on people you care about.
- Balance the need for rejuvenating solitude with reaching out to others.
- Enter interactions believing the other person is worth knowing – and by extension that you are too.
- Be more open-minded and be authentic with yourself.
- Greet one person each day; say hi on the street. (Bogen, 2019, para. 6)

There also is the “UnLonely Project” that was recently started in Brookline, Massachusetts by The Foundation for Art and Healing (Foundation for Art & Healing, 2020).

The mission of the Foundation for Art & Healing is to promote creative arts expression as a means to improve health and well-being for individuals and communities. Our signature program, The UnLonely Project, broadens public awareness of the negative physical and mental health consequences of loneliness associated with a wide range of living conditions and circumstances while also exploring and promoting creative arts-based approaches to reduce the burden (Foundation for Art & Healing, 2020).

The UnLonely Project was created due to the public health concern of loneliness, more specifically social loneliness. The UnLonely Project is educating the public on the dangers of loneliness and using art as a bridge to bring folks together. Founder and president, Jeremy Nobel,
is Board Certified in both Internal Medicine and Preventive Medicine and has a master's degrees in Epidemiology and Health Policy from Harvard. Dr. Nobel was recently interviewed on the Today Show (UnLonely Today Show, 2019, para. 1) by Kate Snow to talk about how The UnLonely project is helping students at the School of Art Institute of Chicago (SAIC) feel more authentically connected. This connection is being made possible using art workshops where students get together and simply make art of any mediums and chat with one another. Students reported that it was very soothing and a great way to shut off the outside world of deadlines and to truly be there with others. These art workshops utilize the benefits of parallel play, used by children. Parallel play is the act of playing independently beside others that are engaging in similar play, but without influencing each other’s activities (Parten, 1932, p. 250). Parallel play is a great way to focus on oneself but also show interest in others and connect through common focuses and engagement (p. 250). With art making sessions, such as the one done at SAIC, parallel play can be a wonderful in that one can play with others but still have autonomy of working on one’s own individual project. Even though this can be an autonomous task, there is still a feeling of belonging when surrounded by others sharing the same art making activity.

**Aging Adults and Loneliness**

While there is a plethora of research done on aging adults and loneliness, there are not many resources on exactly when society started noticing loneliness in this population as a health issue. It is also unclear as to when enough aging adults started to become lonely for it to be noticed in general. Of course, if you live to be old enough for your friends and family to start dying off around you that of course will cause negative effects on your mental health and contribute to feeling lonely.
Who we live with is often where we get a lot of our social interactions which can help counter loneliness. An article titled “History of Elder Care” written by Anderson (2019) goes through the major shifts that have happened in elder care and how we as a world have changed how we treat our aging adults. This article is supportive in showing the isolation that can occur as one ages. For about 2000 years, taking care of aging family within one’s own family was the norm, and some countries would go so far as to rebuke one’s citizenship if one refused to do so (Anderson, 2019, para. 2). In 2013, China created a law stating that adult children must visit their aging adult parents. Loneliness is so severe in aging adults that some countries have even gone to the extent of creating laws to try and prevent that. Housing for aging adults has increased in quality, but there is still much to be desired.

An article published by the Medical Daily (Author, 2019), explains how loneliness can literally kill and that is becoming a main factor on why the aging adults in the United States are turning to suicide to relieve this feeling of isolation (para. 3). The CDC states that suicide rates in the United States are not going down and that in just 2017, 18% of suicides were committed by folks over age 65 (Baer, 2016, para. 2). Dr. Jerry Reed, who studies and manages suicide, violence and injury prevention explains that aging is a big transition (Vatican, 2019, para. 14). Transitions that lack support either from one’s family or one’s community can be an extremely debilitating experience for many seniors, especially if that is coupled with losing functioning that affects one’s day-to-day life.

Depression is a serious side effect of loneliness for older adults, especially for those living in residential care where depression is as high as 35% for them (Dunphy at al., 2018, p. 2). “Depression is identified as the fourth leading cause of disability worldwide and likely to be the second leading cause by 2020” (Dunphy at al., 2018, p. 2). Sure enough, in 2020, The National
Institute of Mental Health reported that neuropsychiatric disorders, such as depression, climbed to number one as the reason for folks claiming disability in the United States (NIMH, 2020, p. 1). A higher chance of getting Alzheimer’s disease as well as cognitive impairments are more examples of debilitating side effects that aging adults can get from prolonged loneliness (Mann et al., 2017, p. 628).

**Treatment of loneliness in aging adults & expressive arts.** In the United Kingdom, doctors have started prescribing social interventions through programs such as Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD; Mann et al., 2017, p. 632). The ABCD organization is strength focused, so instead of focusing on what is lacking, ABCD investigates what the individual and community already has and using that to create connection (p. 632). So far in the United Kingdom, classes such as cognitive interventions teaching CBT or social skills and psychoeducation to aging adults have not shown to be useful or show impacts on social support on those with severe depression from loneliness (p. 631). The hypothesis of these randomized control trials that were used to reduce loneliness in this population was that these type of social skill classes may be better suited as a preparation for those before attending in-person community gatherings but not as a sole treatment of loneliness (p. 631).

In 2016, AARP joined the National Association of Area Agencies on Aging to begin a new campaign to help reduce loneliness in aging adults and to destigmatize conversations about isolation (Baer, 2016, para. 3). This public health campaign along with trying to reduce stigma, also provides education on what loneliness can do over time to the mind and body. It was found that loneliness “carries the same health risk as smoking 15 cigarettes a day” (para. 4). In order to create a change on a community level that effects individuals there must be societal change (Mann et al., 2017, p. 634). Public health campaigns have proven to be effective in the United
States in areas such as reducing smoking, seatbelt usage, and eating healthier and hopefully; will prove to be useful in reducing loneliness in aging adults in this country (Baer, 2016, para. 5).

“Visible Voices” is a program in Ontario, Canada using expressive arts to help connect and reduce loneliness in older adults living in rural areas (MacLeod et al., 2016, p. 14). Visible Voice partners the aging adults experiencing social isolation with older volunteers (p. 14). Visible Voices addresses the research gap by using volunteers to employ expressive arts in areas that are under-resourced and may not have availability of expressive art therapists (MacLeod et al., 2016, p. 15). Volunteers of Visible Voices were able to use their personal skills and experiences, in addition to their arts-based research training, to help others, as well as help their own transitions while enriching their community ties and personal connections (MacLeod et al., 2016, p. 16). Aging is a transition where older adults often feel a loss of control but, using the arts with a caring witness there is a sense of control that can be facilitated. As MacLeod et al. (2016) state, “When older people use their imagination and creativity, combined with meaningful social engagement, there is an improved sense of control and mastery affecting positive health outcomes” (p. 16).

Due to the findings of the person centered 10-week program of Visible Voices the Public Health Agency of Canada believes that arts-based research and interventions should be used with aging adults experiencing social isolation (MacLeod et al., 2016, p. 26). The National Collaborating Center of Determinants of Health also supports the advancing of “art-based research methods and interventions to promote health” (p. 26). Older adults volunteering to help other older adults could be a prescription given by a doctor in the United Kingdom to as many as 1 in 5 older adults experiencing loneliness. We have yet to have that support on a larger
governmental level even though just as many people are experiencing loneliness in the United States (Mann et al., 2017, p. 632).

**Romantic Dependency and Loneliness**

Modern isolation and autonomy have created an experience of romantic partners relying on one another in ways that was once distributed through family members and friends (Hasan & Clark, 2016). A partner, wife, or husband now plays the role of best friend, listening ear, emotional bearer, sexual partner, entertainer, and so on (Perel, 2007). Relationships, especially intimate ones, have a huge impact on our health. For most, loneliness can feel even more painful when in a relationship due to the societal expectation that relationships are a cure all for loneliness.

The motivation to connect and maintain significant, long-lasting romantic relationships is a very basic human need (Hasan & Clark, 2016, p. 429). The desire to belong to a social group or romantic partnership can be linked to evolution and the primitive desire to survive. More quality connections with others secures more access to resources, higher chances of meeting a romantic partner and a greater opportunity to reproduce/create a family (p. 429). With the aforementioned, there is no questioning the importance of personal and high-quality relationships in a person's life. Although even with a significant other one can still experience loneliness. “A commonly held societal belief is that loneliness is caused by a lack of a romantic partner and is cured by being in a romantic relationship” (Adamczyk, 2015, p. 674). This societal belief is not accurate and as discussed earlier those in relationships experience about the same levels of social loneliness as those not in relationships (p. 682). When there is an individual that already is experiencing loneliness and/or social isolation, adverse reactions can occur, such as romantic dependency (Hasan & Clark, 2016, p. 441). Romantic or interpersonal dependence can be
defined as “the tendency to rely on other individuals for nurturance, guidance, protection, and support, even when autonomous functioning is possible” (p. 431). Although Hasan and Clark argued that romantic dependency could have evolutionary ties that secure a relationship long enough to lead to reproduction (p. 431). Whether romantic dependency is evolutionary, it is important to note the roots of interpersonal dependency, which are loneliness and/or social isolation.

**Treatment of the roots of romantic dependency.** Despite the implications of romantic intimacy, many people continue to feel lonely even in romantic relationships. In fact, a study titled “An Investigation of Loneliness and Perceived Social Support Among Single and Partnered Young Adults” (Adamczyk, 2015). found that those in unsupportive romantic partnerships experienced higher romantic loneliness than those that are single (p. 685). One way for couples to learn how to provide more support to one another and reduce loneliness is through couple’s therapy.

“Body and Movement in Couple Therapy: The Intake Phase” (Vulcan & Engelhard, 2019) is an example of how couples can be shown how to support one another through alternative therapy, such as dance movement therapy. Researchers and dance movement therapists Einat Shuper Engelhard and Maya Vulcan (2019) took this study on because they believed that a movement- and somatic-focused couples therapy intake would provide information that normal verbal-led intakes did not. The overall goal of the research was to discover and be able to explain certain subjects that typically do not come up in a verbal dialogue when getting to know folks in their first initial session. This study was also done in hopes to support a more all-inclusive approach to a couple's therapy intake.
The couples discovered this study through social networking and happened to all turn out to be heterosexual, although this was not intentional (p. 57). The only criteria for being a member of this study was to be able to relate to this definition of a couple: “any couple that has made an emotional commitment to make each other their primary attachment figure” (p. 50). From there, they were invited to a 60-minute intake meeting where they did a joint interview and questionnaire that was answered individually. The joint interview, which was labeled as semi-structured, asked the partners to describe nonverbal parts of their life starting at childhood. The individual questionnaire asked the same questions but allowed for confidentiality due to the sensitivity of the questions. The answers from the interview brought up three main themes (a) The Sexual Body, (b) The Communicating Body, and (c) Physical Chemistry. Some of the questions asked were:

- Can you share your memories of body experiences during childhood?
- What are bodily memories of the relationship between you and your mother/father as you were growing up?
- Can you recall and share a specific situation when you danced together? What feelings and emotions accompanied this experience? What are the bodily feelings that are currently elicited by this memory? (Engelhard & Vulcan, 2019, p. 51)

There were other questions asked, which had the couple reflect on their past somatic experiences and how they believed they may bring these bodily memories to their present relationships with their partner and with themselves (Engelhard & Vulcan, 2019, p. 56). These questions allowed for free association and a visualization of how memory is stored in the body. Answering these questions and discussing with one another, the therapist and the couples were able to dive into memories connected to the body which were entirely relevant to current
conflicts in the relationship. By sharing a somatic experience of their upbringing and foundation, this intervention is a great example on how expressive art therapies can help couples connect and support one another.

Due to the tendency for romantically dependent individuals to socially isolate, spending time with others can be an excellent intervention for reducing symptoms of loneliness (Chia et al., 2018, para. 7). Couples going together or individuals to social art-making events were shown to have a reduction in loneliness and improved overall health (para. 7). Makers Month, an event that happened in the United Kingdom from March 12th to April 7th in 2018, was able to bring people together no matter age or disability to make a variety of art, ranging from block cutting to sculpting (para. 1). During this forum, participants could either work alone or join in a group. Those that joined a group were then able to further connect and perhaps create friendships (para. 2). Participants reported that due to this month-long art workshop in the community they felt inspired to attend group or adult education classes to continue to reduce loneliness in their life (para. 4). Group art interventions are not only affordable compared to individual treatments, but using art creates an opportunity for healthy distraction from their personal experiences of loneliness (para. 4). Through attending workshops such as these, people experiencing loneliness in romantic relationships could perhaps bond with other workshop participants and start to increase their social support network.

Discussion

This thesis responds to the current public health crisis in the United States regarding a record amount of people reporting that they feel they have a lack of social support and feel isolated and lonely. This critical review of literature discussed the loneliness epidemic and the current treatments, including some EAT interventions to help the major age groups that are
affected by this public health crisis, along with others that are experiencing severe isolation. Emerging adults and aging adults were found to be the loneliest age groups, but this thesis also explores different populations experiencing loneliness, such as couples in co-dependent relationships.

The literature reviewed in this thesis tended to not address race, and all the studies involving couples were heterosexual couples, which is one limitation pattern across the literature. Another limitation I found in my literature review was regarding access to actual licensed expressive art therapists. Both physical distance and financial strain place further restrictions on the already limited expressive art therapists to treat those in rural areas, so the literature tended not to represent interventions and responses offered by licensed expressive art therapist. Finally, compared to the United Kingdom, the United States has done less research regarding the loneliness epidemic and does not have as active a government or public health field that is providing aid and interventions for those experiencing extreme loneliness.

In response to these limitations, the following recommendations are given. In order to combat the deleterious effects of loneliness on individuals, treatment on a community and governmental level is needed in the United States. As previously discussed in this literature review, doctors in the United Kingdom provide social prescribing to those experiencing loneliness due to social isolation, while others promote community-level initiatives (Mann et al., 2017, p. 632). With regard to large-scale change in the United States, there is ongoing national media coverage of public health campaigns that challenge the stigma of discussing unmet needs that result in loneliness. These public health campaigns also provide information on the hazardous risks that loneliness has on the mind and body. Until the United States addresses the loneliness epidemic through policy change, there is change that can be done on a smaller scale.
Concentrated interventions such as going to local art workshops and challenging oneself to meet at least one new person and learn a new skill is a way to feel connected and promote higher self-esteem. Making art in groups, or with just one other person, whether it is led by licensed expressive art therapist or not, has also shown to be extremely effective in reducing loneliness in any age or ability and enriching the participants overall life (Chia et al., 2018; Dunphy et al., 2019; Foundation for Art & Healing, 2020; Macleod, 2016; Mann et al., 2017; Stuckey & Noble, 2010). Socializing with strangers can be intimidating to those that already feel lonely, isolated, and perhaps shy. Thankfully, art-making can be a comfortable way for those people to meet new people due to the parallel play nature of creating. When making art, there is naturally limited eye contact due to needing to see what is being made, and it is also a very individualized act where one can have full control on how they want to interact with others. Checking out a local spiritual community is also another intervention to loneliness caused by social isolation. Until there is greater societal change, individuals will need to challenge themselves to get out of their comfort zone and reach out to others in order to alleviate loneliness. It is also our responsibility to reach out to our friends and loved ones whether we think they are suffering or not. The more it is recognized that humans are not alone in their aloneness, the more we can create space in our busy lives to connect and ease the collective pain of loneliness.

Friendship is born at the moment when one person says to another: What! You too? I thought I was the only one.

—C.S. Lewis
References


http://doi.org/10.1017/S071498081500063X


Ratcliffe, G. (2018, December 20). Does Canada need a minister of loneliness? Studies have shown that weak social connections are linked to all kinds of negative health outcomes.


Student's Name: Tiffany Crockett

Type of Project: Thesis

Title: Expressive Arts Therapy and The Loneliness Epidemic—A Critical Review of Literature

Date of Graduation: May 16, 2020
In the judgment of the following signatory this thesis meets the academic standards that have been established for the above degree.

Thesis Advisor: Donna C. Owens