

# Addressing Loneliness

## A Mental Health Toolkit

Information and strategies to address loneliness within Temple's Master of Social Work Program

### ***How to use this Toolkit:***

This toolkit offers information and strategies to Temple Master of Social Work (MSW) program faculty and staff about how to address experiences of loneliness within Temple's MSW program. This toolkit has four sections:

1. [What is Loneliness?](#) - This section provides information on the current state of research about loneliness, including how it is defined, the risk factors and effects, and it's prevalence in society.
2. [Loneliness in Temple's MSW Program](#) - This section describes the research our group conducted about loneliness among MSW students and includes our findings.
3. [MSW Student Experiences](#) - In our survey, we asked students open-ended questions to gather feedback and hear about their experiences as members of the Temple MSW community. In this section, we highlight some of those responses.
4. [Strategies to Address Loneliness](#) - This section provides practical evidence-based strategies and activities that Temple MSW program staff and faculty can implement to help students build relationships and feel a sense of belonging in their community. Additionally, this section provides tips and techniques that MSW students can use to improve their wellbeing.

# What is Loneliness & Why is it a Problem?

There are several definitions of **loneliness** and it is often likened to **social isolation** (the actual lack of relationships with others and/or little to no social support or contact). For the purpose of this Toolkit, we focus on loneliness as a **feeling** or **state of mind**:



In 2023, U.S. Surgeon General Dr. Vivek Murthy ([Link here](#)) published a national health advisory ([Link here](#)) about loneliness, its high rate among Americans, and its effect on public welfare.

***"The problem is when loneliness persists for a long period of time. And when it is chronic, then we enter into a chronic stress state. And that is what has dramatically consequential impacts on our health."***

***- Dr. Vivek Murthy, U.S. Surgeon General (2023)***

Dr. Murthy declared that loneliness is an **epidemic** that has lasting consequences on the public's physical and emotional wellbeing. Not only is loneliness a troubling feeling, it is a **public health issue**.

# Potential Risk Factors & Effects



**Anxiety and Depression**



**Impaired Cognitive Functioning**



**Increased Stress Levels**



**Cardiovascular Disease**



**Suicidality and Self-harm**

## LONELINESS RISK FACTORS

Gender Identity  
and Sexual  
Orientation



-Social rejection  
-Exclusion  
-Stigma

Ethnic and Racial  
Minorities



-Racism  
-Discrimination  
-Accessibility to services

Socio-Economic  
Status and Local  
Area



-Inequity of resources  
-Financial constraints can affect  
social opportunities  
-Cost of living

## LONELINESS IN GRADUATE STUDENT POPULATION

-Events often take place at  
inopportune times  
-Students are often working  
or otherwise occupied  
-Inconsistency in cohort  
structure



Limited Social  
Opportunities

-Limited availability  
for social events  
-Increased potential  
for burnout  
-Emotional  
bandwidth



Work-life  
Balance

-Limited disposable  
income  
-Taking on debt  
-Need for multiple  
revenue streams



Financial Stress

# Loneliness in Temple's MSW Program

We created a **mixed-methods survey** to better understand the social/emotional experiences of MSW students at Temple University. The survey consisted of basic demographic questions (e.g. race, gender, student status, employment status) and the UCLA-V3 20-item loneliness scale. We asked respondents to consider their experience as Temple MSW students when responding to the questions. In addition, we included open-ended questions about how effectively Temple fosters an inclusive environment, how Temple can do better to help students feel supported, and how respondents would describe their relationships with fellow students and Temple staff and faculty. The survey was shared with students via the MSW listserv. We also reached out directly to professors and asked them to share the survey with their students. The survey was open from November 18, 2023 to February 5, 2024. **We received responses from 62 students (approximately 17.5% of the Temple MSW student population).**

Tables 1(a-c). Demographics from MSW student survey

Race	n	%
White	44	71.0
Black	14	22.6
Latin / Hispanic	1	1.6
Asian	2	3.2
Biracial (Black, White)	1	1.6
Gender	n	%
Man	14	22.6
Woman	42	67.7
Genderqueer	2	3.2
Non-binary	3	4.8
Transgender Woman	1	1.6

Age Min	22
Age Max	69
Age Mean	31.98
Age Std Dev	8.56

Employment Status	n	%
Not working	11	17.7
Working full-time	35	56.5
Working part-time	16	25.8
Student Status	n	%
Full-time	21	33.9
Part-time	41	66.1
Location	n	%
In-person	36	58.1
Online	26	41.9
Age	n	%
20-29	24	42.1
30-39	26	45.6
40-49	6	10.5
50-59	0	0.0
60-69	1	1.8

## Prevalence of Loneliness

The UCLA loneliness scale is a validated measure often used to characterize experiences of loneliness (Russell, D. W., 1996). Examples of questions from the measure are given in the boxes below. Refer to the appendix to see the full list of questions asked.

How often do you  
feel isolated from  
others?

How often do you  
feel that there  
are people who  
really understand  
you?

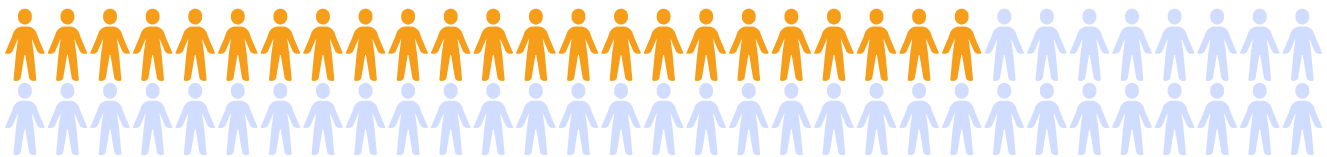
How often do you  
feel left out?

How often do  
you feel that  
there are  
people you  
can talk to?

A shorter 4-item version of the scale, composed of the questions listed above, is frequently used to evaluate experiences of loneliness. Coded responses can be averaged across the items to get a score for each respondent. Higher scores indicate more experiences of loneliness. Previous research with the 4-item scale has identified a score of 2.75 or above indicated experiences of severe loneliness (Nagata, 2023). Of the 62 respondents, 23 people (approximately 37.10%) met criteria for severe loneliness.

We investigated whether rates of loneliness differed as it related to demographic factors (e.g. race, gender, age, student status) to determine if certain groups of people were more likely to experience loneliness. **We found a difference in rates of loneliness approaching statistical significance when evaluating by race. Black respondents overall had higher scores, corresponding with more experiences of loneliness, than white respondents.**

**23 respondents (37.10%) met criteria for severe loneliness**



The most prevalent item, or the item with the highest average score, was: **“How often do you feel that people are around but not with you?”** Other items with high scores contained questions about how often the respondent feels shy, that no one knows them well, and that they lack companionship.

## Relationships and Community

Feelings of mattering to others can mediate feelings of loneliness (McComb et al., 2020). Therefore it is important that people are part of communities where they feel seen and valued. To gauge respondents’ sense of belonging, we included survey questions relating to respondents’ feelings about the Temple community and their relationships within the MSW program. We found that **online students were more likely to strongly agree that Temple is creating a welcoming community.** In addition, **in-person students were more likely to have friends within the program than online students.**

# Temple MSW Student Experiences

We asked MSW students to share about their experiences and relationships within Temple's graduate Social Work program. Below, we've highlighted the common themes that emerged from what they shared with us.

## Common Themes



**32%:** Class engagement and topics foster welcoming environment



**21%:** Temple hosts many events and they're well-advertised



**17%:** Diverse and inclusive student body at Temple



**23%:** Plan events that are accessible to online and working students



**14%:** Student status (e.g. online or part-time) makes it difficult to connect with others



**12%:** Difficulty managing program requirements and other obligations (e.g. work)



**71%:** Interactions with other students are friendly but limited to the classroom or talking about school work



**56%:** Professors have been supportive and engaging.

# Student Responses

We've featured some of the students' responses to the open-ended questions below. Here's what they had to say...

**What is Temple doing well to support the MSW community?**



**What could Temple do better to support the MSW community?**



Describe your relationships with other students and professors.



## Preventing & Addressing Loneliness

A first step to addressing loneliness is to **frame it as an emotion our body produces to signal to us that we are craving certain kinds of interpersonal connection**, rather than pathologizing it as a modern "illness" which can cause people to isolate more because they view themselves as a vector or contagion (Alberti, 2019).

A second helpful step can be to understand that **in modern life, individualism is more widespread than in previous generations, and interpersonal permanence is declining. This may explain why people report that "making lasting friends feels hard." That may actually be the truth.** (Alberti, 2019; Franklin, 2009; Franklin, 2016). However, as the saying goes "knowledge is power" as well as "half the battle." **We believe that the knowledge and resources/activities provided in this toolkit can help Temple MSW students to address loneliness and thoughtfully cultivate robust, lasting networks of meaningful connections with others.**



# Tools for MSW Students Addressing Loneliness

In 2016, psychiatrist Dr. Marcia Morris published a few helpful steps for students to take in preventing or reducing loneliness, including *“join one or two clubs to increase social interactions... Get to know a few students better. Ask a friend out to lunch. Study with a friend at the library. Make a plan to see a campus movie or play. Practice small talk.”*

According to a systematic review by Ellard et al first published in 2022 ([Link here](#)), [creating or having social support groups greatly reduced loneliness in adults](#). Participating in support groups allowed people to feel “listened to.” As a result, people’s self-esteem and perceived sense of support increased. Social support groups also helped members feel like part of a community, which can reduce feelings of loneliness. [Universities can help foster social connectedness](#) even amongst graduate and postgraduate students (Ellard et al., 2023).

Many people do not admit they are lonely because of the stigma that surrounds the issue and the strong social pressure for young people in particular to appear and feel connected. [In the event that someone does not want to and/or is fearful of disclosing when they feel lonely, virtual platforms may be an effective tool](#). Online gatherings, events, or social media sites may make people feel more comfortable sharing their experiences. The internet can be used to disseminate interventions privately and anonymously or where face-to-face social gatherings are limited (Ellard et al., 2023).

## Ways to Increase Social Interaction/Get to Know Other Students:



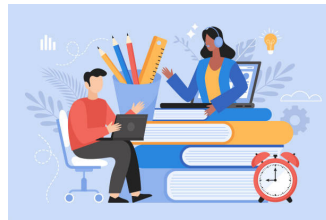
**Meet up for your Mental Health:** There are many **events** for meeting/connecting with other Temple students nearly every day, **both in-person and virtually!**

- Find events in Temple’s Calendar of Social Events ([Link here](#))
- Check out Temple’s student organizations ([Link here](#))
- Did you know there is a Temple organization exclusively for social work students interested in getting involved with the local community? ([Link here](#))
- Don’t see any student organizations that reflect your interests or identity? Be the change you wish to see in the world and be empowered to create your own group! ([Link here](#))



**Work It Out:** Temple has many individual or group physical activity options to check out:

- Campus recreation options ([Link here](#))
- Group Fitness Classes ([Link here](#))
- Sports Clubs and/or Intramural Leagues ([Link here](#))



**Form positive relationships with your professors and advisors**

**Socialize with fellow classmates outside the classroom**



**Campus connection:** While there is limited existing research on the topic of **preventing loneliness among graduate students**, findings suggest that this population benefits from forming **positive relationships with professors and advisors**, particularly those who demonstrate interest in and willingness to advocate for student wellbeing. (Grady et al, 2014; Walker et al, 2022). Like Dr. Morris (2016) says, *“Go visit your advisor or professor during office hours. Getting to know a professor in your field can increase your sense of belonging on campus.”*

**Socialize and stick with it:** Building friendship is different for everyone, but researchers have found that **it takes an average of 50 hours** of intentionally shared connection with another person **to establish a friendship**, that **“good friendships begin to emerge after 140 (hours)... (and that) “best friendships” do not emerge until after 300 (hours)** of time spent.” (Hall, 2019).



**Mental Health Support:** Dr. Morris (2016) (and several other researchers and scholars) endorse seeking mental health support if you are experiencing loneliness. For students interested in individual or group counseling resources, connect with Temple's Tuttleman Counseling Services ([Link here](#)) or call (215) 204-7276.

### Media for Education and Further Information:

- **Podcasts:**
  - Brené Brown's discussion of Loneliness and Connection with U.S. Surgeon General Dr. Vivek Murthy ([Link here](#))
  - A collection of different podcasts that address loneliness ([Link here](#))
- **Books:**
  - Reading more fiction than nonfiction has been found to positively effect a person's empathy and social skills, and if all else fails, reading a good book may help keep loneliness at bay. (Mar et al, 2006; Gabriel & Young, 2011). However, if you're interested in learning about loneliness via nonfiction, Fay Bound Alberti's (2019) well-researched *A Biography of Loneliness: The History of an Emotion* ([Link here](#)) is an excellent and approachable survey of loneliness across time and cultures, and investigates the myriad impacts of difficult to define emotions. Temple's Charles Library has this book available to check out currently, and will hopefully add digital copies to access in the future.



## Tools for Staff/Faculty Addressing Loneliness

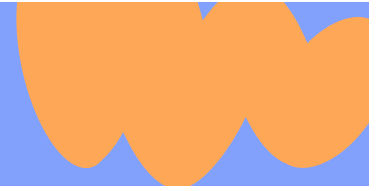
- Normalize discussing loneliness and the importance of building robust connections with others
- Faculty should dedicate class time for “mental health” check-ins and/or conduct mindfulness activities
- Make sure students know how to access mental health services at the start of each semester



## Tools for Temple (MSW Program) Addressing Loneliness

- Universities should help foster social connectedness
  - Campus-wide & Temple MSW program courses, programs, and initiatives
    - Here are some examples we can learn from: This Way Up, an Australian program ([Link here](#)), and Active Minds (Temple University is a part of this national charter! [Link here](#))
  - Create and offer social events on the weekends, and/or at times that do not exclude full- time employed, and/or commuter students
  - Highlight mental health services/supports
  - Create in-person and virtual forum events for students, faculty, and staff to build rapport and voice concerns/needs

# The Toolkit Team



This toolkit was developed by Temple University Master of Social Work students.



**Kathy Arazawa**



**Maggie Dekker**



**Nicholas Kirchhoff**



**Parisa Khoshnood**



**Megan Stanton**



**Sarah Wuchinich**

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# Appendix - Survey Results

This section contains additional results from the survey.

## UCLA Loneliness Measure Results

Table x. Average score (n=62) for each item of the UCLA Loneliness measure, the most prevalent item (i.e. highest score) is highlighted in orange. The items used in the 4-item score are in blue.

How often do you feel...	Average Score
... that you are in community with the people around you?	2.26
... that you lack companionship?	2.73
... that there is no one you can turn to?	2.31
... alone?	2.60
... part of a group of friends?	2.21
... that you have a lot in common with the people around you?	2.06
... that you are no longer close to anyone?	2.63
... that your interests and ideas are not shared by those around you?	2.55
... outgoing and friendly?	1.95
... close to people?	2.10
... left out?	2.65
... that your relationships with others are not meaningful?	2.35
... that no one really knows you well?	2.68
... isolated from others?	2.66
... you can find companionship when you want it?	2.05
... that there are people who really understand you?	2.15
... shy?	2.73
... that people are around you but not with you?	2.85
... that there are people you can talk to?	1.81
... that there are people you can turn to?	1.75



# Evaluating for Differences in Loneliness by Demographic Factors

Table x. Results from ANOVA evaluating for difference of 4-item UCLA score by race

	Df	Sum Sq	Mean Sq	F value	p value
Race	2	2.232	1.1161	2.893	0.0633
Residuals	59	22.76	0.3858		

Table x. Average UCLA 4-item score by race

	UCLA 4-item Score	Standard Deviation
White	2.267	0.685
Black	2.393	0.569
Other	2.563	0.239

## Community and Relationship Results

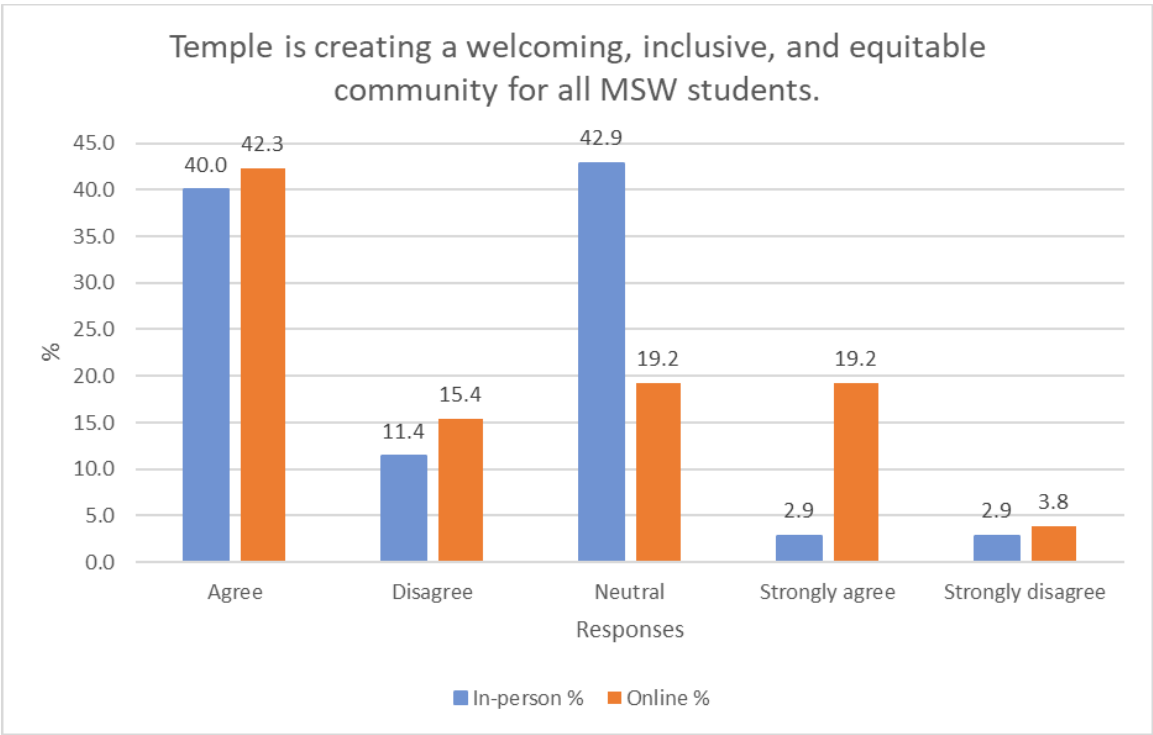


Figure 1. The percentage of in-person and online students by response options to the question, “Temple is creating a welcoming, inclusive and equitable community for all MSW students.”

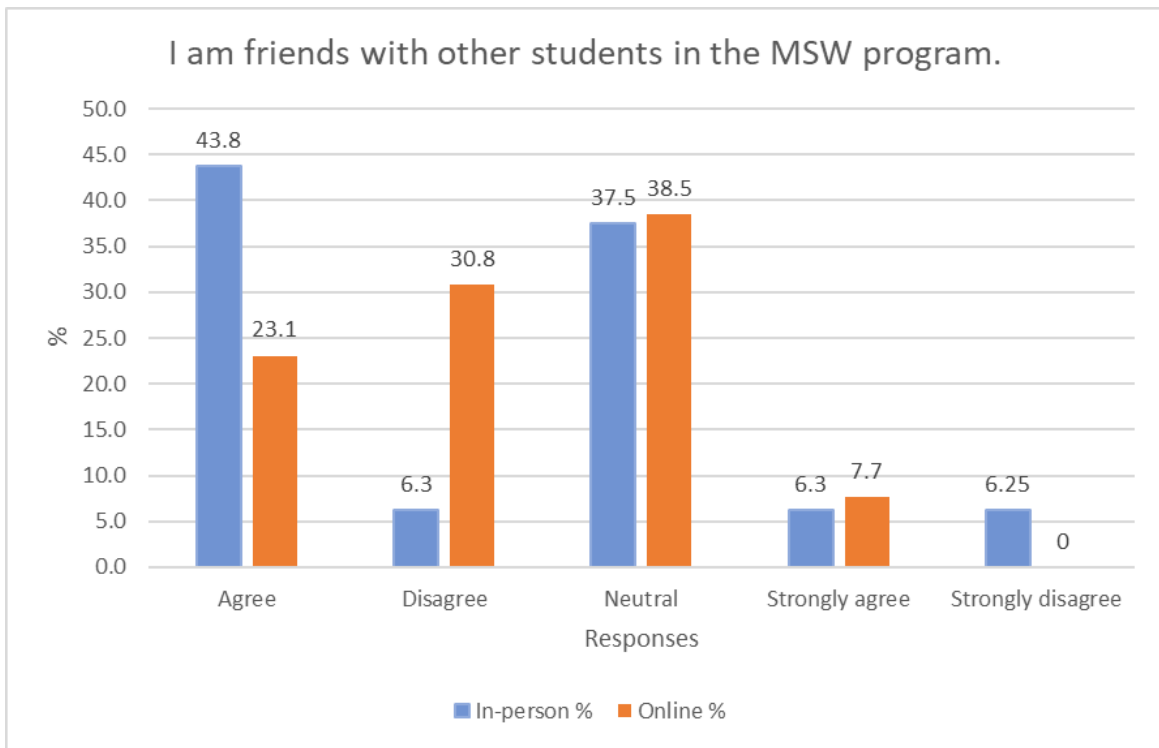


Figure 2. The percentage of in-person and online students by response options to the question, “I am friends with other students in the MSW program.”