

Interventions Addressing Loneliness Among University Students: A Systematic Review

Olivia Betty Ellard*, Christina Dennison, Helena Tuomainen

Warwick Medical School, University of Warwick

*Corresponding author

Background

Loneliness is detrimental to mental health, with university students at higher risk of feeling lonely than other population groups. However, little research has explored interventions to reduce loneliness among students. This systematic review identifies the characteristics and effectiveness of interventions targeting students at university or college.

Methods

PsycINFO, PubMed, ASSIA and Web of Knowledge were searched from inception using keywords linked to 'loneliness', 'intervention' and 'students'. Relevant peer and non-peer reviewed English-language articles on studies implementing an intervention with loneliness as an outcome and investigating undergraduate or postgraduate students at a higher education institute were included for quality analysis and narrative synthesis. Risk of bias was assessed at both study level and at outcome level using the revised Cochrane risk of bias tool for randomized trials (ROB2) and the risk of bias in non-randomized studies of interventions (ROBINS-I).

Results

20 articles were included, comprising 17 studies assessing loneliness quantitatively and three qualitatively, covering 27 interventions, most implemented in the United States. Interventions were based on psychoeducation, social support groups, increasing social interaction, or reflective exercises. Evidence from the RCTs suggests that most interventions had an effect on loneliness outcomes but the magnitude of the benefit is unclear. Across all quantitative studies, 86% (12/14) of interventions based on either social support groups, increasing social interaction or reflective exercises, and 40% (4/10) of interventions based on psychoeducation were deemed effective in reducing loneliness. 20 out of 24 interventions measured quantitatively were delivered in a group setting, of which 65% (13 out of 20) were considered effective in reducing loneliness scores, regardless of intervention.

Conclusions

Universities have a choice of interventions to help reduce loneliness among students either on campus or virtually. Ones promoting social connectedness appear to be more successful. More high-quality studies in a larger number of countries are needed, taking vulnerable student groups into consideration.

Keywords: students, university, college, mental health, loneliness, social connectedness, interventions, prevention

