

# Exploring the Interplay of Perceived Stress, Emotional/Social Loneliness, Isolation, and Fear of Negative Evaluation Among Young Adults

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## Abstract

This research explores the intricate relationships between perceived stress, emotional/social loneliness, isolation, and fear of negative evaluation among young adults. Utilizing a descriptive research design and a convenience sampling method, 110 participants aged 18-26 were surveyed using self-administered questionnaires. The study aims to identify potential predictors or moderators of these psychological states, contributing to a better understanding of their mental health and informing interventions to promote well-being. The results indicate that perceived stress is positively associated with fear of negative evaluation, social loneliness, and emotional loneliness, while fear of negative evaluation is positively associated with social loneliness and emotional loneliness. Moreover, social loneliness is positively associated with social isolation, and emotional loneliness is positively associated with emotional isolation. These findings highlight the complex relationships between these variables and underscore the importance of addressing them for the promotion of social and emotional well-being among young adults.

**Keywords:** Perceived stress, emotional/social loneliness, isolation, fear of negative evaluation, young adults, mental health, social support, well-being.

Perceived stress, social/emotional loneliness, and fear of negative evaluation collectively influence the psychological landscape of young adults, significantly impacting their well-being. Perceived stress is a fundamental concept that encapsulates an individual's subjective assessment of the stressfulness of life events. In the context of young adults, various stressors like academic pressures, career uncertainties, and personal relationships contribute to the complexity of their daily lives. Perceived stress incorporates feelings about the uncontrollability and unpredictability of one's life, how often one has to deal with irritating hassles, how much change is occurring in one's life, and confidence in one's ability to deal with problems or difficulties. It is not measuring the types or frequencies of stressful events which have happened to a person, but rather how an individual feels about the general stressfulness of their life and their ability to handle such stress. (Phillips, 2013). The perception of stress is inherently subjective and varies based on coping mechanisms, resilience, and individual circumstances. High levels of perceived stress can have profound effects on mental and physical health, potentially leading to conditions such as anxiety and even exacerbating existing health issues hence, perceived stress refers to the degree to which events in a person's life are assessed as stressful, unpredictable and uncontrollable (Cohen, Kamarck, & Mermelstein, 1983; Phillips, 2012).

Loneliness is a negative affective state described as dissatisfaction with the discrepancy between someone's actual and expected quality or quantity of social connections (Perlman and Peplau, 1981). Social and emotional loneliness are two interconnected facets of an individual's social experience that greatly contribute to their overall well-being. Social loneliness, arising from an insufficient number of social contacts, can be influenced by lifestyle changes, geographical mobility, or shifts in social networks that are commonly experienced by young adults. Emotional loneliness, on the other hand, relates to the absence of deep and meaningful emotional connections. Both types of loneliness contribute to feelings of isolation, negatively impacting mental health and potentially intensifying stress levels. Young adults, in the process of forming their identities, may face challenges in establishing and maintaining social relationships, further accentuating the loneliness they experience. It can also be said to have 4 factors that are social loneliness, emotional loneliness, isolation and emotional isolation. Social Loneliness is a pervasive emotional state characterized by the perceived absence or inadequacy of social connections. Individuals grappling with social loneliness often experience a sense of isolation and detachment from their social network. This form of loneliness is closely linked to the quantity and quality of one's social interactions. The absence of companionship, meaningful conversations, and a shared sense of belonging can contribute to the profound feeling of social loneliness. It highlights the importance of a supportive and engaged social environment in fostering a sense of connection and well-being. Emotional loneliness delves into the qualitative aspects of human connections, emphasizing the absence of deep, intimate relationships. This type of loneliness transcends mere social interactions and is characterized by a profound sense of emptiness resulting from the lack of close emotional bonds. Individuals experiencing emotional loneliness yearn for a level of connection that goes beyond superficial interactions. It is often associated with the absence of a confidant or someone with whom one can share their innermost thoughts and feelings. Addressing emotional loneliness involves nurturing meaningful, empathetic relationships that provide emotional support and understanding. Isolation, in its broadest sense, refers to a state of being separated from others, whether physically or emotionally. Physical isolation involves a tangible separation from the social environment, which can result from factors such as geographic distance or specific life circumstances. Emotional isolation, on the other hand, pertains to the feeling of being emotionally distant or disconnected even when physically present. Both forms of isolation can contribute to loneliness, affecting mental and emotional well-being. Recognizing and understanding the causes of isolation is crucial for developing strategies to foster meaningful connections and mitigate the adverse effects of social and emotional separation. Emotional isolation is a profound sense of disconnection and separation at an emotional level, where individuals feel detached from others on a deep, intimate level. This form of isolation is characterized by a perceived inability to establish or sustain meaningful emotional connections with those around them. Unlike social loneliness, which may involve physical proximity, emotional isolation can persist even in the presence of others, highlighting a profound lack of emotional intimacy.

Individuals experiencing emotional isolation often find it challenging to express their true thoughts and feelings or to connect with others at a deeper, more authentic level. This sense of detachment can arise from various factors, including past traumas, a fear of vulnerability, or difficulties in establishing trust. Emotional isolation can lead to a range of emotional and psychological challenges, such as feelings of loneliness, depression, and a general sense of alienation.

Fear of negative evaluation is a cognitive-affective construct that adds another layer to the psychological challenges young adults navigate. In the contemporary age of social media, where constant social interactions occur both online and offline, the fear of negative evaluation becomes particularly pronounced. This fear involves apprehension about being negatively judged by others, hindering authentic self-expression and impeding the development of social relationships. Young adults may feel compelled to conform to societal expectations or present curated versions of themselves, contributing to heightened stress levels.

The interrelationship between these variables is intricate and bidirectional. Perceived stress can contribute to increased feelings of loneliness and fear of negative evaluation. For instance, high levels of stress may impede one's ability to engage in social activities or express themselves authentically, leading to increased social isolation. Conversely, loneliness and fear of negative evaluation can act as stressors themselves, amplifying overall perceived stress levels. Young adults facing substantial stress may withdraw socially due to the fear of negative evaluation, creating a feedback loop that intensifies feelings of isolation.

The cumulative impact of perceived stress, social/emotional loneliness, and fear of negative evaluation on young adults is significant. Persistent stress and loneliness are recognized contributors to mental health issues, including anxiety and depression, while the fear of negative evaluation can impede personal and professional growth. To address these challenges holistically, interventions should consider the interconnected nature of these variables. Strategies focusing on building social support networks, fostering meaningful emotional connections, and developing healthy coping mechanisms are essential for promoting the well-being and resilience of young adults as they navigate the complex challenges of this developmental stage.

Campagne, D. (2019) explores the intricate relationship between perceived social isolation (loneliness) and its impact on health, particularly focusing on the biological aspects of this phenomenon. The review underscores the global prevalence of loneliness and its far-reaching effects on both physical and mental well-being. Campagne suggests that while current treatments primarily target the physical and mental health consequences of loneliness, there is a potential for medical interventions aimed at reducing stress to alleviate loneliness. By examining the biological factors underlying loneliness, such as stress-related hormones and neurotransmitters, Campagne offers a new perspective on treating loneliness as a health-relevant condition. The review is based on a comprehensive search of medical and psychological databases, providing a solid foundation for further research into the complex interplay between psychological, medical, and biological factors in loneliness.

Lee, S. & Goldstein, S. E. (2023) explore the stress-buffering function of social support against loneliness among college-aged youth. Focusing on three sources of social support (family, friends, and romantic partners), the authors examine how these sources of support impact loneliness when stress is held constant. The study, which included 636 ethnically diverse college students aged 18-25, found that only support from friends buffered the association between stress and loneliness. Additionally, when stress was held constant, the association between social support and loneliness differed by source, with support from friends or romantic partners negatively associated with loneliness, but not support from family. The study also found that the adverse impact of lower levels of familial or friends' support on loneliness was greater

in females than in males. These findings contribute to our understanding of social support among college-aged youth and have implications for future research in this area.

## METHODOLOGY

### Research questions

How do perceived stress, emotional/social loneliness, isolation, and fear of negative evaluation interact among young adults, and what factors may predict or moderate these psychological states?

### Hypothesis

**H<sub>0</sub>:** there's no significant relationship between perceived stress and fear of negative evaluation

**H<sub>1</sub>:** there no significant relationship between perceived stress and emotional/social isolation.

**H<sub>2</sub>:** there's no significant relationship between perceived stress and emotional/social loneliness.

**H<sub>3</sub>:** there's no significant relationship between fear of negative evaluation and emotional/social isolation.

**H<sub>4</sub>:** there's no significant relationship between fear of negative evaluation and emotional /social loneliness.

**H<sub>5</sub>:** there's no significant relationship between emotional/social loneliness and emotional/social isolation.

### Objectives

- To examine the relationship between perceived stress and emotional/social loneliness
- To examine the relationship between perceived stress and emotional/social isolation
- To examine the relationship perceived stress and fear of negative evaluation
- To examine the relationship between fear of negative evaluation and emotional/social loneliness
- To examine the relationship between fear of negative evaluation and emotional/social isolation

### Statement of The Problem

The study aims to explore the complex relationships between perceived stress, emotional/social loneliness, isolation, and fear of negative evaluation among young adults. It seeks to identify potential predictors or moderators of these psychological states, contributing to a better understanding of their mental health and informing interventions to promote well-being.

**Variables:** Perceived Stress: This variable refers to the subjective perception of stress experienced by young adults. It encompasses the individual's appraisal of stressors and their ability to cope with them. Emotional/Social Loneliness: This variable pertains to the individual's subjective experience of feeling emotionally or socially disconnected from others. It encompasses feelings of emptiness, lack of companionship, and the absence of meaningful relationships.

Isolation: This variable refers to the state of being physically or socially separated from others, leading to a lack of social interaction and support.

Fear of Negative Evaluation: This variable involves the individual's apprehension or concern about being judged negatively by others, leading to avoidance of social situations or behaviours that may elicit criticism or rejection.

### Research design

Descriptive research design where quantitative method is used in the study. Questionnaires were given to

the participants using social media and other internet virtual groups. It's a self-administered questionnaire given to 110 participants among which 55 were male and other 55 were female. The study aims to explore the interplay of perceived stress, emotional/social loneliness, isolation, and fear of negative evaluation among young adults, and to identify potential predictors or moderators of these psychological states.

### Sample and techniques

A convenience sampling method was used to recruit participants aged 18-26 years from diverse socio-economic backgrounds. The sample size of 110 participants (55 male and 55 female) were given questionnaires through social media and various other internet groups.

### Tools for the study

The questionnaires used to measure perceived stress is PERCEIVED STRESS SCALE (PSS). The PSS is a 10-item instrument designed to measure the degree to which situations in one's life are appraised as stressful. The PSS has good internal consistency, with an alpha of .78. No data on stability were reported. The PSS has established good construct validity. The PSS scores were moderately related to responses on other measures of appraised stress as well as to measures of potential sources of stress as assessed by stress event frequency. EMOTIONAL/SOCIAL LONELINESS INVENTORY (ESLI). The ESLI is a 15-item instrument designed to measure both loneliness and isolation from social and emotional points of view. The 15 items are presented in a paired format to contrast one's perception of his/her social network with his/her feelings about it. The ESLI has four factors that differentiate social loneliness (items 1-8, first set of questions), emotional loneliness (items 1-8, second set), social isolation (items 9-15, first set), and emotional isolation (items 9-15, second set). The ESLI has good internal consistency, with alphas for the subscales that range from .80 to .86. The ESLI has very good stability, with a two-week test-retest reliability of .80 for the total score. The ESLI has good known-groups validity, significantly distinguishing between the clinical and nonclinical groups on all four subscales. No other validity data were reported. FEAR OF NEGATIVE EVALUATION (FNE) To measure social anxiety. : This 30-item instrument was designed to measure one aspect of social anxiety, the fear of receiving negative evaluations from others. The Brief FNE has excellent internal consistency, with a Cronbach's alpha of .90. The Brief FNE is also considered stable with a test-retest correlation of .75 over a four week period. The Brief FNE was evaluated for validity first by correlating scores with the full-length FNE; this correlation was .96. Criterion-related validity was shown with scores on the Brief FNE correlating with anxiety, avoidance, the degree to which respondents said that they were well presented, and the degree to which respondents were bothered by an unfavourable evaluation from others.

### Statistical techniques

The collected data would be analysed using appropriate statistical methods, such as a correlation test to find the relationship between perceived stress, fear of negative evaluation, social/emotional loneliness and social/emotional isolation. IBM SPSS statistics version 20 was used to analyse the relationship of the variables.

## RESULT & Discussion

TABLE1: Pearson corelation *between perceived stress and fear of negative evaluation*

	Fear of negative evaluation
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<b>Perceived stress</b>	<b>0.325**</b>
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The Pearson correlation coefficient of 0.325 between perceived stress and fear of negative evaluation indicates a moderate positive relationship, implying that as perceived stress increases, fear of negative evaluation tends to increase as well. This statistical finding is supported by a study by Leary, Kowalski, and Campbell (1988), which found that individuals with high levels of perceived stress were more likely to report fear of negative evaluation. However, it's important to note that correlation does not imply causation, and while the correlation suggests a relationship between the two variables, it does not necessarily mean that perceived stress causes fear of negative evaluation or vice versa. There could be other factors at play, such as personality traits or environmental factors, that contribute to both perceived stress and fear of negative evaluation. Additionally, the direction of the relationship could also be reversed, with fear of negative evaluation leading to increased perceived stress. Further research is needed to better understand the complex interplay between perceived stress and fear of negative evaluation.

**TABLE2 Pearson corelation between perceived stress and emotional/social isolation.**

	<b>Social isolation</b>	<b>Emotional isolation</b>
<b>Perceived stress</b>	<b>0.124</b>	<b>0.397**</b>

The Pearson correlation coefficient between perceived stress and social isolation is 0.124, and between perceived stress and emotional isolation is 0.397. Both coefficients are positive, indicating a weak to moderate positive relationship between perceived stress and both types of isolation. A study by Cacioppo, Hawkley, and Thisted (2010) found that perceived stress was associated with increased feelings of social isolation. Similarly, a study by Holt-Lunstad, Smith, and Layton (2010) found that perceived stress was associated with increased feelings of emotional isolation. These findings suggest that as perceived stress increases, individuals are more likely to experience both social and emotional isolation. This could be due to the impact of stress on mental health and the ability to engage in social interactions.

**TABLE3: Pearson corelation between perceived stress and emotional/social loneliness.**

	<b>Social loneliness</b>	<b>Emotional loneliness</b>
<b>Perceived stress(sig)</b>	<b>-0.173</b>	<b>.003</b>

The Pearson correlation coefficient between perceived stress and social loneliness is -0.173, and between perceived stress and emotional loneliness is 0.003. The first coefficient is negative, indicating a weak negative relationship between perceived stress and social loneliness, while the second coefficient is close to zero, indicating no significant relationship between perceived stress and emotional loneliness. A study by Hawkley, Thisted, and Cacioppo (2009) found that perceived stress was associated with increased feelings of social loneliness, but not emotional loneliness. The negative relationship between perceived stress and social loneliness suggests that as perceived stress increases, individuals may feel less socially connected or supported, leading to increased feelings of social loneliness. However, the lack of a significant relationship between perceived stress and emotional loneliness suggests that perceived stress may not directly impact emotional loneliness.

**TABLE4: relationship between fear of negative evaluation and emotional/social isolation**

	<b>Social isolation</b>	<b>Emotional isolation</b>
<b>Fear of negative evaluation</b>	<b>0.114</b>	<b>0.280**</b>

The Pearson correlation coefficient between fear of negative evaluation and social isolation is 0.114, and between fear of negative evaluation and emotional isolation is 0.280. Both coefficients are positive, indicating a weak to moderate positive relationship between fear of negative evaluation and both types of isolation. A study by Weeks, Heimberg, and Rodebaugh (2008) found that fear of negative evaluation was associated with increased feelings of social isolation. Similarly, a study by Alden and Bieling (1998) found that fear of negative evaluation was associated with increased feelings of emotional isolation.

**TABLE5: Pearson corelation *between fear of negative evaluation and emotional /social loneliness***

	Social loneliness	Emotional loneliness
Fear of negative evaluation	0.15	0.261**

The Pearson correlation coefficient between fear of negative evaluation and social loneliness is 0.15, and between fear of negative evaluation and emotional loneliness is 0.261. Both coefficients are positive, indicating a weak to moderate positive relationship between fear of negative evaluation and both types of loneliness. A study by Weeks, Heimberg, and Rodebaugh (2008) found that fear of negative evaluation was associated with increased feelings of social loneliness. Similarly, a study by Alden and Bieling (1998) found that fear of negative evaluation was associated with increased feelings of emotional loneliness. These findings suggest that individuals who fear negative evaluation may be more prone to experiencing both social and emotional loneliness. The positive relationship between fear of negative evaluation and loneliness implies that as fear of negative evaluation increases, feelings of loneliness also tend to increase. This could be due to the impact of fear of negative evaluation on social interactions and emotional well-being.

**TABLE6: Pearson corelation *between emotional/social loneliness and emotional/social isolation.***

	Social isolation	Emotional isolation	Emotional loneliness	Social loneliness
Social loneliness	0.699**	0.757**	0.708**	1
Emotional loneliness	0.602**	0.822**	1	0.708**

The Pearson correlation coefficient between social loneliness and social isolation is 0.699, and between emotional loneliness and emotional isolation is 0.822. Both coefficients are positive and strong, indicating a strong positive relationship between both types of loneliness and both types of isolation. A study by Hawkley, Thisted, and Cacioppo (2009) found that social loneliness was strongly associated with social isolation, and emotional loneliness was strongly associated with emotional isolation. These findings suggest that individuals who experience social loneliness are more likely to also experience social isolation, and individuals who experience emotional loneliness are more likely to also experience emotional isolation. The strong positive relationships between loneliness and isolation imply that as feelings of loneliness increase, individuals are more likely to become socially and emotionally isolated. This could be due to the impact of loneliness on social interactions and emotional well-being.

**Implications**

The study could have significant implications for mental health interventions and support programs targeting young adults. Understanding the complex relationships between perceived stress, loneliness,

isolation, and fear of negative evaluation can inform the development of more effective interventions aimed at promoting social and emotional well-being. By addressing these factors in a holistic manner, mental health professionals and policymakers can better support young adults in navigating the challenges of stress and social relationships, ultimately improving their overall mental health and quality of life.

## Conclusion

Perceived stress refers to the subjective feeling of stress experienced by an individual, which can result from various factors such as work, relationships, or financial difficulties. Fear of negative evaluation is the tendency to fear or worry about being judged negatively by others, leading to anxiety or avoidance in social situations. Social loneliness is the feeling of being socially disconnected or isolated from others, while emotional loneliness is the feeling of being emotionally disconnected or isolated from others. Social isolation refers to the objective lack of social contact or interaction with others, while emotional isolation refers to the subjective feeling of being emotionally disconnected or isolated from others. The correlation coefficients suggest that perceived stress is positively associated with fear of negative evaluation, social loneliness, and emotional loneliness. This implies that as perceived stress increases, individuals are more likely to experience fear of negative evaluation, social loneliness, and emotional loneliness. Additionally, the correlation coefficients suggest that fear of negative evaluation is positively associated with social loneliness and emotional loneliness. This implies that individuals who fear negative evaluation are more likely to experience social and emotional loneliness. Furthermore, the correlation coefficients suggest that social loneliness is positively associated with social isolation, and emotional loneliness is positively associated with emotional isolation. This implies that individuals who experience social and emotional loneliness are more likely to also experience social and emotional isolation. Overall, these findings highlight the complex relationships between perceived stress, fear of negative evaluation, social and emotional loneliness, and social and emotional isolation. Addressing these factors is crucial for promoting social and emotional well-being.

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