Persistent Loneliness due to COVID-19 over 18 Months of the Pandemic: A Prospective Cohort Study

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INTRO
- Loneliness was common early in the COVID-19 pandemic due to physical distancing measures, but little is known about how loneliness persisted into later stages of the pandemic.
- Persistent loneliness is strongly linked to short- and long-term physical and mental health outcomes.
- Objective: Characterize trajectories of loneliness over 18 months of the pandemic.

METHODS

Sample
- 641 English- and Spanish-speaking adults diagnosed with ≥1 chronic condition (Range: 23-91 years old)

Over 18 months of the COVID-19 pandemic, 1 in 6 older adults experienced persistent loneliness. Pre-COVID symptoms of anxiety and depression were closely related to the risk of persistent loneliness, as was living alone, living below the poverty line, and/or identifying as Hispanic/Latinx.

RESULTS
- Overall rates of loneliness declined (p=0.01):
  - March to April/2020: 51% lonely
  - September to December/2021: 31% lonely
- Four identified trajectories of loneliness:
  1) Persistently Lonely (16%)
  2) Adapted (22%)
  3) Occasional loneliness (29%)
  4) Never Lonely (33%)
- Subgroups at highest risk of persistent loneliness included those identifying as Hispanic/Latinx, living below the poverty line, living alone, and with pre-COVID depressive or anxiety symptoms.

CONCLUSIONS
- Overall rates of loneliness declined, but persistent loneliness was common, particularly among identified subgroups.
- Interventions addressing loneliness can ease pandemic-related suffering, and may mitigate long-term mental and physical health consequences.

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