

Loneliness Updated

Recent research on loneliness and how it affects our lives

Edited by
Ami Rokach



Loneliness Updated

“To be alone is to be different. To be different is to be alone, and to be in the interior of this fatal circle is to be lonely. To be lonely is to have failed” (Susan Schultz, 1976)

Loneliness carries a significant social stigma, as lack of friendship and social ties is socially undesirable, and social perceptions of lonely people are generally unfavourable. Lonely people often have very negative self-perceptions, believing that the inability to establish social ties is due to personal inadequacies or socially undesirable attributes.

This book is divided into three parts. The first part reviews loneliness in general, describing what it is and how it affects us. The second part examines loneliness throughout the life cycle, analysing how it affects us in childhood, adulthood and as we age. The final part explores the connection between loneliness and other conditions such as arthritis, eating disorders and depression.

Loneliness Updated offers the latest research on how loneliness can affect us in our daily lives, and how it is expressed as we travel through life from childhood to old age. It will be a highly interesting read for scholars, students and researchers of clinical psychology, particularly those interested in further exploring the effects and consequences of loneliness.

This book was originally published as a special issue of *The Journal of Psychology*.

Ami Rokach is a clinical psychologist who has been exploring loneliness and its effects for the past 30 years. Aside from helping people deal with their loneliness and pain, he also teaches in the psychology departments at York University in Toronto, Canada, and The Centre for Academic Studies, in Israel.

Dedicated with love and the greatest appreciation to Natalie and Benny.

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Ami Rokach

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Loneliness Updated: An Introduction

The whole conviction of my life now rests upon the belief that loneliness, far from being a rare and curious phenomenon, peculiar to myself and to a few other solitary men, is the central and inevitable fact of human existence.

—Thomas Wolfe

CHANCES ARE that you would disclose a sorry family history, medical problems, and even depression, but few would openly admit to being lonely. Susan Schultz (1976) poignantly wrote that “To be alone is to be different. To be different is to be alone, and to be in the interior of this fatal circle is to be lonely. To be lonely is to have failed” (p. 15). There is a stigma to being lonely. The public and therefore us researchers seem to not look favorably on anyone who admits to suffer its pain. When I present, or teach, and ask my audience whether there is anyone in the group who has never experienced loneliness, no one raises a hand. When I further inquire whether anyone is lonely now—dead silence. No one, in my 30 years of researching this topic, has ever had the courage to admit, in public, that he or she is lonely. Loneliness carries a significant social stigma, as lack of friendship and social ties are socially undesirable, and the social perceptions of lonely people are generally unfavorable. Lonely people often have very negative self-perceptions, and the inability to establish social ties suggest that the person may have personal inadequacies or socially undesirable attributes (Lau & Gruen, 1992).

Loneliness has become an almost permanent and all-too-familiar way of life to millions of North Americans: the single people, divorced individuals, adolescents, housewives, and the scores of people who call suicide prevention centers and hot lines. It is so widespread and aversive, that a billion-dollar loneliness industry has been developed to meet the desire of those who do not know what to do about their loneliness (Rokach, 1988). The loneliness business includes videotaping clubs, health spas, self-help books and mate-finding agencies and is an extremely fast-growing business. It tempts us with an array of relational possibilities, social-skills upgrading, and semiforced joined activities. Many lonely people join the ride in an attempt to become unlonely and frequently end up more hopeless than they were when they started. Dating online and the explosive growth of Facebook are but two attempts at creating virtual communities that for many may replace flesh-and-blood friends.

Ours is the age of relationships. We tend to believe in the uniqueness, importance, and availability of relating to others, thinking that we know how to conquer the barriers against closeness that we erect. Whereas in the past, work

was seen as the valued solution to self-fulfillment, today it is relationships that appear to be the main—if not the only—means by which self-esteem can be affirmed. A paradox is thus created where on the one hand we yearn for close intimate relationships, and on the other hand our social conditions are not conducive to the development of human relations. Our life style in the dawn of the 21st century both creates isolation and makes it more difficult to cope with it (Rokach, 2000). Everyone is seeking companionship, and everyone seems to be having trouble finding it. Good, close, intimate relationships have become scarce, and when scarcity occurs, there is usually somebody around to exploit it (Gordon, 1976).

Observed Friedman (2007),

Indeed the social fabric of American life is rapidly changing, in reaction to the collision of contemporary social forces, touching most of us in one way or another. Increased mobility and social isolation, the stress of a fast paced and high pressure lifestyle changes in the family unit, the impact of technology and the rise in consumerism are forces that disrupt our ability to create strong and lasting social connections (p. 3).

In today's fast-paced ever-changing world, when virtual reality sometimes replaces the real one, people have no time or energy for establishing a connection with anything beyond the narrow frame of their own hurried lives in a culture that gives little priority to human relationships and that rewards nothing but the individual acquisition of power and money (Carter, 1995).

Loneliness is a prevalent, common, and disconcerting social phenomenon (Cacioppo and Patrick, 2008). Recent estimates suggest that up to 32% of adults experience loneliness and that up to 7% report feeling intense loneliness (see Hawkley et al., 2010). It is clear that all of us wish to avoid experiencing it. But what is that experience we dread so much? While some writers describe loneliness as a specific and unique pain, an undifferentiated stressor, others view loneliness as a response to various needs, circumstances, and situations and accordingly finely differentiate it into several *types* of loneliness. Although such differentiation may be useful as an intellectual tool, these types are artificial. They conceive of loneliness as a unified experience and, in so doing, fail to capture the complexity of this experience.

Cacioppo et al. (2006) suggested that—just like physical pain, which, while it is unpleasant, has a protective function and serves as an alarm bell to guard against damage to the organism—loneliness is a social pain that is triggered by disconnection from others, from the group to which the human individual belongs and that can assure us of food, defense, social connection, and support in the struggle to survive (as it did especially for our ancestors). Based on the various theoretical sources and my own research, I proposed three distinguishing characteristics of all loneliness experiences:

1. Loneliness is a universal phenomenon that is fundamental to being human (see also Peplau & Perlman, 1982; Wood, 1986).
2. Although shared by all of us periodically, loneliness is in essence a subjective experience that is influenced by personal and situational variables (see also Rook, 1984).
3. Loneliness, which is a complex and multifaceted experience, is always very painful, severely distressing, and individualistic (see also Moustakas, 1961; Rokach & Brock, 1997).

Since Moustakas wrote, in 1961, his seminal book on loneliness, there has been growing research and academic interest in this common experience. All of us experience it, but only in the past 2 decades has there been an open quest to understand it and learn how to cope with it.

The present, special issue, includes a wide variety of interesting, creative, enlightening, and even groundbreaking research on loneliness and its relationships to other human conditions.

This special issue is divided into three parts. The first includes articles that review loneliness in general; the second examines loneliness and its effects and expression throughout the life cycle; and the third examines the connection between loneliness and other conditions.

Russell, Cutrona, McRae, and Gomez present the cognitive discrepancy model, which predicts that loneliness will be experienced when a person perceives that his or her social involvement is less than what that person would want it to be. Ben-Zur looked at the interaction of loneliness and optimism and how they affect the well-being of people with various marital status, that is, married, divorced, and widowed people. Zysberg suggested that emotional intelligence may contribute to our understanding of, and possibly coping with, loneliness. Wright examined the question whether people “at the top” of their organization are lonelier than the rest of us. She discovered that they are not. Managers were no more or less lonely than their non-manager counterparts.

In the second part were included studies that examined loneliness throughout the life cycle. Sharabi, Levi, and Margalit examined the contributions of individual and familial variables for the prediction of loneliness as a developmental risk and the sense of coherence as a protective factor. Looking at children in Grades 5–6, those researchers found that family cohesion was, indeed, a protective factor as far as loneliness is concerned. Victor and Yang examined loneliness as experienced by those 15 years of age and older. It was found that those either younger than 25 years or older than 65 are the loneliest. Depression, physical health, and social involvement were associated with loneliness at different stages in life. Schinka, Van Dulmen, Bossarte, and Swahn explored the association between loneliness and suicidability of youth aged 10–14 years. Suicide among them is a growing problem and concern, and it appears that loneliness, while not the only factor, is a poignant one in contributing to the decision of youngsters to take their own

lives. Segrin, Nevarez, Arroyo, and Harwood found that the loneliness of youths' parents and the youths' having suffered bullying were significant predictors of youth loneliness. Ruiz-Casares examined adolescents' loneliness and solitude and found that those who were lonely enjoyed being home alone much less than those who were not lonely. Possibly, being alone increased their perception and amplified their experience of loneliness.

Loneliness of elderly individuals and its affects on their health and quality of life form a growing social concern. We have, thus, included four articles on that topic. Theeke, Goins, Moore, and Campbell examined the relationship between loneliness, depression, social support, and quality of life in chronically ill older Appalachians. Those researchers found that loneliness, as could be expected, was a significant problem for that population. Hensley, Martin, Margrett, MacDonald, Siegler, Poon, and additional researchers from the Georgia Centenarian Study examined the loneliness of Georgian centenarians, who are functionally limited and commonly experience social isolation. They found that lifetime negative events, neuroticism, and perceived competence were all significant predictors of loneliness. Ayalon, Shiovitz-Ezra, and Palgi examined the loneliness of frail elderly individuals, who commonly have a foreign aid worker looking after them. Those researchers argued that the elderly individuals, living in such conditions of physical limitations, being cared for by someone whom they do not know well, and with limited social involvement, are particularly prone to loneliness. And last, Fokkema, Gierveld, and Dykstra investigated elderly loneliness in a cross-comparative perspective. They examined the loneliness of European elderly individuals. Their study showed significant difference between levels of loneliness of elderly individuals in Northern Europe (i.e., Denmark and Switzerland) and higher loneliness levels in those in the Southern part of Europe (i.e., Greece and Spain). To understand and explain these cross-national differences, those authors examined the demographic data, socioeconomic data, health, and social network of the elderly individuals.

Our third section includes articles that examine loneliness in relation to other conditions. For instance, Kool and Geenen explored the loneliness that people afflicted with Rheumatic disease, fibromyalgia, and ankylosing spondylitis experience. Those researchers suggested that social support is highly important for the sick. Levine examined the link between loneliness and eating disorders (anorexia and bulimia). She found that negative interpersonal relationships and experiences of loneliness exacerbate eating disorders. Loneliness, negative emotions, and reduced social connection are highly significant in maintaining eating disorders. Examining loneliness and depression, Vanhalst, Luyckx, Raes, and Goossens explored whether rumination functioned as a mediator or moderator in the relationship between two types of loneliness (the relationship with parents and those with peers) and depressive symptoms. They found that rumination partially mediated between peer-related loneliness and depression, and moderated between parent-related loneliness and depressive symptoms.

I cannot close my introductory remarks without wholeheartedly thanking all those reviewers who gave so kindly of their time, expertise, knowledge, and—mostly—their wish to help in creating the best and most highly relevant and interesting special issue.

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We all hope that you will find this issue enlightening, helpful, engaging, and enriching.

Ami Rokach
Guest Editor

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PART I: A REVIEW OF LONELINESS

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Is Loneliness the Same as Being Alone?

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ABSTRACT. The cognitive discrepancy model predicts that loneliness occurs when individuals perceive a difference between their desired and actual levels of social involvement. Using data from a sample of high school sophomore students, the present investigation was designed to go beyond previous research that has tested this model by examining the predicted nonlinear relationships between desired and actual social contact and feelings of loneliness. Analyses indicated that support for the cognitive discrepancy model of loneliness was found only for measures of close friendships. Specifically, the discrepancy between the students' ideal number and actual number of close friends was found to be related in a nonlinear fashion to feelings of satisfaction with close friendships and loneliness after control for the number of close friends. Implications of these findings for theoretical models of loneliness are discussed.

LONELINESS RESEARCHERS commonly distinguish between the experience of loneliness and being alone (Cutrona, 1982; Paloutzian & Janigan, 1987; Perlman & Peplau, 1982; Russell, 1982). This reflects the recognition that some individuals may be alone or socially isolated and be quite happy with that situation. In contrast, other individuals may be involved in a large number of interpersonal relationships yet be dissatisfied with important aspects of their relationships (e.g., the quality of the relationships; lack of a particular type of relationship, such as a romantic relationship) and experience feelings of loneliness.

To understand the distinction between social isolation and loneliness, the *cognitive discrepancy* model of loneliness was developed (Peplau & Perlman, 1982). According to this model, individuals develop an internal standard or expectation against which they judge their interpersonal relationships. If their relationships with others exceed this standard, then individuals are satisfied with their relationships and do not experience feelings of loneliness. If their current relationships with others are below this standard, then individuals are dissatisfied with their relationships and experience feelings of loneliness.

The cognitive discrepancy model of loneliness represents an extension of earlier theoretical ideas developed by Thibaut and Kelley (1959). They present an analysis of satisfaction and attraction in dyadic relationships based on the individual's Comparison Level (CL). If the outcomes experienced by the individual from a given relationship are above the CL, then the individual is satisfied and attracted to the relationship. If the outcomes experienced by the individual for that relationship are below the CL, then the individual is dissatisfied and not attracted to the relationship. The cognitive discrepancy model of loneliness proposes that the individual develops a CL for his or her entire network of social relationships. This CL can be thought of as representing the quantity or quality of social contact the person desires and is used by the individual to evaluate the adequacy of his or her current social network. Thus, the cognitive discrepancy model hypothesizes that satisfaction with social relationships and feelings of loneliness are jointly determined by the person's current social relationships and his or her CL for social relationships.

One factor hypothesized by Thibaut and Kelley (1959) to determine the person's CL is social comparison. That is, the individual formulates expectations concerning the number and type of social relationships he or she should have in part based on the social relationships of similar others. So, for example, students should develop expectations regarding their interpersonal relationships based in part on the relationships of other students who are perceived as being similar to themselves.

An interesting issue concerns how discrepancies between the person's actual interpersonal relationships and desired or expected relationships are related to satisfaction with relationships and loneliness. Kelley and Thibaut (1978) suggest that this relationship may not be linear. That is, near the person's CL a unit increase or decrease in the quantity or quality of relationships may be especially important to the person in determining satisfaction and loneliness. Thus, there may not be a simple linear relationship between changes in the discrepancy between current relationships and the CL and feelings of satisfaction and loneliness.

To understand this prediction, imagine that a student desires four close friends. If this student has four close friends and loses one, that loss may affect greatly his or her satisfaction with friendships and loneliness. What if the same student has eight close friends and loses one, or has two close friends and loses one? Clearly, in these latter cases the person is so far above or below the CL that a loss of one

friend has very little meaning in terms of changes in relationship satisfaction or loneliness. Thus, the units of satisfaction or loneliness may be “stretched” in the area surrounding the CL.

The cognitive discrepancy model of loneliness was tested by Russell, Steffen, and Salih (1981). Using data from a randomly selected sample of over 500 college students (including nearly equal numbers of the four undergraduate classes and graduate students), measures were taken of students’ current social relationships, CL for social relationships, typical social relationships of college students, and satisfaction with social relationships in three relationship domains: friendships, romantic/dating relationships, and family relationships. In addition, participant’s level of loneliness was measured using the UCLA Loneliness Scale (Russell, Peplau, & Cutrona, 1980). Analyses were conducted examining the relationship between a discrepancy score, formed by subtracting the person’s current relationships from his or her CL, and satisfaction with each type of relationship.

As predicted by Kelley and Thibaut (1978), nonlinear associations were found between this discrepancy score and relationship satisfaction and loneliness for all three types of relationships. For example, Russell, Steffen, and Salih (1981) found that the relationship between increases in the number of close friendships and satisfaction with friendships and decreases in loneliness was linear until the point where the person’s current friendships and his or her CL for friendships were equal. Above that point, there was no further increase in satisfaction or decrease in loneliness with further increases in the number of close friendships above the CL. These results were also found for measures of the quality of relationships. For example, the association between increases in the intimacy of romantic relationships and satisfaction with romantic relationships and decreases in loneliness was linear until the point where the person’s current relationship intimacy and his or her CL for intimacy were equal; there were no further increase in satisfaction or decrease in loneliness with further increases in intimacy. These results indicate that, as suggested by Kelley and Thibaut (1978), individuals are differentially sensitive to increases or decreases in the quantity or quality of their interpersonal relationships, depending upon how their current relationships compare to the CL. Below the CL, satisfaction and loneliness are determined by the number of close friends and the level of romantic relationship intimacy. Above the CL, further increases in the number of close friendships or the intimacy of the romantic relationship had no effect on relationship satisfaction or loneliness.

Archibald, Bartholomew, and Marx (1995) attempted to test the cognitive discrepancy model of loneliness in a sample of high school sophomores. They assessed the current social relationships of these students, their ideal social relationships (i.e., the CL), and their perceptions of the relationships of the typical high school student. Feelings of satisfaction with social relationships and loneliness were also assessed. After controlling for the current social relationships of these students, Archibald et al. (1995) found that the discrepancy between their ideal and actual social relationships was strongly related to relationship

satisfaction ($\Delta R^2 = .14$) but was unrelated to feelings of loneliness. By contrast, the discrepancy between the typical student's social relations and their own social relationships was only weakly predictive of either relationship satisfaction or loneliness ($\Delta R^2 = .02$).

Ward and Rana-Deuba (2000) also examined the effects of actual social contact versus desired social contact on satisfaction with social relationships and loneliness for a sample of foreigners living in Nepal (*M* Age = 39.6 years). They assessed the amount of actual social contact and desired social contact in 12 areas (e.g., going to social functions, discussing social and political issues, celebrating holidays) for relationships with Nepalese and individuals from their own country. Their results indicated that the discrepancy between their actual and desired social contacts across these 12 areas was related to satisfaction with the quality and quantity of relationships with Nepalese and conationals ($r = .35-.48$). The measures of relationship satisfaction were also significantly related to feelings of loneliness. However, as Archibald et al. (1995) found, the discrepancy measures were unrelated to loneliness.

Unfortunately, these investigations did not test for the nonlinear relationships between their discrepancy measures and feelings of satisfaction and loneliness predicted by Kelley and Thibaut (1978) and found by Russell et al. (1981). As a consequence, it is unclear whether or not their results are consistent with the predictions of the cognitive discrepancy model of loneliness. The present study collected data from a sample of high school sophomores using the measures of social relationships employed by Archibald et al. (1995). In addition, data were collected using the measures of close friendships employed by Russell et al. (1981). Using these data, analyses were conducted to test for both linear and nonlinear relationships between the cognitive discrepancy measures and feelings of satisfaction with relationships and loneliness.

Method

Participants

A sample of 188 sophomore students from a suburban high school participated in the study. In recruiting participants, teachers were first contacted to determine if they would permit students in their class to participate during class time. A total of 195 students, representing approximately 45% of the 435 sophomores in the school, were allowed to participate in the study. The final sample represented 43% of the sophomore class, or 96% of those who were permitted by their teachers to participate.

Participants were 85 males and 95 females. The remaining eight students did not indicate their sex. The students were 15–16 years of age. A majority of the sample (57%) was white, 14% were African American, 7% were Hispanic, and 6% were Asian. Remaining participants were either of mixed racial background (9%) or in another racial group (7%).

List-wise deletion of cases with missing data on the measures was used to ensure that the results were consistent for the different sets of analyses that were conducted. As a consequence, the number of cases used in the analyses was 169. Individuals with missing data on one or more of the variables ($n = 19$) were compared to cases with complete data ($n = 169$) in terms of demographic characteristics and the measures of interpersonal relationships and loneliness. Perhaps not surprisingly, male students (12.9%) were more likely to have missing data on these measures than female students (2.1%), $\chi(1, N = 180) = 6.33, p < .05$. None of the differences between these two groups on the remaining measures were statistically significant ($p < .05$).

Measures

Social Life Questionnaire. This measure was developed by Archibald et al. (1995) to assess various aspects of the social lives of high school students. It consists of 78 items that ask students about their actual and ideal levels of social activity as well as their perceptions of the social activities engaged in by the typical high school student. The measure covers activities with social friends, close friends, romantic relationships, and specific social events. For example, one item asks participants, “How often before classes start: (a) do you get together with friends? (b) would you like to get together with friends? and (c) does the typical student get together with friends?” Students responded to these items using a 9-point Likert scale that ranged from “every school day” to “almost never.”

Scores were computed following the procedures used by Archibald et al. (1995). A measure of *actual* social activity was derived by standardizing and summing together the 26 questions that dealt with student involvement in social activities. This measure was found to be highly reliable ($\alpha = .95$). *Ideal-actual* discrepancy was derived by subtracting students’ ratings of their actual social activities from their ideal social activities, standardizing these scores, and then summing them. This measure was also found to be reliable ($\alpha = .94$). An identical procedure was used to derive scores for the *typical-actual* discrepancy measure, which was also found to be reliable ($\alpha = .95$).

A final set of seven questions asked the students to rate how satisfied they were with various aspects of their interpersonal relationships on a 7-point Likert scale that ranged from “completely satisfied” to “completely dissatisfied.” So, for example, students were asked, “How satisfied are you with the amount of weekday social activity you engage in?” Responses to these items were standardized and summed together to form a measure of social satisfaction ($\alpha = .90$).

Close friendships. A series of questions identical to those used by Russell et al. (1981) was asked concerning close friendships. First, students were asked to indicate their current number of close friends on a 7-point scale that ranged from “none” to “11 or more.” They were also asked to indicate their ideal number of close friends and how many close friends they thought the typical sophomore at

their high school has, using the same 7-point scale. Finally, they were asked to indicate how satisfied they were with their current number of close friends on a 9-point scale that ranged from “not at all” to “very satisfied.”

To be consistent with the measures computed from the Social Life Questionnaire, measures of ideal-actual discrepancy and typical-actual discrepancy were also calculated from the measures of close friendships.

Loneliness. Loneliness was assessed using Version 3 of the UCLA Loneliness Scale (Russell, 1996). This latest version of the Loneliness Scale was designed to improve on earlier versions of the scale (e.g., Russell et al., 1980) by simplifying both the wording of the questions and the response format. Data presented by Russell (1996) provide support for the reliability and validity of the loneliness scale for a variety of populations. The measure was found to be reliable in this sample ($\alpha = .90$).

Results

Descriptive Statistics

The average loneliness score for this sample was 40.57 ($SD = 9.16$). This is comparable to the average scores on Version 3 of the UCLA Loneliness Scale for college student samples (Russell, 1996). Male students ($M = 41.86$) reported higher levels of loneliness than female students ($M = 39.91$), although the difference was not statistically significant, $t(168) = 1.38$. It should be noted that most studies have not found sex differences in loneliness using the UCLA Loneliness Scale (see review by Borys & Perlman, 1985).

Students in the present study reported a higher level of ideal social activity than their actual level of social activity, $t(168) = 8.90, p < .001$. Similarly, students also reported a higher number of ideal close friendships than their actual number of close friends, $t(168) = 5.44, p < .001$. They rated the typical student's level of social activity as higher than their own, $t(168) = 6.63, p < .001$. However, their rating of the typical student's number of close friends did not differ from their own actual number of close friends, $t(168) < 1$. There was also no difference in their rating of the ideal and typical level of social activity, $t(168) < 1$. Finally, students rated their ideal number of close friends as higher than the number of close friends of the typical high school sophomore, $t(168) = 3.86, p < .001$.

Correlations among the measures of loneliness, satisfaction, and social activity are presented in Table 1, along with the parallel measures for close friendships. The measures derived from the Social Life Questionnaire (Archibald et al., 1995) were all very highly correlated. By contrast, the measures of close friendships were less strongly related to one another. The two sets of measures were nearly equally related to scores on the loneliness measure. Finally, the measures of social activity and the two discrepancy scales were all correlated above .40 in magnitude with the satisfaction measure derived from the Social Life Questionnaire.

TABLE 1. Correlations Among the Measures of Loneliness, Satisfaction, Social Activity, and Close Friendships

Variable	Social Activity	Ideal-Actual Discrepancy	Typ.-Actual Discrepancy	Satisfaction	# of Friends	Ideal-Actual Friends	Typ.-Actual Friends	Satisfaction w/ Friends
Social Activity	1.00							
Ideal-Actual Discrepancy	-.71***	1.00						
Typ.-Actual Discrepancy	-.85***	.81***	1.00					
Satisfaction	.46***	-.44***	-.44***	1.00				
# of Friends	.31***	-.26**	-.31***	.22**	1.00			
Ideal-Actual Friends	-.23**	.36***	.25**	-.22**	-.26**	1.00		
Typ.-Actual Friends	-.33***	.29***	.41***	-.19*	-.61***	.28***	1.00	
Satisfaction w/ Friends	.34***	-.17*	-.28***	.40***	.25**	-.13	-.29***	1.00
Loneliness	-.35***	.23**	.35***	-.44***	-.31***	.23**	.43***	-.49***

Note. $N = 169$. Typ. = Typical.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.