



Rob Danzman
Campus Crunch

LONELINESS

Why Are College Students Feeling So Lonely?

... and what parents can do to help.

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Source: Pexels/Gratisography

When I first read Madison's intake form, she listed her primary symptoms as depression, low energy, sleeplessness, and some anxiety. She was a first-semester freshman and was already feeling like she was drowning. Her parents were worried but optimistic. They'd never seen her in such a rut but assumed it was just her transitioning into the new normal of college.

As weeks turned into months and she slogged through papers and tests, it became clear what was really troubling her: She was lonely.

She had good friends throughout high school and never felt isolated or lonely. Of course there were the normal ups and downs of friends and relationships but nothing chronic. She focused so much on the excitement of starting college she hadn't thought much about how she would meet a whole new set of friends. She assumed friends would just "happen."

Her depression and most of her other challenges were directly connected to unmet social expectations. Madison, like so many other students and their parents, just assume that friends and social opportunities automatically present themselves. When we feel lonely over long periods of time we start to feel disconnected and maybe even hopeless, like we'll never have friends again. Sounds extreme, but the human brain can often exaggerate the severity of a situation. Temporary problems may feel permanent.

According to a [recent survey](#) of 48,000 college students, 64% reported feeling extremely lonely in the last year. Late Fall is when I see this in real life. There is a jump in the number of students, like Madison, beginning to experience overwhelming sadness from loneliness. It's a tough time since the weather is colder and friend groups seem more established and less accessible. January is also bad, maybe even worse. It's when kids are back to school and the temporary reprieve of being home for winter break with family and home friends has faded. The cold reality of campus, courses, and the challenges of the last semester come flooding back.

Why Is It So Hard to Find Friends?

With tens of thousands of students on big campuses, how is it possible for a student to struggle connecting with others? Friendships take time, often years, to develop. Friendships are based on common interests, values, and experiences. Friendships are also based on trust. All of this takes time to explore with others. Students are also bringing to campus their own expectations and social norms. What's fashionable and cool to talk about in New York City is likely very different than what's cool in Atlanta. This can make it challenging to figure out where someone fits in. Someone who was well-liked and maybe even pretty cool back home may struggle when they're not accepted at the same social rank.

friends, and parties all baked-in together. Greek life represents the promise of belonging somewhere. Many students can't imagine being at school without their frat or sorority. The benefits of being in greek life can be substantial.

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But what about students who either don't want to join a frat or sorority or don't get a bid? College can be even more difficult if there is a significant greek presence but they're not part of it. Students might feel compelled to rush even if they're not really into it. If they do want to rush, which houses should they try to get bids at? If they get multiple bids, how do they choose which house to go with? Just the process of rushing can be stressful. Being accepted can provide a safe place to live with lots of other students to hang with. But if they're not accepted, they can feel forgotten, ignored, and rejected. For many students, they've never experienced that type of rejection before and may not be prepared for being kept out.

Everyone Is Having So Much Fun

No, they're not. At the risk of beating up on everyone's favorite boogeyman, social media can amplify loneliness and, in some cases, be the cause. Seeing other students' pics of parties, tailgating, and campus events where everyone is smiling and hugging and just loving life creates an unrealistic expectation in many that they're missing out. *Everyone else is part of a group! Everyone else is included! Everyone else found their tribe! Why not me?* When we have control over what we share, we show the polished, best version of ourselves.



Source: Photo by Jeswin Thomas from Pexels

Just Join a Club

Every large school has a thriving club scene and will have all the different options listed on their student life page. Unfortunately, many clubs now conduct interviews, might be limited to a specific number of students, or might be pretty exclusive.

Wait, what? Clubs were the place to go where a student *didn't have to* apply, get initiated, and sell themselves. The thing I like about clubs is the self-selection effect: Students who like chess might join the Chess Club. Students who join the Chess Club are more likely to have other common or overlapping interests like the Scrabble Club and Yahtzee Club. Hey, this is starting to sound like a good way to meet new friends with similar interests. I also like clubs for developing friends since the focus is on an activity (eg. playing chess) rather than the non-focus of a frat.

What Can Parents Do?

falls to the parents who are well-intentioned but out of their depth. Here are specific things parents can do:

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- Get a release of information signed so that you can talk with and coordinate with the university [counseling](#) program, academic advisors, and disability services staff.
 - Listen to your son/daughter and reflect what they're feeling, but don't try to solve anything: *"Sounds like it's really hard to make deeper connections right now and it seems like it's easier everyone else."*
 - Offer to help brainstorm ... but only after being asked: *"When you need some suggestions on how to make new friends, let me know."*
 - Don't accept silence and assume everything is ok. Keep up with regular communication with your son/daughter and the school.
 - If the school isn't able to help, find a therapist close to campus who specializes in working with college students. A good therapist will not only provide counseling but also help parents with their supportive skills.

With some solid communication and a good team, your struggling student can find the space to rebuild [confidence](#), connect with friends, and have a more satisfying college experience.



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