Loneliness: A Public Health Concern

Why in news?

Recently, World Health Organisation (WHO) declared a pressing, albeit underappreciated, global health threat 'loneliness' in its report.

What is loneliness?

- **Definition** – It is largely understood to be "the *unpleasant experience* that occurs when a person's network of *social relations is deficient* in some important way, either quantitatively or qualitatively," and is computed as an experience other than 'social isolation.
- **Vulnerable population**
  - **World Health Organisation (WHO)** – At least 10% of adolescents, and 25% of older people are lonely.
  - **The Global State of Social Connections**– At least 25% of 4.5 billion people felt 'lonely' or 'very lonely' in 2023.
- **Spread** – WHO clarified in 2023 that loneliness impact the health and well-being of *all age groups across the world*.
- **Reason for higher levels** – *Wars, climate change and social inequality* have only accelerated this 'silent' threat.
- **Impact of Covid pandemic** – ***It have calcified loneliness*** as a feature of daily life, with implications on people's long-term mental and physical health, longevity and well-being.
- **Measure** - The WHO has established a ***Commission on Social Connection (2024-2026)*** with the intent of addressing loneliness from a public health lens.
- It will propose a global agenda on social connection and work to develop solutions targeting loneliness as a medical and social condition.

> *During the course of the **UN Decade of Healthy Ageing (2021-2030)**, the Demographic Change and Healthy Ageing Unit of WHO will be addressing social isolation and loneliness.*

What is India's status in Loneliness?

- **Loneliness in India**
  - **2004 NSSO study** – About 49.1 lakh people (12.3 lakh men and 36.8 lakh women) were living alone and suffered from loneliness.
  - ***In 2012, self-reported loneliness*** was found to be 17.3% and 9.5% in urban and rural adolescents, respectively.

- **Loneliness among younger people** – The Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS) in 2017 studied 6,000 people aged 15-34 years across 19 States.
    - *12% of India's youth reported feeling depressed* often, and about *8% frequently felt lonely*.
- **Loneliness among the elderly** – The Longitudinal Ageing Study in India (LASI) in 2017-18 surveyed 72,000 people from 35 States and Union Territories.
    - 20.5% of adults aged 45 years and above reported moderate loneliness, and *13.3% were severely lonely*.
- **Gender vulnerability** – The odds of loneliness were higher among females as compared to males.
- **A taboo in our society** – There is lack of acknowledgment of mental health issues as people see poor mental health as a "collective problem" that reflects badly on the family, even impairing one's marriage eligibility.

Why loneliness as a public health concern in India?

- **A fertiliser of other diseases** – It can thus inflame India's rising communicable and non-communicable disease burden.
    - The ***2017 LASI*** found that loneliness also *increased the odds of major depressive disorder and insomnia symptoms*.
- **Emerging dementia epidemic** - Mental health disorders like depression, anxiety disorders, bipolar disorder *have risen steadily* over the last few years.

What are the reasons for India's loneliness epidemic?

- **Social inequity** – People belonging to marginalised communities go through loneliness intensely.
- **Socioeconomic challenges** – High poverty, income inequality, low education, high dependency ratio is making people depressed.
- **Higher dependence on monsoon** – There is *rising farmer suicides* due to the burden of seasonal droughts.
- **Rapid urbanisation and changing family structure** – The *suicides of daily wage or migrant workers* is more due to their disintegration at their village home as well as the lack of any family structure in the urban setting.
- **Reduced social cohesion and support** – Changing lifestyles erode kinship ties and interpersonal relationships.
- **Slum rehabilitation issues** - The 2022 study in Mumbai reported that slum rehabilitation dwellers loneliness was partly due to *random allocation of flats*.
    - It hampered their collective identity, weakened their social support network, and significantly led to loneliness.
- **Attachment to Social media** – Social media has uniformly been linked to rising loneliness.
- **Impact of COVID-19 pandemic** – Loneliness among young people is on the rise.
- **Chronic illnesses** – It exacerbate loneliness among people.
- **Institutional deficiencies** – According to a 2023 report by a Standing Committee on Health and Family Welfare, India *lags with inadequate staff, medical infrastructure* and budgetary allocation.

What should India focus on?

> *By 2030, India wants to reduce suicide mortality by 10% under the National Suicide Prevention Strategy (NSPS).*

- **Change perspectives** – Treat loneliness as a conditions itself rather than considering as a symptom or state of mind.
- **Tailored treatments** – Treat loneliness as a distinct social and medical condition to *develop targeted interventions* specific to people's cultural context.
- **Capacity building** – Investing in mental healthcare facilities, training doctors and setting up health provisions in AIIMS.
    - India has launched *suicide and mental health helplines*.
- **Scale up digital infrastructure** – Develop and improve digital mental health programming infrastructure.
- **Efficient diagnosis and treatment** – Find the root cause of loneliness and suggest physical exercise and spending time socially.
    - Develop healthcare dedicated to addressing loneliness.
- **Promote community intervention** – Address deficits in communities by building safe spaces like community facilities, effecting anti-discrimination and equality laws, and tackling the causes and consequences of poverty.
- **Conduct national-level survey** – It should be conducted in local languages, and questions modified to match people's cultural context as almost 60% of India which lives offline remains beyond the purview of research paradigms.

References

1. The Hindu| India's Loneliness Epidemic
2. WHO| Social Isolation and Loneliness
3. Gallup| Global State of Social Connection

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