

‘Lonely But Not Alone’: How Teachers Can Assist Lonely Students at School

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THE UNIVERSITY OF
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*Positive Schools Conference Melbourne 2016;
Cohesion, Communication, Community*



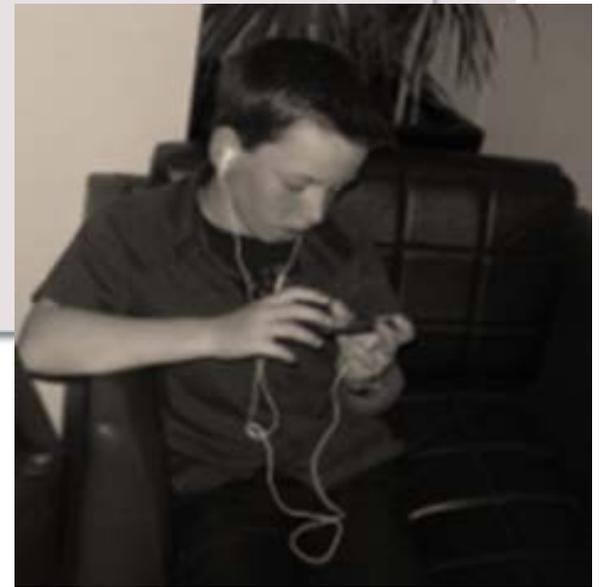
Loneliness can be defined as an unpleasant emotion associated with a discrepancy between desired and perceived [‘number’ or ‘quality of’] social networks, interactions or friendships¹

1. Peplau, L.A., & Perlman, D., *Blueprint for a social psychological theory of loneliness*. Love and Attraction, ed. M. Cool, & G. Wilson, G. 1979, Oxford: England: Pergman. 101-110.

Loneliness is...experienced by many

5 year cohort (15 yr olds)

- 65% stable low loneliness ^{1,2}
- 35% issues with loneliness ¹
 - chronically high loneliness,
 - high but decreasing loneliness,
 - moderate decreasing
 - low but increasing loneliness



1. Ernst, J.M. and J.T. Cacioppo, Applied and Preventive Psychology, 2000. **8**(1): p. 1-22.

2. Jobe-Shields, L., R. Cohen, and G.R. Parra, Merrill-Palmer Quarterly, 2011. **57**(1): p. 25-47.

Loneliness is.... significant



Transient loneliness is normal

Persistent feelings of loneliness (or increasing loneliness over time) is problematic

Loneliness at 15 is concurrently associated with both suicidal ideation and suicidal behaviour¹

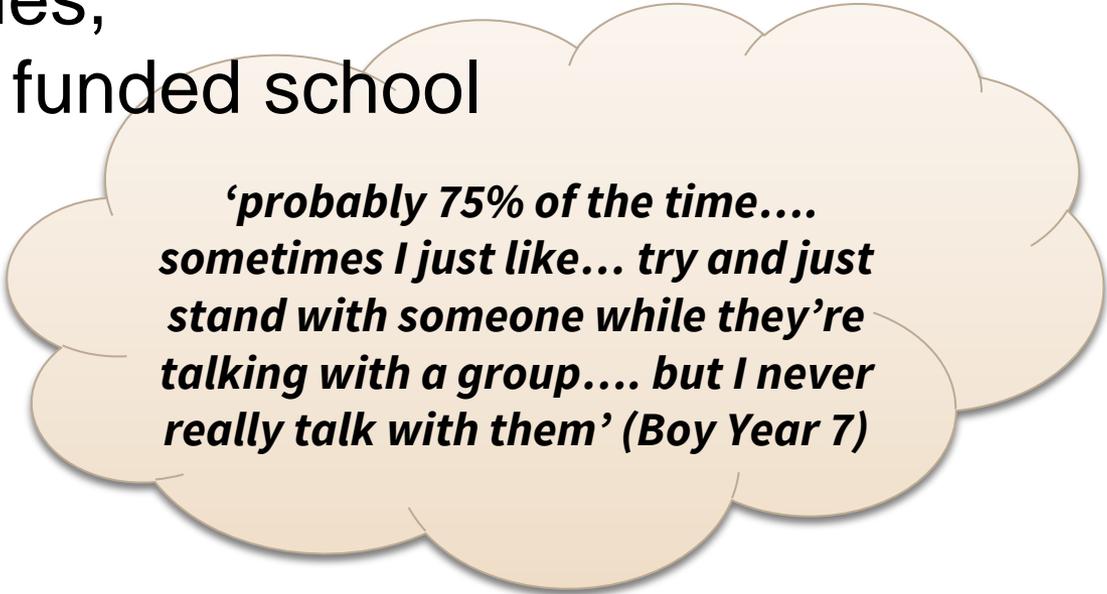
Loneliness increases a child/adolescent's risk of depression², poorer and shorter sleep, overeating and overweight, lowered academic progress and exit exam success³,

1. Schinka, K.C., et al., The Journal of psychology, 2012. **146**(1-2): p. 105-118.
2. Vanhalst, J., et al., Journal of Adolescence, 2013. **36**(6): p. 1305-1312
3. Benner, A.D., Journal of Youth and Adolescence, 2011. **40**(5): p. 556-567.

Loneliness can be... devastating

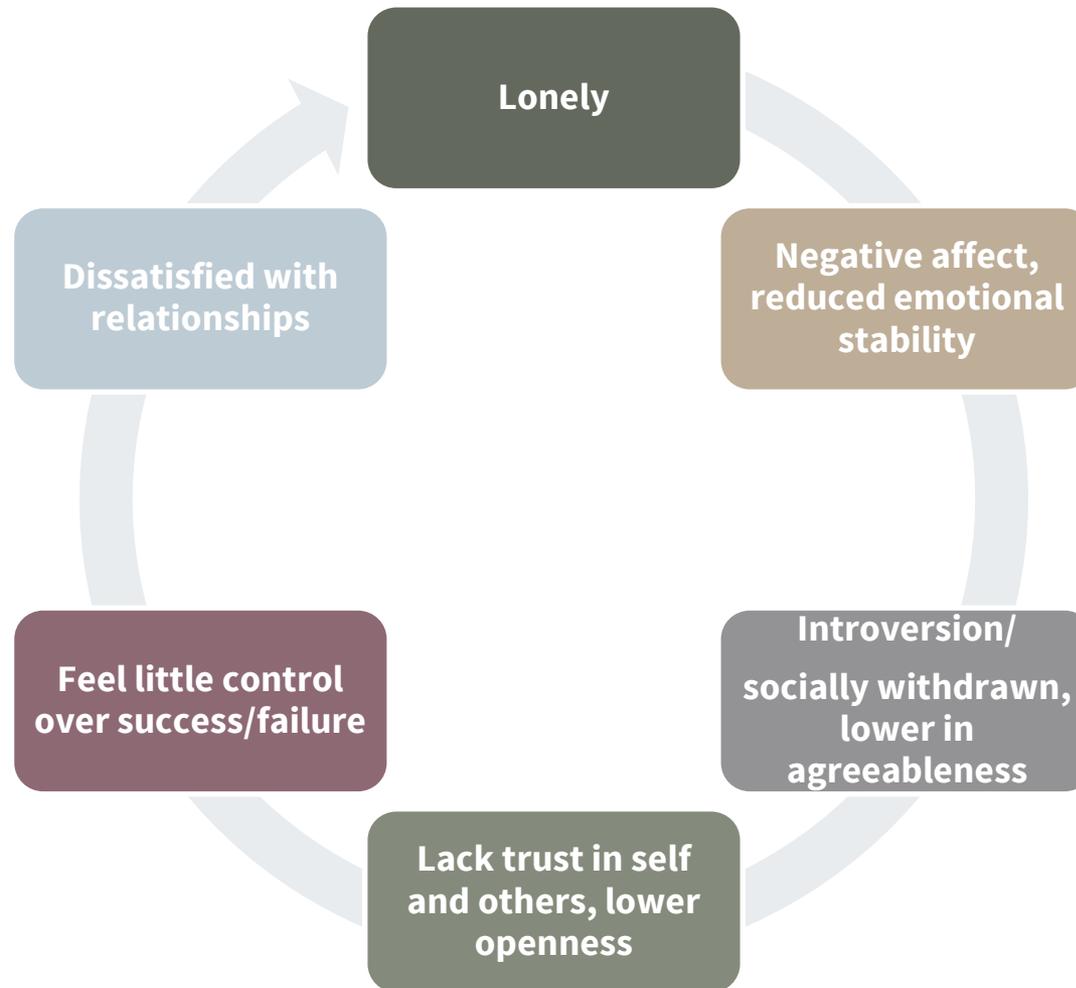
Qualitative research ¹

- 32 upper primary and lower secondary students,
- males and females,
- govt and private funded school



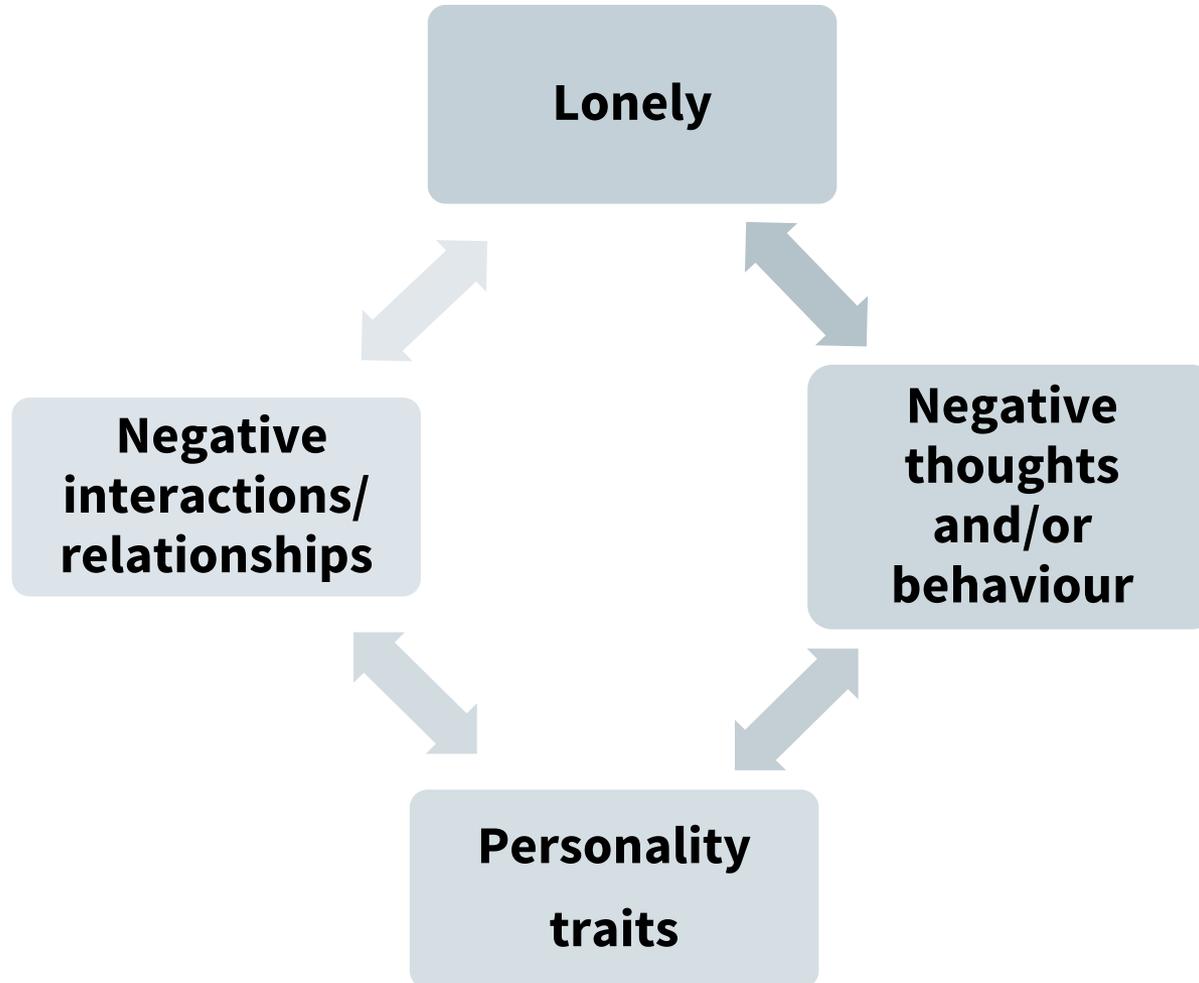
***'probably 75% of the time....
sometimes I just like... try and just
stand with someone while they're
talking with a group.... but I never
really talk with them' (Boy Year 7)***

The Loneliness Cycle



Theory generated using results from; Ernst, J.M. and J.T. Cacioppo, *Applied and Preventive Psychology*, 2000. **8**(1): p. 1-22.
Vanhalst, J., et al., *Journal of Adolescence*, 2013. **36**(6): p. 1305-1312.

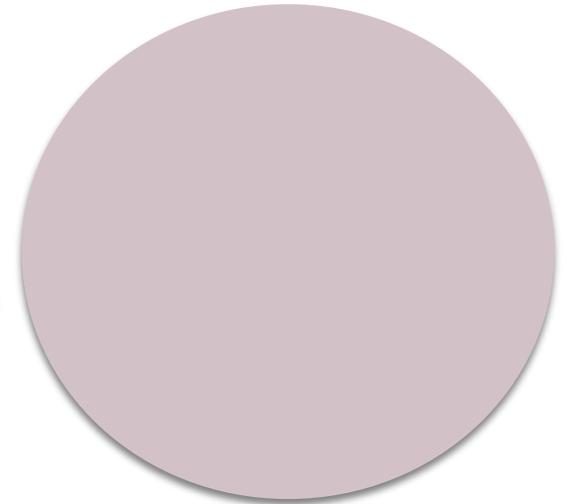
Factors Associated with Loneliness



Theory generated using results from; Ernst, J.M. and J.T. Cacioppo, Applied and Preventive Psychology, 2000. **8**(1): p. 1-22.

Social Loneliness^{1,2}

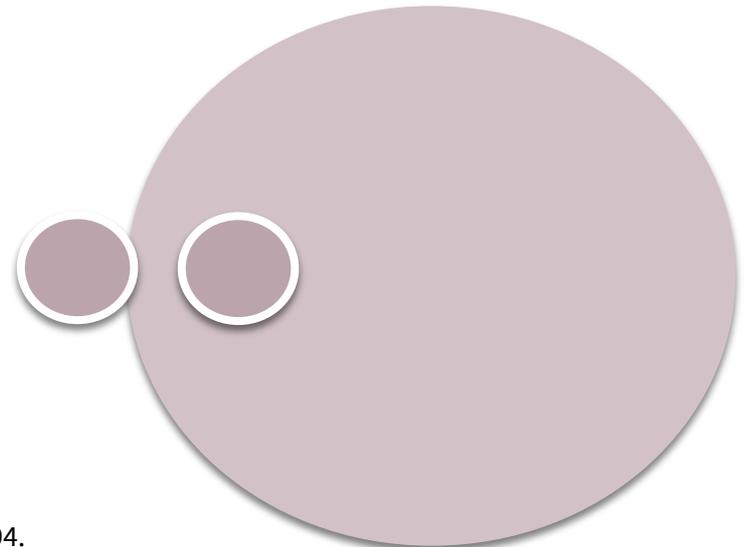
Socially isolated;
may have poor social skills,
disability, loner by choice



Common → feels different or disliked

Emotional loneliness^{1,2}

Emotionally separated;
may have excellent social
skills,



References;

1. Goossens, L., et al., Personality and Individual Differences, 2009. **47**(8): p. 890-894.
2. 1. Goossens, L. and W. Beyers, Journal of Clinical Child and Adolescent Psychology, 2002. **31**(2): p. 252-262.

Social Loneliness^{1,2}

Socially isolated;
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Friends
and/or
family

Common → feels different or disliked

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**Social
Loneliness^{1,2}**

'I think I need more friends. Cause I don't actually have that many friends. They sort of leave and stuff.'

(Female, Year 7)

**Emotional
loneliness^{1,2}**

'Um, I don't know like every day, I'm not really happy 'cause I don't have the best life 'cause of my friends at school, and so, I don't know... I just kind of try to block it out'

(Female, Year 9)

Well it kind of makes, alone
kind of makes, for me. It
makes me feel a bit sad.
You've kind of got no-one to
be with and you kind of feel
like a bit like you're not
belonging with someone else.

Negative

Aloneness

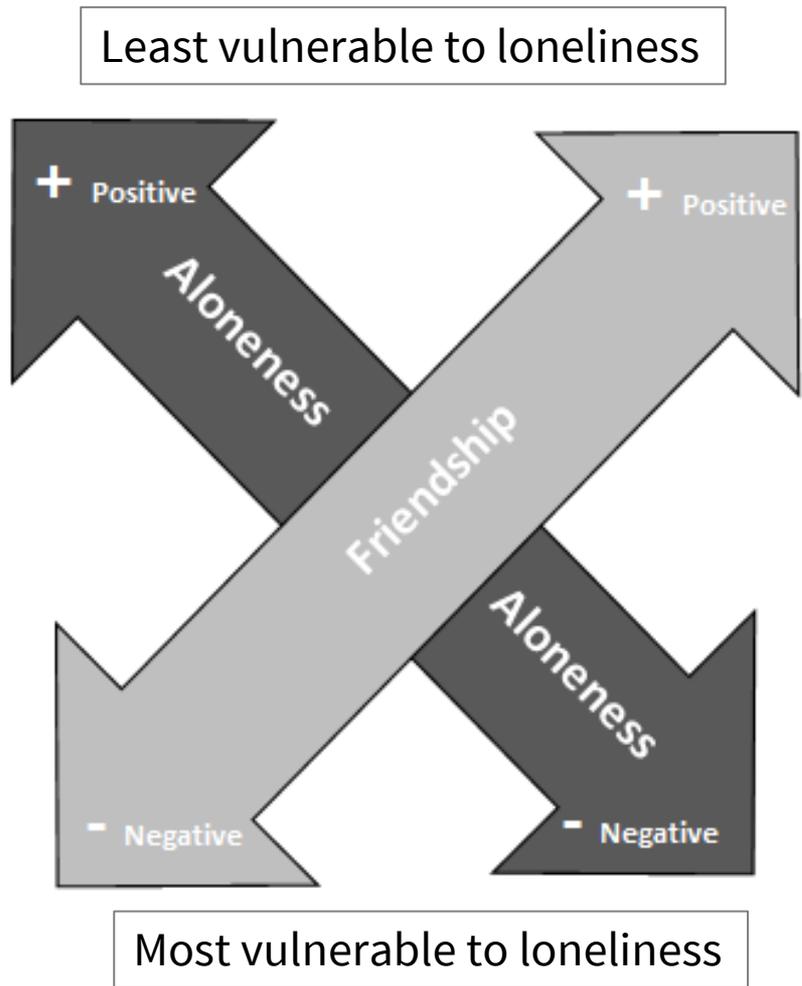
Positive

*struggle to identify
any positive aspects
of being alone*

*enjoy or finding
positive aspects in
being alone*

References;

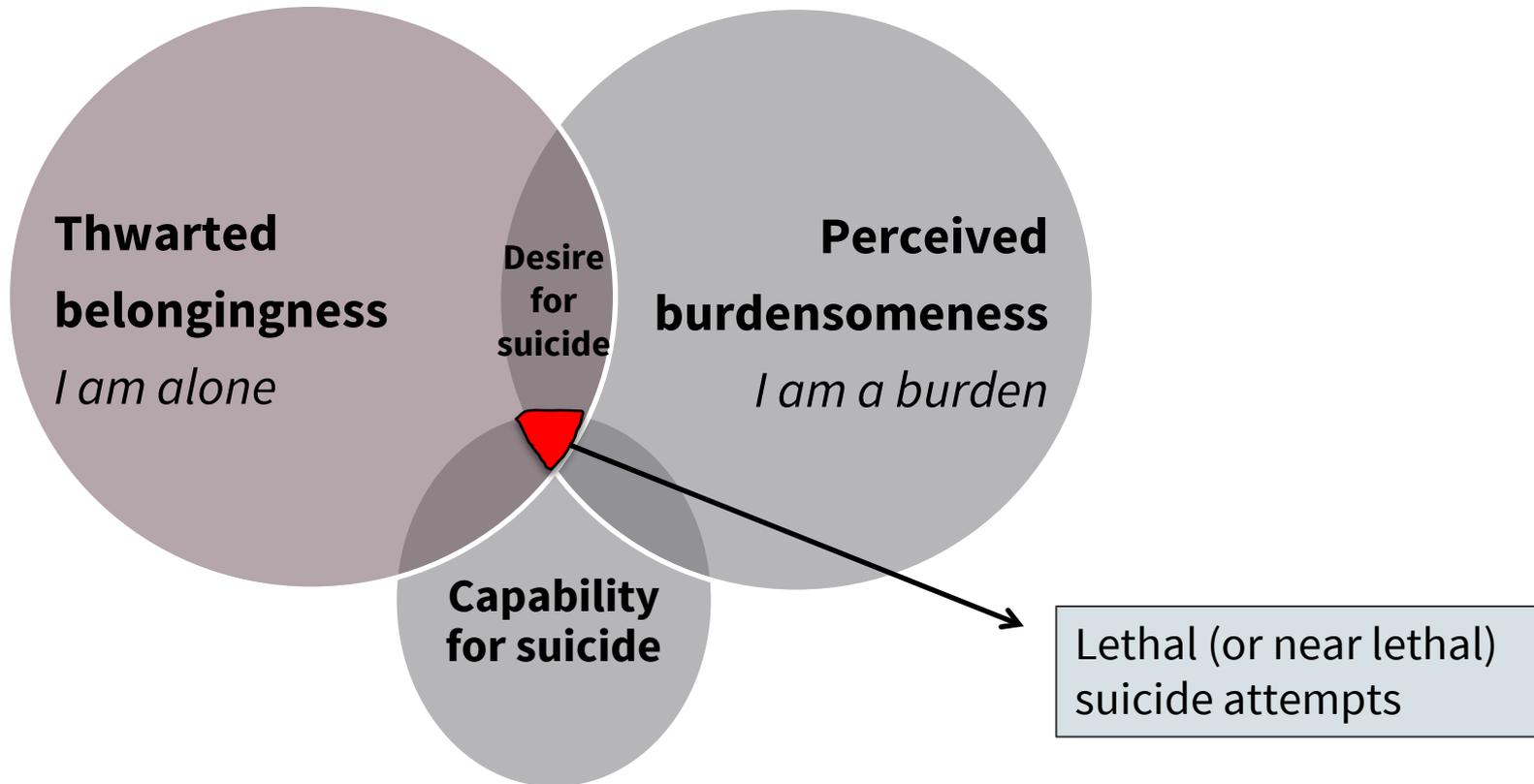
1. Houghton, S., et al., Child Psychiatry & Human Development, 2014. **45**(5): p. 604-616.
2. Goossens, L., et al., Personality and Individual Differences, 2009. **47**(8): p. 890-894.



1. Martin, K., et al. J Child Adolesc Behav, 2014. **2**(5): p. 2
2. Houghton, S., et al., Child Psychiatry & Human Development, 2014. **45**(5): p. 604-616.

The Interpersonal Theory Of Suicide

(Van Orden, Witte Et Al. 2010)



Assumptions of the interpersonal theory of suicide

(Van Orden, Witte et al. 2010)

**Teachers don't do anything....they don't know what to do. They are experienced in teaching not like helping kids.
That's like a counsellors job or something (Year 7 Girl)**

Intervening; how can schools and teachers help?

Emotionally lonely

Associated with underlying psychological issues
e.g. low self esteem, anxiety

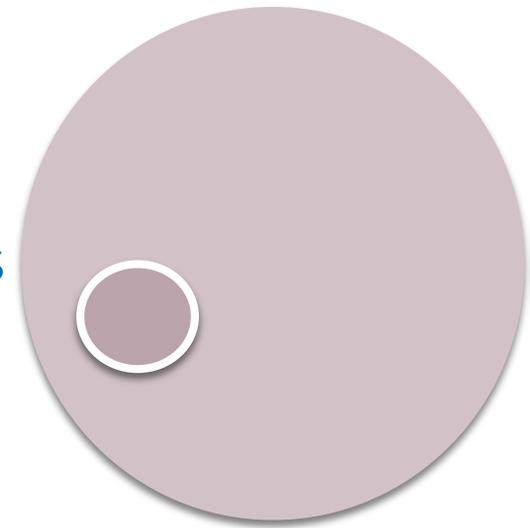
Psychological interventions eg. Cognitive Behavioural Therapy, mindfulness

Personal reflection exercises to explore feelings

Student support groups (children to discuss the feelings associated with their loneliness – could include lonely and non-lonely children)

Family centred interventions may be needed

Ensure bullying prevention always in place



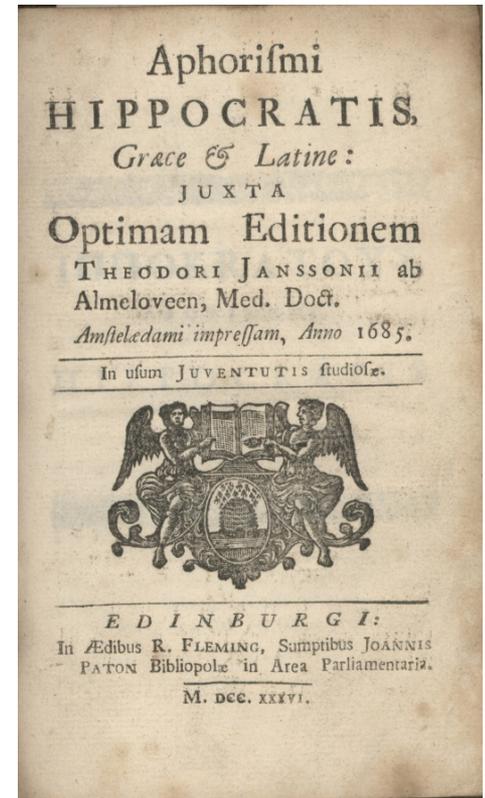
Consider existing practices

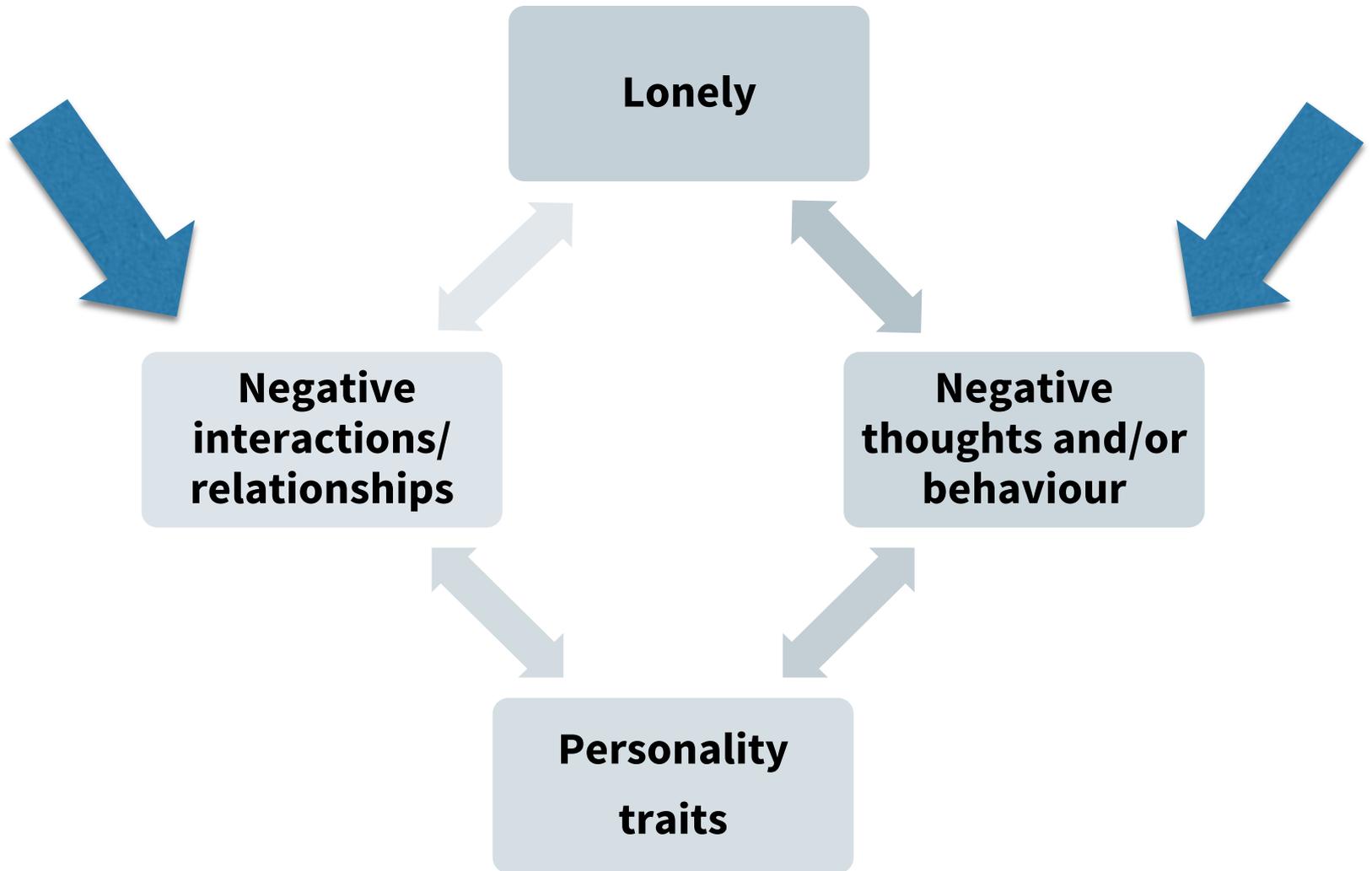
- Adolescent perception of expendability
- Can feel burdensome

Reduce practices that could exacerbate these feeling se.g.

- Team leader chooses team
- Seating plans
- Segregating year groups
- Shaming
- Association between suspension and suicide (Ombudsman's Report)

Ombudsman Western Australia, *Investigation into ways that State Government Departments and Authorities can Prevent or Reduce Suicide by Young People*. 2014: Perth, Western Australia.





Age (younger)

**Home (rural/
remote)**

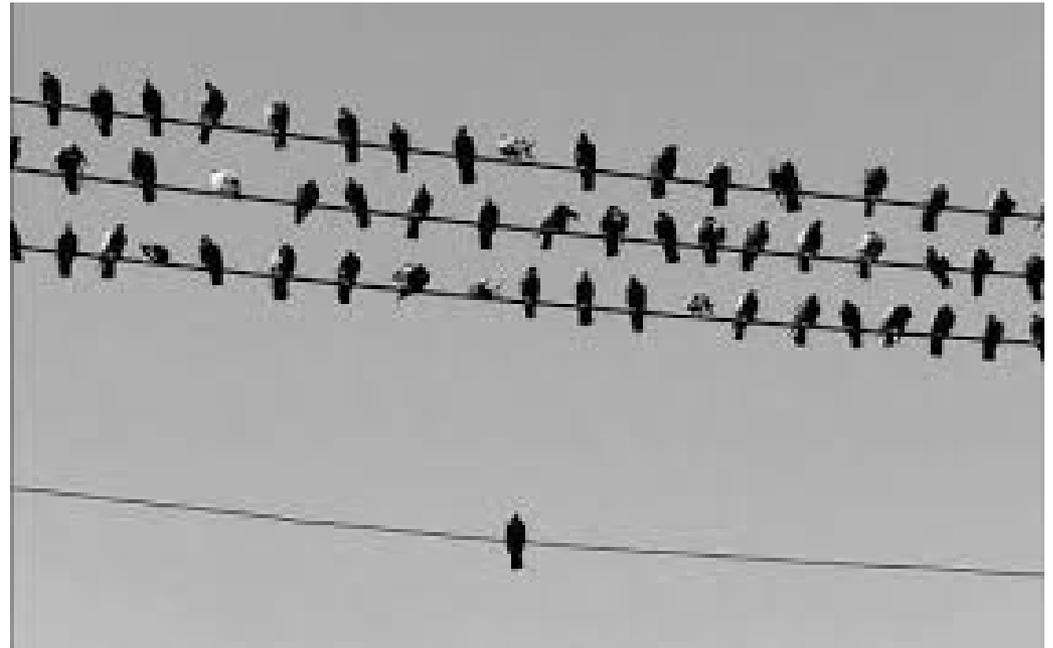
**Location of being alone
(school)**

**Frequency of 'forced'
being alone (higher non-
voluntary time alone)**

Negative

Aloneness

Positive



Assisting socially isolated; student intervention

1. Generate feelings of compassion for those who are alone
2. Strategies for connected student to identify and help isolated students;
 - *friendship bench,*
 - *mentors- all one year group assist younger years, students teach compassion to younger years*
 - *Student 'playground leaders' walk around keep eye out for people who might not have a friend that day*
3. Encourage students to develop programs



Slaughter Elementary
Friendship
Bench

The Alannah and Madeline Foundation's Better Buddies Framework



<http://www.betterbuddies.org.au/>

Assisting socially isolated; teacher level

Teacher intervenes

- eg teacher talks to a particular group or individual student and ask them to make an effort to include someone who might seem lonely or left out

Promoting emotional literacy

- eg emotional discussion, personality self awareness and understanding)

Generating supportive teacher relationships

- eg 'chatting' with those socially isolated)



Assisting socially isolated; school level

Provide a sense of **belonging to a community** (Compassionate Schools)

Provide **opportunities for less social students to shine** (eg robotics clubs)

Normalise being alone at school (e.g. outdoor bean bags; kids can go read, play outdoor chess etc.)

Provide **opportunities for generosity**/ increase **feelings of purpose** (eg community service)

Nurturing physical environments (e.g community garden; particularly good for those that may have experienced trauma, have developmental difficulties etc)

Decreasing competition among children, and increasing the amount of time spent in **shared activities**¹.



Circle of Courage

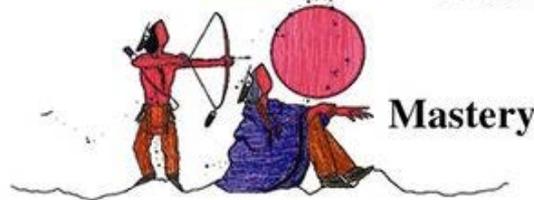
Generosity



Independence



Belonging



Mastery



<https://www.starr.org/training/youth>

Communicate; ask isolated students & connected students (what helps? what doesn't? what may help?)

Informal discussions by duty teachers

Focus groups with students about activities they may enjoy at recess/lunch

Questionnaires

Photo activity

Assignment



School Cohesion, Communication, Community

Increased student/staff connectedness=
less lonely students
(and fewer burnt out teachers²!!)

