

Loneliness and self-efficacy in higher education: The mediation role of social support and hope

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Abstract

The subjective experience of loneliness reflects dissatisfaction from social relations, resulting in an emotional distress. However, its relation to cognitive evaluation of self-efficacy beliefs, as well as to hope and social support may extend the comprehension of the loneliness construct. The goals of the study were to identify the relations between self-efficacy as a belief of personal competence and loneliness as an expression of interpersonal distress, while exploring the mediating role of hope in addition to family and friends' support. The sample consisted of 1268 Israeli college students. The mediation analysis confirmed that higher self-efficacy predicted decreased loneliness. However, hope in addition to social support fully mediated these relations. The results demonstrated the complexity of the loneliness construct, while emphasizing the unique roles of intrapersonal and interpersonal resources.

Introduction

Loneliness: College's students face enhanced academic demands while trying to establish new social relationships. These circumstances may increase one's vulnerability to alienation and loneliness. Loneliness has been conceptualized as a distressful experience, reflecting unmet personal and interpersonal needs. It has been related to unsatisfied social relations, and associated with social alienation, depression, and poor social skills (Icekson, et al., 2021). Loneliness has been related to individual characteristics, personal difficulties, and a lack in interpersonal connection. (Qualter, et al., 2015). The goals of the study were to explore the role of self-efficacy, hope and social support in predicting this social distress.

Self-efficacy: Self-efficacy refers to the confidence of being able to achieve desired goals. People's beliefs in their efficacy affect the type and level of the objectives that they set for themselves and the strength of their motivation to achieve them (Stajkovic et al., 2018). Bandura (2018) stated that "Self-efficacy plays a special role because it contributes to the operation of the other agentic elements" (p.133).

Hope: Snyder (2002) defined Hope as a cognitive construct involving individuals' expectations of successful goal attainment. Individuals with high hope are able to (1) identify meaningful goals, (2) develop specific strategies to reach these goals (*pathways thinking*) and (3) initiate and sustain the personal energy for using these strategies (*agency thinking*). Hopeful individuals often construct detailed strategies for attaining their goals, as well as energize themselves in pursuing the pathways to do so (George-Levi, et al., 2022).

Perceived Social support: Perceived Social support reflects the feeling that one is cared for and a part of a supportive and assisting social network, thereby impacting positive outcomes (George-Levi, et al., 2022). Since college students have to adjust to a changed environment while facing many academic challenges, the support from their families and friends may reduce their experiences of distress and aloneness.

Hypothesis

In conclusion, we hypothesized that in addition to self-efficacy and hope as personal resources, support from family and peers as interpersonal resources will predict the levels of loneliness distress.

Method: sample and questionnaires

The sample consisted of 1268 students (396 males and 874 females) from 10 universities and colleges in Israel, with a wide age range between 18-60 years (M=26.80, SD = 6.81). Students with disabilities were not included in this sample.

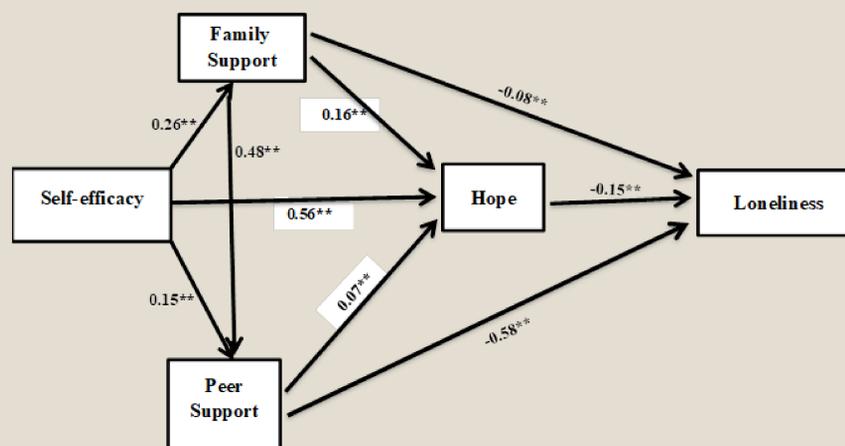
- Loneliness (Gierveld & Tilburg, 2006)
- Self-efficacy (Chen, Gully & Eden, 2001).
- Hope (Lackaye & Margalit, 2006)
- Social support (Zimet, Dahlem, Zimet & Fanley, 1988).

Results

The mediation analysis confirmed the hypothesis that the beliefs of competency (self-efficacy) predicted loneliness. However, hope and social support fully mediated these relations. Therefore, the negative significant relations (-0.44, $p < 0.01$) between self-efficacy and loneliness lost its significance (0.02, $p = -0.79$), when hope and social support from different sources were included in the analysis. Additionally, all other links between the study's variables were significant as well (see figure 1).

Figure 1

The mediation of social support and hope on the relations between self-efficacy and loneliness



Note:
* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$
 $c' = -0.02$ ($c = -.44**$)

Conclusions

The results demonstrated the complexity of the loneliness construct, while emphasizing the unique mediated role of intrapersonal and interpersonal resources. The theoretical importance of these findings underscores the importance of locating key factors from both personal and interpersonal levels, encompassing cognitive and emotional elements, in minimizing the harmful consequences of loneliness. With respect to the clinical implications, developing intervention programs that strengthen a sense of competence, increase social ties alongside establishing hopeful thinking, can be critical to students' ability to develop and thrive in their environment.

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