110: The Hidden Cost of Disconnection: Why Loneliness Slows Stress Recovery

Lindsey Whissel Fenton: Welcome to *12 Degrees*. I'm Lindsey Whissel Fenton. We're talking this week about some research related to the social degree of wellness. We all know that stress can wear us down, but we may focus more on trying to mitigate stress than thinking about our ability to recover from it. And it turns out loneliness can slow that recovery in ways that impact both our emotional and physical health. In this episode, I talk with Dr. Jee eun Kang, a researcher at Penn State whose work explores the links between loneliness, emotional resilience, and long-term well-being. We discuss what her findings reveal about stress, stigma, and the small but powerful ways in which we can support emotional recovery in ourselves and others. You found that loneliness can extend how long someone feels stressed after a tough moment. Can you explain why that matters for our overall health?

Jee eun Kang: So maybe I can start with stress first. Stress, especially when it lingers, can wear down both our body and mind. When we are stressed, our body kicks into gear by activating systems like the HPA axis and releasing cortisol—our main stress hormone—to help us respond to challenges. That's helpful in the short term, but if the stress response stays on for too long, it can start to take a toll on the body. So basically, stress can wear us down physically and mentally over time, and loneliness can play a role in that. In our study with a midlife sample from the Bronx in New York, we looked at whether loneliness was linked to daily stress experiences, how people reacted to and recovered from those stressors emotionally. Specifically, we looked at changes in negative emotion from the time someone experienced a stressor to about three hours later. What we found was that lonely people actually experienced more daily stressors than those who are not lonely. And while both groups had similar increases in negative emotions when stressors occurred, the lonely individuals still had elevated negative emotions a few hours later. In other words, they recovered more slowly. When we don't have emotional support or feel disconnected from others, our body may stay in that activated stress state longer than it really needs to, and that lingering stress can accumulate over time and potentially affect our health in the long run.

Lindsey Whissel Fenton: That's so interesting. So many people assume loneliness and being alone are the same thing. How do you define loneliness in your work and why is that distinction important?

Jee eun Kang: In research, we define loneliness as the perceived gap between the social relationships someone wants and what they actually have—both in quantity and quality. It's not just about being alone or living alone. You can be surrounded by many people and still feel lonely if those relationships don't feel meaningful or you don't feel connected. Some people are totally comfortable spending time alone—and that's not loneliness. What matters is how satisfied we are with our connections. From an evolutionary perspective, loneliness acts like a signal—kind of like physical pain—that tells us we need to reconnect to increase the chances of survival. But ironically, it can also make people more hypervigilant and self-protective, leading them to withdraw more. That affects stress systems and, over time, can take a toll on both cognitive and physical health.

Lindsey Whissel Fenton: You mentioned a moment ago that loneliness doesn't always make people more reactive to stress, but it does seem to make it harder to recover. Why might that be?

Jee eun Kang: That slow recovery could be because lonely people may lack someone to talk to or share their feelings with. They may also use less effective emotional regulation strategies like suppressing emotions or blaming themselves. They might not have many distractions and may ruminate more. All of this can make stress linger, and all of this is shown in the literature as well.

Lindsey Whissel Fenton: How does loneliness differ from depression? And why is it important to study loneliness on its own, rather than lumping it in with mental health overall?

Jee eun Kang: That's a good question. Loneliness and depression are actually closely related. They do overlap, but they're not the same. Based on the literature, loneliness often comes first. And if it lasts long enough, loneliness can lead to depression, although there are many other factors that lead to depression. That's why it's so important to study loneliness on its own—because it can be a warning sign of deeper struggles ahead, like depression. And there can be so much stigma, even still, with all we know about mental health, around things like depression. And you mentioned that people can be equally reluctant to report feeling lonely, which can lead to underreporting.

Lindsey Whissel Fenton: How do you think we can help reduce the stigma that might cause barriers to acknowledging when we feel lonely?

Jee eun Kang: That's still an ongoing question for me, actually. There's still a lot of stigma around loneliness, especially for men or certain cultural groups, and that makes it hard to talk about—and even harder to measure. In traditional surveys, people might not admit to being lonely because they interpret the question as, "Are you a lonely person?" And no one wants to label themselves that way. So, in the research, we try to avoid directly using terms like “loneliness” in those traditional surveys. But when we ask in the moment, like, "Do you feel lonely right now?" people are more likely to be honest. And we ask the question multiple times, so at least on one occasion they admit that they're feeling lonely. But in real life, I don't know how to decrease the stigma. Yeah. Sorry, that's my, yeah, answer.

Lindsey Whissel Fenton: Oh no, that’s a fair answer. And I think research like the work you're doing helps us normalize it more. So, I think we're moving in the right direction.

Jee eun Kang: Yeah. I think after the pandemic—because we talked about loneliness more in the media and loneliness and social isolation were major topics for a while—I think that helped us talk about loneliness. And it increased awareness of loneliness as well.

Lindsey Whissel Fenton: What can we do in our day-to-day lives to better support emotional recovery—either for ourselves or for those who might be quietly struggling with loneliness?

Jee eun Kang: To support stress recovery in lonely individuals, I think we need to focus on emotional connection and healthy coping strategies. That includes encouraging meaningful social interaction, helping people express emotions, and promoting tools like reappraisal or mindfulness. I also want to really highlight that lonely people tend to expect and interpret social situations more negatively. They often feel more anxious about social interactions and perceive more stress and fewer positive events in daily life. This bias can reinforce isolation. So, for anyone struggling with loneliness, I really want to say: Talk to yourself kindly. Keep reminding yourself that if you're worried about rejection or what others might think, it's likely a biased perception—it's not reality. You matter. And if you know someone who seems isolated, let them know they're valued. Tell them how much you enjoy their presence and how they make your life better. Even a small gesture—a text, a smile, or a shared activity—can make a real difference. You've studied social wellness in a very data-driven way.

Lindsey Whissel Fenton: What's one insight from your research that changed how you think about your own relationships?

Jee eun Kang: Doing this research has helped me realize how powerful our social networks are. It's reminded me to prioritize my relationships and be more aware of how I handle stress or feelings of loneliness. Since I work remotely, I don't see many people outside of my family. I'm a very social person, so during the day when my family's not around, I often feel lonely. And I've noticed that I get more nervous about social events than I used to. But now I remind myself: People will be happy to see me. I will enjoy it. I just need to show up and not let fear stop me. When I experience stressors, I reach out to my friends and my mom. I talk openly about what happened and how I'm feeling in the moment. That really helps. I also try not to blame myself for everything that went wrong. Instead of focusing on the stressor itself, I try to shift my focus to what I can do—the solution. That makes a big difference in my life.

Those are such helpful perspectives. Thank you for this conversation and for the work that you're doing.

Jee eun Kang: Thank you so much. I'm happy to share.

Lindsey Whissel Fenton: That was Dr. Jee eun Kang, a researcher at Penn State whose work explores the links between loneliness, emotional resilience, and long-term well-being. I'm Lindsey Whissel Fenton. That's it for this episode of 12 Degrees. To learn more, you can visit wellness.psu.edu. Be sure to like and follow this podcast so you don't miss any of the upcoming conversations that will help you adopt healthy habits. Until next time, we wish you good progress on your wellness journey. *12 Degrees* is produced by WPSU in collaboration with the Penn State Ross and Carol Nese College of Nursing. This podcast is intended for informational purposes only and is not a substitute for medical advice, diagnosis, or treatment. Always seek the advice of your physician or other qualified healthcare provider with any questions you may have regarding a medical or mental health condition. If you are in crisis, help is available 24/7 in the U.S. by calling or texting the Suicide & Crisis Lifeline at 988. More information is available at 988lifeline.org.

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