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The views of young people on how to prevent or address loneliness: analysis of British survey data from the BBC Loneliness Experiment

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ABSTRACT

Loneliness in adolescence is a promising intervention target because of the high prevalence of loneliness at this developmental stage, the demonstrable associations with mental illness, and potential to prevent the onset of mental disorder. However, the acceptability of loneliness interventions to adolescents is questionable, and may explain the weak trial evidence to support effectiveness. In the current study, we captured the views of young people about which interventions they recommended for preventing or addressing loneliness. Using thematic analysis and descriptive statistics we analysed qualitative and quantitative data for 393 British participants age 16–18 years in the BBC Loneliness Experiment, recruited in 2018. Analysis identified three main themes: Connecting with others; Changing how one relates to others; and Changing how one experiences solitude. Responses to a list of 21 suggested solutions to loneliness showed that >50% endorsed each of: distraction approaches, focussing on work, study, or hobbies, talking about one's feelings, and joining a club. Our findings suggest that young people find the experience of loneliness distressing but are resourceful in finding strategies to prevent or mitigate it. Learning to take pleasure in their own company was described as a way of avoiding solitude being experienced as a stigmatised state of aloneness. These, and other important life skills, such as seeking out social connections and using opportunities for self-improvement, provided valuable guidance for peers. Their advice provides guidance for future research and co-produced intervention development to address loneliness in this age group.

1. Introduction

Loneliness is often assumed to be a problem primarily affecting older people (Pitman et al., 2018). However, international evidence consistently demonstrates that young people report high levels of loneliness (Mund et al., 2020; Barreto et al., 2021; Hawkley et al., 2022). In the UK, 10% of 16–24 year-olds report feeling lonely often or always (DCMS, 2020). This is despite the number of social contacts that young people are assumed to acquire through their educational settings, local communities and family networks. Loneliness is a subjective construct, defined as the distressing feeling that accompanies the perception (conscious or subconscious) that one's social needs are not being met by the quantity, and particularly the quality of, one's interpersonal relationships (Hawkley and Cacioppo, 2010; Cunningham et al., 2025). This cognitive discrepancy is therefore distinct from, although related to, the objective concept of social isolation (Mann et al., 2017) and not necessarily dependent on number of social relations (Wang et al., 2017). Whilst evolutionary theory conceptualises loneliness as an adaptive signal motivating individuals to restore social connections, when prolonged it can also heighten sensitivity to social threat and promote

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maladaptive social cognitions (Cacioppo et al., 2006; Cacioppo and Cacioppo, 2018), with implications for mental and physical health. Chronic loneliness has been defined as that persisting as two years or more, but dimensions such as frequency and intensity of loneliness are also important (Lim et al., 2023).

Public health concerns about loneliness in young people relate to the association (likely mutually reinforcing) between loneliness and poor mental health, psychological wellbeing, social outcomes and physical health in adulthood (Kim et al., 2025). These include an increased probability of sleep problems (Matthews et al., 2017), depression and emotional difficulties (Qualter et al., 2010; Lempinen, 2018), and suicidality (McKinnon et al., 2016; McClelland et al., 2020). Loneliness is also likely to worsen the prognosis of depression and anxiety in young people with pre-existing mental health conditions (Hards et al., 2022). Young people who experience loneliness in the context of depression describe a vicious cycle of social withdrawal leading to feelings of loneliness that worsen mood, thereby perpetuating their depression (Achterbergh et al., 2020). The stigma of loneliness in this age group includes both self-stigma and stigmatizing judgements of other people who self-report loneliness (Barreto et al., 2022). This stigma makes it difficult for young people to seek help, perpetuating their loneliness (DCMS, 2023).

There is an absence of formal evaluations of population-level primary prevention of loneliness, for example interventions addressing the socioeconomic, structural, normative, social capital, and environmental drivers of chronic loneliness (Crowe et al., 2024). However, there is evidence to support the effectiveness of individual and group interventions to prevent (and to a lesser extent to alleviate) loneliness in young people (Osborn et al., 2021; Eccles and Qualter, 2021). Such approaches have been classified as intrapersonal strategies (e.g. therapy that changes thinking and behaviour), interpersonal strategies (e.g. improving social skills), and social strategies (e.g. enhancing social support, providing opportunities for social contact) (Pearce et al., 2021). It is likely that these exert their effects through facilitating sustained social support, providing young people with opportunities for socialising with peers, and changing thinking and behaviour, particularly in relation to their attitudes to themselves and others (Pearce et al., 2021). Trial evidence is not conclusive on which approaches are most successful but suggest that emotion management and social skills are important for preventing transition to chronic loneliness, and that addressing anxiety and negative cognitive biases may be important for those with chronic loneliness (Eccles and Qualter, 2021). Notably, the preventive interventions evaluated have tended to be targeted at young people at greater risk of loneliness, for example due to their mental health problems, rather than delivered as universal interventions for all young people at potential risk of loneliness (Osborn et al., 2021). For feasibility of implementation, it is critical to consider the acceptability of loneliness interventions for this age group (Eager et al., 2024). Given that context-specific and needs-specific interventions are more acceptable, yet tend to be high-intensity, such targeted interventions are unlikely to be feasible at a population level (Osborn et al., 2021). For all such interventions, co-design is essential to ensure that strategies are personalised to fit individual needs and interests of specific sub-groups of young people (Pearce et al., 2021). It is therefore important to ask young people what they think works to reduce or mitigate loneliness, irrespective of the approaches identified by professionals. Such evidence is lacking yet critical for planning the components of interventional strategies likely to be effective and acceptable to the target group. In the current study, we aimed to elicit from a large sample of young people in the UK what strategies they perceive as personally effective for preventing, mitigating, and managing loneliness.

2. Methods

2.1. Participants

We analysed descriptive statistics and free text data among responses to the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) Loneliness Experiment; an online survey launched in 2018 by BBC Radio 4 and BBC World Service to assess experiences of loneliness (Barreto et al., 2021). This was promoted internationally over a four-month recruitment period, gaining wide media attention in print, online and broadcast media. It was open to anyone internationally aged 16 years or over, completed using a computer, mobile phone or tablet. Participant information explained that the aim of the survey was: to explore experiences of and thoughts about community and friendship; perceived causes of and interventions to address loneliness; and the role of communities and friends in loneliness. The survey included a range of fixed-choice and free text questions about participants' 'attitudes and opinions on social connections and loneliness' and two emotion perception tasks. Participants were not given a definition of loneliness and instead responded as per their own understanding of the construct.

A total of 54,988 individuals aged 16–99 years responded to the survey in 2018; predominantly UK-based (70.7%), female (66%), and employed (61.4%), therefore not representative of the UK or international population (Zoppolat et al., 2026).

Inclusion criteria for our analysis were being 16–18 years old and living in the UK. Whilst the WHO define young people using an upper limit of 24 years old (WHO, 2014), and adolescence is defined with an upper limit of age 24 years (Sawyer et al., 2018) we chose a narrower age band to capture those with more similar experiences and to be more specific in our recommendations. Establishing an upper limit of 18 years confined the sample to school-aged adolescents prior to their transition to independence. Due to cultural differences in experiences of loneliness (Barreto et al., 2021) and to gain a specific intervention and policy focus, the sample was also restricted to the 70% of survey respondents who were resident in the UK (Qualter et al., 2021).

2.2. Measures

The survey instrument captured socio-demographic information through fixed-choice options. Gender options were: Male, Female, Other. Sexual orientation options were: Exclusively heterosexual, Predominantly heterosexual, Equally heterosexual/homosexual, Predominantly homosexual, Exclusively homosexual, Asexual. The category "Equally heterosexual/homosexual" maps to bisexual identity. Employment status options were: Retired, Full-time in work, Part-time in work, Full-time student, Part-time student, Non-paid work (e.g. volunteering, carer), Unemployed. Household size was measured as the number of people living in the household (not including the participant), to which we added one to include the respondent. All these questions also included the option of 'Prefer not to say'.

In the current study we analysed qualitative responses to survey questions capturing suggestions as to potential approaches to address loneliness. The questions were worded to capture prevention and mitigation respectively, as follows::

What do you do to prevent loneliness?
What has worked for you when you have felt lonely?

Respondents were invited to provide as much or as little detail as they wished. Respondents were then routed to a fixed-choice question asking them to select any number of options from a list of 21 suggested solutions to loneliness for themselves or others:

Please think about which of these possible solutions to loneliness you, or others you know, have found to be effective at reducing feelings of loneliness. Please select all that apply.

Options included Join a club, and Use the internet for support, but

had not been visible when answering the previous open questions.

2.3. Qualitative data analysis

We analysed qualitative data using reflexive thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's six-phase approach to understand and identify themes representing young people's experiences in addressing loneliness (Braun and Clarke, 2006, 2012, 2019; Braun and Clarke, 2021, 2022). We used a predominantly inductive approach in developing our thematic framework as the researcher responsible for coding the majority of the data (AH) had limited previous awareness of interventions developed to address loneliness or of the evidence investigating effectiveness. We regarded this as an advantage in reducing the influence of any preconceptions about youth loneliness during the initial analytic phase of the study.

Given the short nature of responses, often in the form of a single sentence per question, all data were organised in Microsoft Excel, allowing codes and sub-themes to be created using columns. Two authors (AH; AP) familiarised themselves with the data by reading qualitative responses blinded to fixed-choice responses on suggested solutions to addressing loneliness. We excluded n = 17 missing, brief or uninterpretable responses such as "Yes", "Not much" or "I don't" at the item level. We adopted a data-driven approach, with one researcher (AH) initially coding the data, then a second researcher (AP) independently coding data for 19% (71/376) of participants to support discussions around reflexivity, given their differing stances in relation to clinical/research experience (Braun and Clarke, 2021, 2022). In comparing coding, they agreed an initial set of codes before one researcher (AH) continued coding, iteratively developing a set of potential sub-themes in discussion with a second researcher (AP). Through a process of collaborative meetings and discussions the research team organised codes into potential sub-themes and higher order themes, to create a thematic framework. We reviewed data against the final thematic framework and presented findings at interdisciplinary faculty meetings to check validity.

Regarding reflexivity, the researcher team brought experience from a range of disciplines (psychiatric epidemiology; computational neuroscience; social psychology; developmental psychology; social geography; public health; clinical psychiatry) and from past experiences as 16–18 year-olds facing loneliness at key transition points (for example when working or studying overseas). Whilst the lead analyst (AH) approached data analysis with few preconceptions of interventional research to address loneliness, other team members acknowledged greater familiarity with the literature and practice on this topic and potential biases about the likely effectiveness of different interventional approaches. In coding discussions, the team acknowledged their personal stances on this topic, including perception that loneliness can impair an individual's well-being and emotional health and that the stigma of loneliness in young people is a major barrier to seeking help for this. These discussions helped us consider how each researcher's subjectivity and context might influence the research process, enhancing transparency, credibility, and rigor of the study.

2.4. Quantitative data analysis

To contextualise responses and define our sample, we described the socio-demographic characteristics of the 393 participants in our analytic sample.

After finalising our thematic framework, to ensure that researchers conducting thematic analysis were blind to these categories and responses, we presented descriptive statistics for the 393 participants' responses to the tick-box question endorsing any of 21 suggested solutions to addressing loneliness, to triangulate qualitative findings.

3. Results

3.1. Participant characteristics

Of the total of 518 participants in the BBC Loneliness Experiment who met inclusion criteria for this study (age 16–18 years, UK residence), 393 responded to at least one of the relevant survey or fixed-choice questions and were included in our analytic sample. Age distribution was even between those endorsing ages 16 (n = 123; 31%), 17 (n = 139; 35%) and 18 years (n = 131; 33%). The majority identified as female (73%), single (84%), full-time students (75%), exclusively or predominantly heterosexual (67%), with financial needs met adequately (93%) and from a median household size of 3 people (inclusive of the respondent) (Table 1). Of the 393 respondents included in our analytic sample, all provided responses to the fixed-choice question, whilst 376 (96%) also provided interpretable responses to at least one survey question (Table 2).

Table 1
Demographic characteristics of final sample (n = 393).

	N	%
Gender		
Male	105	26.72
Female	288	73.28
Other	0	0
Age		
16	123	31.30
17	139	35.37
18	131	33.33
Employment		
Full-time student	294	74.81
Part-time student	9	2.29
Full-time work	5	1.27
Part-time work	70	17.81
Unemployed	13	3.31
Non-paid work	2	0.51
Needs met by financial resources		
Very well	167	42.49
Fairly well	197	50.13
Poorly	26	6.62
SES ladder[a]		
Mean	6	-
Median	7	-
Range	1 to 10	-
IQR	6 to 7	-
Missing	2	-
Living status		
Alone by choice	10	2.54
Alone not by choice	3	0.76
Not alone	380	96.69
Number of people in household (inc respondent)		
Mean	3	-
Median	3	-
Range	1 to 8	-
IQR	2 to 4	-
Marital status		
Single	330	83.97
In a relationship	61	15.52
Missing	2	0.51
Sexual orientation		
Exclusively heterosexual	173	44.02
Predominantly heterosexual	92	23.41
Equally heterosexual/ homosexual	60	15.27
Predominantly homosexual	15	3.82
Exclusively homosexual	15	3.82
Asexual	32	8.14
Missing	6	1.53

[a] SES ladder represents the MacArthur Subjective Social Status measure (MSSS): a 10-point scale in which participants subjectively rate their SES on the basis of money, education and respect accorded to job, from lowest (1) to highest (10) relative others in their country of residence.

Table 2
Distribution of included, missing, and uninterpretable responses across survey Question 1 (prevention) and Question 2 (mitigation) (n = 393).

Q2 \ Q1	Included	Missing	Uninterpretable
Included	314	4	26
Missing	15	2	2
Uninterpretable	17	2	11

N.B. Shaded regions represent responses excluded from qualitative analysis.

3.2. Qualitative themes

Our analysis identified three main themes capturing young people's strategies to prevent and overcome loneliness: 1) Connecting with others, 2) Changing how you relate to others, and 3) Changing how you experience solitude. We present themes and sub-themes below, illustrated with quotes denoting the respondent's age, gender, employment status, sexuality, and household size (inclusive of respondent). Quotes were corrected for obvious spelling errors only where this did not change the meaning of the response.

3.2.1. Theme 1: connecting with others

Respondents described making conscious efforts to connect with other people to prevent and/or overcome their feelings of loneliness. This included connecting with people already within their social networks, such as friends and family, and/or people outside their networks. This involved using remote means (such as telephone or social media) as well as physically spending time with others or seeking physical contact. Whilst most respondents described the positive rewards of connecting with other people, some respondents indicated that these efforts could sometimes be difficult.

3.2.1.1. Connecting with people generally. Respondents often recommended connecting with friends, family, or other contacts, described in very general terms, without specifics of the quantity or quality of the connection.

> *"Make sure to have interactions with other people, however small."* – 18-year-old male, full-time student, household size four, predominantly homosexual.
> *"I talk to my friends or a teacher I've known for years."* – 16-year-old female, full-time student, household size two, bisexual.
> *"Maintain a structure which involves communicating with others."* – 18-year-old male, full-time student, household size two, exclusively homosexual.

Respondents explained that making efforts to "*maintain friendships*", particularly "*maintain healthy relationships with friends*", was also helpful, particularly in preventing loneliness. They appeared to value not only the immediate social gains of connecting with others as a way of preventing loneliness, but also the reassurance of having someone they could connect with when needed.

Not all respondents used these relationships to talk about their feelings of loneliness: for some just having that connection seemed sufficient to stave off loneliness. However, some individuals did find it helpful talking to others about their troubles, including feelings of loneliness. Being able to share their feelings appeared to provide a valuable outlet, to help them feel supported and understood, and to reinforce their sense of having a supportive social network.

> *"I talk to people and share my thoughts because I feel lonely when I bottle feelings up inside."* – 18-year-old female, full-time student, household size six, exclusively heterosexual.
> *"I reach out to my friends to let them know how I'm feeling - even if I'm alone, their support lets me know that they might not be by my side physically but they're there mentally."* – 16-year-old female, full-time student, household size four, bisexual.

Whilst many respondents regarded connecting with others as helpful in combatting loneliness, some added that it could sometimes be difficult, citing doubts about how much others cared.

> *"I talk to people but not too much as I'm not sure they are interested in listening."* – 16-year-old female, full-time student, household size four, predominantly heterosexual.
> *"Talking to people. This doesn't always help and I often find it hard to."* – 17-year-old female, full-time student, household size five, bisexual.

3.2.1.2. Connecting with people with shared values/interests. Respondents highlighted the importance of seeking out connection with people who shared similar core values, specific hobbies, or religious beliefs . These connections appeared to feel more meaningful and to increase feelings of belonging, helping to prevent and overcome feelings of loneliness.

> *"Keep in contact with other Christians who I can have meaningful conversations with."* – 16-year-old female, full-time student, household size six, exclusively heterosexual.
> *"Integrate yourself with people that you have similarities with."* – 18-year-old female, full-time student, household size six, predominantly heterosexual.

Some respondents emphasized the importance of being themselves; not changing their personality or traits but instead finding others who understood them and were similar to their true selves.

> *"Be yourself and find like-minded people to be your company."* – 16-year-old male, full-time student, household size seven, exclusively heterosexual.

Several respondents suggested connecting with people who specifically shared their feelings of loneliness and who valued social connection. It appeared this not only helped the respondent to manage their feelings of loneliness but also to practise altruism in thinking about others needing support and connection, providing further personal benefits.

> *"I write articles online anonymously about how I feel and I always get messages from people saying how this is exactly how they feel, which makes me feel less alone and them also in the way that they are not alone in how they feel."* – 17-year-old female, full-time student, household size four, predominantly heterosexual.

3.2.1.3. Connecting with specific valued people. Some respondents described seeking out connections with specific people, with whom they had authentic or meaningful relationships. They described the security of knowing that these people were always there for them and would make them feel valued.

> *"Talking to my mum: she's always full of life and vibrancy that she feels like twenty people in one so it's hard to feel lonely when talking to her."* – 16-year-old female, full-time student, household size four, bisexual.

"Find someone (a very close friend/sibling) who I know will always be willing to talk to me no matter what." – 18-year-old female, full-time student, household size five, exclusively heterosexual.

Whilst some respondents had access to specific friends or relatives with whom they had an existing valued connection, a few respondents appeared to lack such connections and instead described their efforts to establish them. These respondents appeared to recognise that superficial connections were of little value when feeling lonely, and this motivated them to seek out more authentic relationships.

"Try to find someone you can connect with on a deeper, personal level." – 18-year-old female, full-time student, household size three, predominantly heterosexual.

3.2.1.4. Connecting with others through a shared activity. Many respondents described connecting with others through a shared activity such as a group-based hobby, clubs or social activities. This seemed to offer the dual benefits of a distracting activity that was enjoyed with others whilst also meeting new people or strengthening existing social connections.

"I go out to places and try to get myself involved with different people and activities. I go to clubs if I can." – 17-year-old female, full-time student, household size five, predominantly heterosexual.
"Going out somewhere with my friends or joining with people to do something I love." – 16-year-old female, full-time student, household size three, bisexual.

Some respondents mentioned specifically taking part in shared activities to help others, such as volunteering or community work, which had added altruistic benefits.

"I get involved with organisations like charities, making myself feel like I am doing some good and helping people." – 17-year-old female, full-time student, household size four, exclusively heterosexual.

Although connecting with new people over a shared activity was enjoyable for some, others described difficulty in motiving themselves to meet new people at such activities.

"Make myself go to events even if I don't know that many people going." – 18-year-old female, full-time student, household size three, exclusively heterosexual.

3.2.1.5. Connecting with non-humans. Beyond human contact, several respondents described connecting with animals or spiritual entities as helpful in preventing and overcoming loneliness. A number reported the value of being in the company of a pet, recommending approaches such as "*being with my dogs*" or "*talking to the pets*" to convey the value of these connections.

A few respondents reported connecting with a deity or another religious entity during periods of loneliness. This was distinct from the sub-theme of connecting with others from the same religious community, in that respondents described a very personal connection to their God, providing examples of the value of using prayer, "*listening to biblical sermons*" or making time to "*thank God for what I have*". These communications appeared to affirm an important connection through their faith when feeling lonely.

3.2.1.5.1. Seeking professional help. Representing an outlier, a very small minority (n = 3) reported seeking out professional help, primarily counselling, but gave no details about whether they did this to address underlying or associated problems (such as depression), to address loneliness explicitly, or to seek connection with an independent empathic professional. Alongside providing suggestions such as "*I force myself to go to a counsellor*" and "*Going to see a counsellor*" they also suggested self-help approaches such as those described above, so professional input was not their sole strategy for addressing loneliness.

3.2.2. Theme 2: changing how one relates to others

Many respondents described changing the way they related to other people as something they had found helpful in preventing and overcoming loneliness. They identified ways of changing their attitudes to others or their behaviour towards others, which they viewed as helpful in their social interactions.

3.2.2.1. Improving the skills needed in social interactions. Several respondents had recognised personal weaknesses in their social skills and made efforts to improve these, for example addressing their communication skills or conflict resolution strategies. A few respondents had recognised their own potential prejudices in relationships and made efforts to overcome those, viewing these as social skills important in preventing loneliness.

"Be open minded, don't let preconceptions about certain groups of people prevent what could be a fulfilling relationship." – 17-year-old female, full-time student, household size five, exclusively heterosexual.
"Try to improve my social skills and get out of the house. Right now I am looking towards getting into public speaking." – 17-year-old male, full-time student, household size four, exclusively heterosexual.
"I try and hear them out on their side of the argument so that we don't fall out therefore leaving me or them feeling lonely." – 16-year-old female, full-time student, household size four, sexuality not reported.

A few respondents reported making efforts to change the way they behaved around others in order to be perceived as more socially desirable. Despite not reflecting how they felt inside, putting on this front appeared to help them mask their true feelings of loneliness. This contrasted with data under sub-theme 3.2.1 capturing the importance of being oneself.

"Behave in a way that I expect others to want me to; they'll want me around more if I am what they want me to be." – 17-year-old female, part-time work, no response for household size, predominantly heterosexual.
"I change things about myself e.g. *Wear makeup, interesting clothes, try to lose weight, try to be nicer/funnier"* – 17-year-old female, part-time work, household size five, bisexual.
"As a man I just grin and bear it because boys don't cry." – 17-year-old male, full-time student, household size five, exclusively heterosexual.

3.2.2.2. Challenging one's negative thoughts about the quality of relationships with others. Respondents reported having challenged any negative cognitions they had about the quality of their relationships with others. For example, to combat beliefs about being socially isolated or lacking a wide social network, they reminded themselves that they had good friends and valued social connections.

"Reminding myself that there are select people around me that know me very well" – 16-year-old female, unemployed, household size three, exclusively heterosexual.

Some of these respondents appeared to conflate loneliness with social isolation, as it was not always clear whether they felt that their social needs were being met by the social networks they identified. However, reminding themselves of the authentic connections they had with people in their networks (even if they were not physically present) appeared to be helpful in reducing any feelings of loneliness.

"…reminding myself of all the people I have around me." – 18-year-old female, full-time student, household size three, exclusively heterosexual.

Some respondents recommended adopting a more positive way of thinking about the way they approached social situations, such as to "*think positively and logically*", "*have a positive mental attitude*" or "*force*

yourself to be confident even if you really are not". These conveyed the cognitive efforts that respondents perceived necessary to forge or maintain connections, helping them feel (and appear) more positive and confident, despite finding this difficult at times.

3.2.3. Theme 3: changing how one experiences solitude

Solitude seemed to be experienced on a spectrum from enjoyable to uncomfortable via bearable . Those framing solitude positively appeared to embrace the idea of it as an opportunity for reflection and restoration between episodes of interaction. Conversely, viewing solitude negatively as stigmatising seemed to engender loneliness. Many respondents had found that improving the experience of time spent alone (for example by engaging in solo hobbies) was a means of gaining enjoyment from solitude, thereby preventing or overcoming loneliness. For others this involved reflecting on and challenging their negative thoughts about being alone.

3.2.3.1. Engagement in solo activities. Many respondents reported engaging in enjoyable solo activities to manage their time spent alone. This was seen as a form of self-care or constructive distraction to get through a period spent alone, and as a means of personal enjoyment in itself. They included watching television, playing games, listening to music, and exercising.

> *"Hobbies. They can distract you from the negativities of being alone and can provide more positive vibes which in turn help you to enjoy your own company."* – 18-year-old female, part-time work, household size six, exclusively heterosexual.
>
> *"Normally I wait for the feeling to pass by doing something fun"* – 16-year-old male, full-time student, household size four, exclusively heterosexual.
>
> *"Being alone more but doing something that makes me proud of who I am."* – 16-year-old female, full-time student, household size four, predominantly homosexual.

Where such activities were perceived as constructive and created a sense of task completion or of achievement, they were seen to have advantages beyond pleasant distraction. Some individuals mentioned channelling their energies into study or work, addressing personal goals or challenges, or setting time aside to problem-solve. Activities seen as addressing 'self-betterment' included exercise, healthy eating and taking a positive attitude towards accomplishing things.

> *"I keep myself active and busy to keep my mind off of it. I set goals and achieve them to feel good about myself."* – 17-year-old female, full-time student, household size five, exclusively heterosexual.
>
> *"Filling time up with something productive such as college work so I am not focusing on the loneliness."* – 18-year-old female, part-time work, household size two, exclusively heterosexual.
>
> *"Take time when I'm alone to reflect on current problems and think of solutions."* – 17-year-old female, part-time work, household size five, predominantly heterosexual.
>
> *"Self-betterment. Focusing on my own health, getting fit, stop eating, being more self-positive and spending more time on friends and family."* – 17-year-old male, part-time work, household size two, bisexual.

The sense of achievement gained from these solo activities helped them enjoy solitude rather than dwell on any negative connotations of being alone. However, where activities were seen as merely distractions they could be viewed as preventing an individual from confronting their underlying negative thoughts and feelings.

> *"I often don't confront the feeling and box it away, distracting myself by watching a film or reading a book"* – 17-year-old female, full-time student, household size six, exclusively heterosexual.

These accounts presented a sense of making the best of time spent alone, rather than actively seeking out time alone for its own enjoyment.

3.2.3.2. Challenging one's negative thoughts about solitude. Several respondents recommended challenging any negative thoughts they had about solitude, thereby learning to enjoy time spent alone. Through this they distinguished between being alone and feeling lonely. Most respondents who provided data coded under this theme appeared to find such psychological shifts particularly challenging. Whilst they were able to accept that spending time alone could be pleasurable and/or comforting in principle, this was not always how they experienced it in practice. Many adolescents described having to "*try*", "*learn*" or "*remind*" themselves that they could actually enjoy solitude.

> *"Try to be able to be comfortable being alone without feeling lonely"* – 16-year-old female, full-time student, household size four, predominantly heterosexual.
>
> *"Learn to enjoy my own company. Only lonely when that becomes forced after a long period of time."* – 18-year-old male, full-time student, household size five, predominantly heterosexual.
>
> *"Trying to remind myself that sometimes I enjoy being by myself"* – 18-year-old female, part-time student, household size five, bisexual.

Those who managed to shift their views from solitude as a stigmatised state to solitude as a positive and restorative state seemed less likely to experience unpleasant feelings of loneliness.

3.2.3.3. Using self-reflection to process feelings about being alone. A small number of respondents reported using their time alone to reflect on why they were feeling lonely. It appeared that thinking critically about their feelings gave them "*something tangible*" to focus on and address in their efforts to feel less lonely.

> *"Reflecting on it and finding the source of my loneliness helps me to understand it better"* – 16-year-old female, full-time student, household size 4, bisexual.

A few respondents described using strategies such as mindfulness, meditation and journaling to process their feelings of loneliness. However, it was not always clear whether these psychological approaches were being used specifically to overcome loneliness or for other difficulties, also having with associated impacts on feelings of loneliness.

3.2.3.4. Challenging one's negative thoughts about self-identity. Several respondents suggested challenging any negative thoughts held about one's own identity. Whilst the examples given by respondents did not directly mention feelings of loneliness, the implication was that identity in this context related to a sense of belonging. it appeared that adopting a generally positive attitude to oneself and was a means of boosting self-esteem, which could be helpful, particularly in preventing loneliness arising from spending time alone. Such positive thinking seemed to help gain perspective on their situation, helping them feel less burdened by feelings of loneliness.

> *"Be happy with myself and who I am, also where I am in life."* – 17-year-old female, full-time student, household size five, exclusively heterosexual.
>
> *"Focus on the positives in life, like I am given the opportunity to live another day and I have food on my plate."* – 17-year-old female, full-time student, household size five, exclusively heterosexual.
>
> *"Relax and find peace in your own strength and self-belief."* – 17-year-old female, part-time work, household size three, bisexual.

3.2.3.5. Data distribution and theme overlap. The majority of respondents provided data that were coded under theme 1, many of whom also provided data that were coded under themes 2 or 3. However, only very few respondents provided data coded under both themes 2 and 3, such that these patterns appeared to define two sub-groups of respondents. When relating the coding to respondents' socio-demographic characteristics, there were no clear factors distinguishing these sub-

groups (Table 1). Whilst all those providing data coded under both themes 2 and 3 identified as female, it should be noted that the majority of respondents in the sample identified as female (73%).

We observed some overlap between our three themes (Fig. 1). We noted that data coded under the Theme 1 sub-theme of *Connecting with others through a shared activity* identified the secondary gain of providing a means of forgetting about feelings of loneliness. This overlapped with the Theme 3 sub-theme of *Engagement in solo activities* in that such activities were enjoyable but also had value in absorbing distraction. These approaches avoided directly confronting negative cognitions about solitude and loneliness, in contrast to the sub-themes capturing attempts at self-reflection. Data coded under Theme 2′s sub-theme of *Challenging negative thoughts about the quality of one's relationships with others* described respondents' attempts to reframe their negative thoughts about the value of their social relationships, and to adopt a more positive mindset about their social situation. Data coded under Theme 3′s sub-theme of *Challenging one's negative thoughts about solitude* and its separate sub-theme of *Challenging one's negative thoughts about self-identity* described similar efforts to challenge the negative thoughts they held about solitude and about themselves. These three sub-themes therefore overlapped in describing respondents' efforts at positive thinking, for its influence on ameliorating unpleasant feelings of loneliness, yet were distinct due to the differing focus of each.

3.3. Quantitative responses

The proportion of the 393 respondents endorsing each of 21 suggested solutions to loneliness (Table 3) for themselves or other people they knew showed that the most endorsed responses were distraction approaches used when spending time alone (73%), dedicating time to work, study, or hobbies (65%), talking to friends and family about one's feelings (58%) and joining a club (52%). The next-ranked responses applied to less than half the sample.

3.4. Interpretation of discordance between qualitative and quantitative responses

Our quantitative findings, selected from options presented after respondents had provided their views using free text, conflicted with qualitative findings, which were more focussed on connecting with

Table 3
Proportion of young people aged 16–18 years endorsing each of 21 suggested solutions to loneliness as helpful for themselves or others (n = 393).

Suggested solution to loneliness	N (%)
Find activities which distract you when you are on your own	288 (73.3)
Dedicate your time to work, study, or hobbies	257 (65.4)
Talk to friends and family about your feelings	229 (58.3)
Join a club	206 (52.4)
Tell someone else you're feeling lonely	193 (49.1)
Give yourself time to think about why you are feeling lonely	160 (40.7)
Change my thinking to be more positive	154 (39.2)
Set out to look for the good in every person you meet	151 (38.4)
Use the internet for support	151 (38.4)
Carry on as normal and wait for the feeling to pass	147 (37.4)
Decide to invite people to be friends without fearing rejection	146 (37.1)
Find new social activities and pastimes	143 (36.4)
Find new friends	132 (33.6)
Deliberately start a conversation with anyone you interact with e.g. in shops	108 (27.5)
Find new non-social activities and pastimes	101 (25.7)
Seek counselling	94 (23.9)
I don't know what to do when I feel lonely	90 (22.9)
Re-engage with your church, mosque, or equivalent	70 (17.8)
Set out to introduce yourself to all your neighbours	60 (15.3)
Look for a new job	50 (12.7)
Move to a new area	26 (6.6)

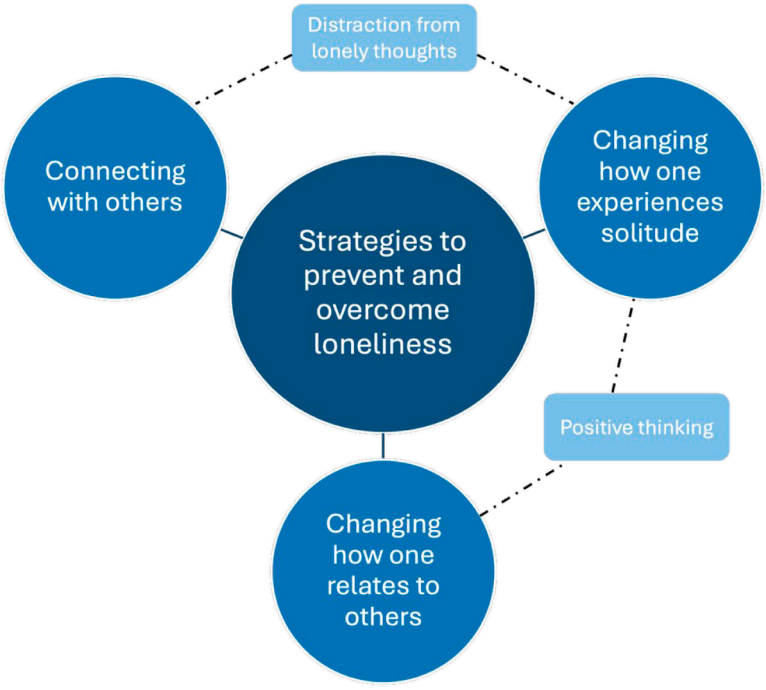

Fig. 1. Three main themes and their overlap (overlaps represented by pale blue boxes connected to themes by dotted lines).

others. We had coded the majority of free text data under theme 1 (Connecting with others), involving strengthening or maintaining existing connections as well as creating new connections. However, connecting with others was a the third-ranked option on the fixed-choice list. It should be noted that the earlier open questions had asked respondents what had worked for them personally, whilst the fixed-choice questions captured what had worked for them or others they knew, which may explain the observed differences. Relatively few of the 21 options captured interpersonal strategies such as strengthening or maintaining existing connections. Our qualitative analysis therefore brought up solutions to loneliness that the fixed-choice responses had overlooked; namely the importance of utilising the existing social network.

Our qualitative analysis conveyed strongly the importance of connecting with people to reinforce a sense of belonging, even if this did not involve explicitly sharing one's feelings of loneliness. However, this approach had not been listed in the 21 fixed-choice options. Instead, it was striking that 58% of the sample specifically endorsed 'talking to friends and family about your feelings'; an approach that had not come across prominently in our qualitative data. Approaches involving self-reflection (e.g. 'give yourself time to think about why you are feeling lonely') were endorsed by 41%. This was consistent with qualitative responses coded under Theme 2, although represented by a much smaller number of respondents qualitatively. Indeed, their qualitative responses had conveyed the efforts required to challenge one's own thoughts or attitudes.

Whilst 24% endorsed the fixed-choice option of counselling as having been helpful (for self or others), this was reflected by far fewer (<1%) in qualitative responses, where seeking help emerged only as an outlier, apparent under Theme 1 as the sub-theme of seeking professional help. This discordance, and others, is most likely to be methodological, in that free text responses reflected personal solutions whilst the fixed-choice options reflected solutions for themselves and/or others they knew. Similarly, methodologically, the open-ended questions required respondents to generate solutions spontaneously, whereas the fixed-choice format prompted consideration of counselling as a possible option. The fixed-choice question therefore may have reminded individuals of strategies they had used but not mentioned in the previous responses. Another explanation is that some suggestions provided by respondents in the free text (notably strengthening or maintaining existing connections) did not feature in the fixed-choice options. Finally, the discrepancy may have arisen from divergence between what seems useful in abstract and in practice. Substantive explanations are apparent in previous research findings suggesting that adolescents typically prefer informal sources of support, such as friends and family, and often experience barriers to professional help-seeking, including stigma, concerns about confidentiality, uncertainty about how to access services, and preferences for self-reliance (Aguirre Velasco et al., 2020; Radez et al., 2021). Counselling may, therefore, be recognised as potentially helpful when presented as an option but be less salient as a spontaneously generated strategy for addressing loneliness. Relatedly, stigma may have influenced responses in that approaches suggested for others (including seeking counselling) may have felt too stigmatising to describe as acceptable to oneself.

4. Discussion

4.1. Main findings

Our analysis of data from UK-based participants ages 16–18 years in the BBC Loneliness Experiment represented a sample who were predominantly female and socio-economically advantaged. They identified a range of recommended solutions to loneliness, covering both primary prevention (for those at risk of chronic loneliness) and secondary prevention (for those self-identifying as lonely). The solutions suggested were similar for preventing and overcoming loneliness. These included: making efforts to strengthen or maintain connections with valued others, improving social skills to assist in these and future relationships, reframing self-perceptions about one's identity in relation to others, and changing negative thought patterns about the extent or quality of their social network. Some suggested solutions related to addressing social isolation, including making efforts to increase their network size.

Many of the young people in our sample demonstrated careful attention to meta-cognitions (awareness and understanding of one's own thought processes), indicating that they had reflected carefully on the origins of their loneliness, seeing this as a product of their perceptions about their social interactions or social connections and about solitude. These insightful responses described recognising and overcoming their potential prejudices (about self and others) to improve their sense of self as well as their interpersonal relationships. Another striking finding was that some individuals had learned to enjoy their solitude, and this seemed more effective at combating loneliness where the activities they engaged in during solitude involved 'self-betterment' beyond solely passive entertainment.

Those approaches helped them to take pleasure in their own company rather than experiencing it as a stigmatising state of aloneness, helping overcome a tendency to feel lonely. In being able to challenge the idea that solitude was a negative experience, they had gained an appreciation of solitude, and this seemed to be a valuable life skill. In contrast, others avoided confronting their feelings about solitude and loneliness and instead used the distraction of hobbies or social interactions. Sometimes they masked their loneliness to others or tried to behave in a way that they perceived as more appealing. The strain of this inauthenticity was apparent and appeared to be driven by a fear of stigmatising views from others. Indeed, stigma may be an important factor influencing adolescents' choice of and engagement with potential interventions for loneliness (Barreto et al., 2022).

Only a small number of respondents described seeking professional support as a solution to loneliness, and such responses appeared distinct from the approaches featured in other themes. It may be that sources of professional support for loneliness are not readily apparent to young people or that such individuals sought professional support for other mental health reasons (with associated benefits for loneliness). A quarter of the sample nevertheless endorsed counselling as a helpful strategy for themselves and/or others. We have considered above both methodological and substantive factors explaining this and other discordances identified when triangulating our qualitative and quantitative findings, in that some of fixed-choice options selected by a high proportion of respondents did not feature prominently in the thematic framework and vice versa. We therefore used such discordance to identify the approaches that matter to young people but that might not be so evident to those designing interventions, and to understand the influence of stigma when addressing loneliness. This highlights the importance of comparing qualitative and quantitative findings, identifying perspectives that we might otherwise not have elicited through either approach (Carter et al., 2014).

4.2. Findings in the context of existing literature

Only three previous studies have explored the acceptability of a range of loneliness interventions to young people. One elicited views from UK adolescents ages 14–24 years to identify interventions that appear worth testing for their potential effectiveness in reducing loneliness, anxiety and depression in young people and the potential mechanisms of action (Pearce et al., 2021). Among other approaches, the study identified therapy that focuses on changing thinking and behaviour, for example by fostering positive attitudes to oneself and others, as potentially beneficial. This is consistent with our finding that reframing one's attitudes to self-identity and interactions with others was identified by respondents as helpful. A second UK study interviewed young people ages between 16–24 years, presenting them with a description (and examples) of different types of loneliness interventions

(Eager et al., 2024), including interpersonal interventions, to improve social and emotional skills; social interventions, to improve opportunities for social interaction and support; and intrapersonal interventions, to address psychological factors. In contrast to findings from the BBC Loneliness Experiment dataset, their responses therefore primarily represented a reaction to specific suggestions rather than a spontaneous description of what had worked for them (followed by selecting items from a list). Key similarities in findings between the this and our study were the emphasis on building and strengthening connections; interviewees recognised a value in loneliness interventions that provided opportunities for building connections, practising communication skills, and developing social confidence. Another key similarity was a recognition of the stigma of admitting to struggling with loneliness or being considered a 'loner' by other people, which served as a deterrent to seeking help for loneliness. Interviewees described this stigma in more depth, expressing the view that loneliness interventions should specifically aim to reduce the stigma associated with loneliness. They also had suggestions for language used to describe strategies for addressing loneliness, preferring terms such as 'making connections' or 'meeting new people' to the negatively-framed language of loneliness. A third study interviewed young people aged 8–14 years in Belgium and Italy identified strategies for mitigating loneliness that were very similar to those identified here: reaching out to others, finding ways to enjoy solitude, and changing the way they act in social situations (Verity et al., 2021).

Other empirical work has indirectly addressed the identification of strategies for addressing loneliness in adolescence, for example when describing experiences of loneliness. A study of the experiences of loneliness in emerging adults (ages 18–25 years) did not probe specifically for ways to prevent or address loneliness, but did identify the difficulties of disclosing loneliness due to stigma (Kirwan et al., 2023), consistent with our study. In addition, participants showed a high degree of self-reflection and insight into the drivers of loneliness at this developmental stage (Kirwan et al., 2023). A qualitative meta-synthesis of studies describing the experience of loneliness among young people with depression found that although some individuals wanted to talk about their difficulties, they also found this challenging given fears about the consequences, including the threat of peer rejection (Achterbergh, et al., 2020). Combined, all studies highlight the barriers created by stigma.

The concept of solitude as a positive rather than pathologised state has not been well explored in the literature. A synthesis of qualitative research on the child and youth experience of loneliness concluded that young people generally view loneliness as connected to, but separate from, aloneness, isolation, and solitude, and this was also reflected in the measures used to capture loneliness in this age group (Qualter et al., 2025). It is recognised that developing the capacity to handle and enjoy solitude is a developmental process that may be difficult for some people where there is a craving for social connections and external stimulation (Costa, 2024). In a Japanese sample of people aged 20–79 years, preference for solitude was associated with poor mental health (Sakurai et al., 2024) but the temporality of this cross-sectional association was unclear. International students aged 16–40 years surveyed for the BBC Loneliness Experiment described loneliness in terms of finding oneself alone for long periods but identified positive aspects of this through the opportunities it provided for reflection or work (Zheng et al., 2023). Australian adolescents with autism and/or ADHD describe in focus groups how solitude was welcomed when self-chosen but could exacerbate feelings of loneliness when imposed by circumstances (Verity et al., 2025). Canadian qualitative work shows that when comparing the attitudes of adolescents and adults towards '*what being alone means to you',* adolescents described being alone more negatively than adults (Borg and Willoughby, 2022). There is also evidence that young people with negative beliefs about being alone experience a steep increase in loneliness after spending time alone in daily life, whereas those with positive beliefs feel less lonely after spending time alone (Rodriguez et al., 2025a). Whilst those (of all ages) in the BBC Loneliness Survey who rated their loneliness as most severe were those who spent the most time alone (Qualter et al., 2021) qualitative evidence demonstrates that what people do when alone, whether they enjoy it, and how they view this time is critical. A survey of Canadian young adults (aged 18–25) found that they spent time alone engaged in activities such as homework (71%) or passive media (television/movies; 61%), with only 1% each endorsing the options of 'nothing', 'daydreaming/thinking' or 'meditating' (McVarnock et al., 2025). The use of time alone to reflect on feelings of loneliness and self-identity was much more apparent in our sample, but this may reflect response bias in respondents to the BBC Loneliness Experiment. Together this evidence, and the findings of our study, suggests great scope to reframe attitudes to solitude (as a positive, restorative and valued commodity), reducing feelings of loneliness. It is also consistent with evidence from the wider population favouring loneliness interventions that address maladaptive social cognitions (Masi et al., 2011).

4.3. Strengths and limitations

This analysis of qualitative data from 393 British teenagers represents, to our knowledge, the largest qualitative study internationally exploring solutions to loneliness in this age group. As the survey instrument deliberately avoided defining loneliness, this allowed respondents to present their own conceptualisation of this construct. Questions were worded carefully to be open and non-leading, with suggested options for addressing loneliness concealed until respondents had expressed their views online. Recruitment was supported by the media reach of the BBC, encouraging participation even from those who perceived loneliness as stigmatising. The anonymous nature of data collection promoted disclosure, but at the cost of gaining further detail through interview approaches. The validity of our thematic framework was enhanced through independent coding of free text data, a lack of preconceptions on the part of the primary coder (AH), the triangulation of quantitative and qualitative findings, the use of team discussions and research seminars to review emergent themes, and the broad range of disciplinary backgrounds of those on the research team.

However, we acknowledge some limitations of using BBC Loneliness Experiment data, including the likelihood of selection bias, particularly given the predominantly female and socio-economically advantaged sample, including the digital exclusion of more socially disadvantaged young people. The database lacked ethnicity variables, so it was a major limitation that we were unable to explore patterning of themes by ethnic group. We were also unclear which respondents had grown up in households without siblings. Data were collected in 2018, prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, so did not include reflections on enforced isolation through pandemic restrictions, although this did at least avoid dominance of specific pandemic-related experiences. They also reflect an earlier stage of the rise in social media use and concerns about adolescent wellbeing (Orben, 2020). However, we note that our findings from 2018 were similar to those from a UK sample of young people interviewed during and after COVID social distancing periods (Eager et al., 2024). As an open survey there was no denominator, so we were unable to estimate response or to gauge the degree of response bias. Together, these limitations of the data suggest that our findings may not be generalisable to all 16–18 year olds in the UK, particularly young men and those from more deprived backgrounds. Lacking information about the ethnicity of respondents, we cannot be clear about how suggestions in our study might vary by culture, although our findings were broadly similar to those of UK work involving an ethnically diverse sample of young people (Eager et al., 2024). Our analytic sample was limited to a narrow age range, including those likely to be still at school and living with parents, before the transition to adulthood and a more varied range of independent social connections. The length of the survey meant that responses to each question were relatively limited, with no opportunity to explore ideas further or to respond to distress. Finally, the open

questions we focussed on asked what had worked for respondents personally, biasing responses away from suggestions about societal approaches to addressing loneliness.

4.4. Policy and research implications

Our findings from a sample of 16–18 year olds in the UK suggest that many young people are resourceful in warding off or reducing feelings of loneliness whilst also expressing the efforts involved. However, one in five endorsed the option 'I don't know what to do when I feel lonely' highlighting an unmet need for support for this group. This and other published work highlights the issue of stigma in admitting to being a 'loner' when accessing interventions for loneliness, which is a key issue when considering the acceptability of interventions (Eager et al., 2024). Although our sample was predominantly female, we note the perspective of a young male that "boys don't cry" in relation to loneliness, conveying the particular difficulties that young men face in being seen to address their loneliness. Care around language and how this might be interpreted is critical when producing guidance or services to address loneliness in this age group. Specific interventions to address the stigma of loneliness (or related mental health problems) might also be important, given that stigma and discrimination are likely drivers of loneliness among young people (Barreto et al., 2022; DCMS, 2023; Barreto and Shi, 2025). In view of this stigma, it may be more realistic to create self-help materials for young people who feel lonely, based on the material from this study and other accounts. We therefore recommend investment in projects that support young people to co-produce self-help guidance for their age group on how to tackle loneliness, using empirical findings specific to their country context.

Responses indicated that reframing one's attitudes to self-identity, interactions with others, and solitude was found to be particularly helpful. This may relate to reducing a tendency for rumination, which is implicated in the links between loneliness and depression (Luo et al., 2025). These findings have implications for the design of psychological interventions, including those accessed online (Eccles and Qualter, 2021; Pearce et al., 2021). This is particularly important given that most interventional work has tended not to focus on young people (Hansen et al., 2024). Many respondents had found ways to improve their experience of solitude as a life skill that helped them prevent and overcome loneliness. There is evidence that helping lonely individuals reframe solitude as a positive experience can improve their well-being (Rodriguez et al., 2025b), and this may be a promising future direction for interventional research. Our study did not emphasise community-level interventions to address loneliness in young people, likely due to mode of questioning, but there is some evidence to support community approaches (Osborn et al., 2021). Integrating the suggestions from our study into community-level interventions may be a way to prepare young people for periods of life when some solitude is inevitable, particularly around key transitions. There are policy precedents for this in schools through the provision of social emotional learning programs for use in preschool, as well as schools providing a means of detecting loneliness and creating more binding communities for young people (Goldman et al., 2024). It is also important to consider policy initiatives regarding place, given that features of the areas in which young people grow up are likely to influence their loneliness (DCMS, 2023), particularly in relation to walkability and public transport accessibility (Bower et al., 2023). Local authorities should consider what improvements they can offer with respect to activities identified by young people in this study as important for addressing loneliness, including getting fit. Providing safe spaces where people can spend time alone in nature may also be important in addressing wellbeing and loneliness (Petersen et al., 2021).

Our empirical findings make a contribution to models of coping in relation to loneliness. Cognitive discrepancy approaches conceptualise loneliness as arising from a perceived gap between desired and actual social relationships (Perlman and Peplau, 1981). The prominence in our data of strategies such as reframing self-perceptions, adjusting expectations, and challenging negative beliefs is consistent with this framework, highlighting that loneliness is shaped not only by objective social circumstances, but also by subjective appraisal. In addition, evolutionary theory conceptualises loneliness as an adaptive signal motivating individuals to restore social connections, but one that can also heighten sensitivity to social threat and promote maladaptive social cognitions when prolonged (Cacioppo et al., 2006; Cacioppo and Cacioppo, 2018). This perspective helps to explain both the meta-cognitive awareness evident in participants' reflections and the reported concerns about stigma, masking, and negative evaluation by others.

More recent integrative accounts emphasise that loneliness emerges from dynamic interactions between cognitive processes, interpersonal behaviours, and broader social-contextual factors (e.g., opportunities for connection and cultural meanings attached to loneliness). Goldman et al. (2025) synthesise those perspectives, highlighting that loneliness is best understood as a multi-level construct involving reciprocal influences between internal representations of the self and others, behavioural responses to social environments, and structural or societal conditions. The range of solutions described by young people in our study, including cognitive reframing, efforts to build or maintain relationships, and recognition of stigma, maps closely onto this multi-level conceptualisation. Notably, the positive reappraisal of solitude observed in our sample extends these theoretical accounts by illustrating how time spent alone may not be experienced as discrepant or aversive when it is interpreted as meaningful or self-enhancing. This supports emerging theoretical distinctions between loneliness and solitude and underscores the importance of cognitive interpretation in determining whether aloneness is experienced as distressing or beneficial.

5. Conclusions

Our thematic analysis of free text data from UK-based 16–18 year olds summarised the strategies they favoured in preventing and mitigating loneliness, whether through connecting with others or learning to savour time spent alone. Their responses also conveyed the distress they experience in coping with loneliness at a critical stage of identity development, compounded by stigma. Their suggestions provide valuable material with which to co-produce self-help guidance for young people on how to tackle loneliness and review the design of existing formal strategies, whether intrapersonal strategies (e.g. therapy that changes thinking and behaviour), interpersonal strategies (e.g. improving social skills), or social strategies (e.g. enhancing social support, and providing opportunities for social contact).

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CRediT authorship contribution statement

Anna Hall: Conceptualization, Methodology, Project administration, Formal analysis, Writing – original draft. **Manuela Barreto:** Funding acquisition, Investigation, Writing – review & editing. **Christina Victor:** Funding acquisition, Investigation, Writing – review & editing. **Pamela Qualter:** Funding acquisition, Investigation, Data curation, Conceptualization, Methodology, Writing – review & editing.

Alexandra Pitman: Conceptualization, Methodology, Formal analysis, Validation, Supervision, Writing – original draft.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare the following financial interests/personal relationships which may be considered as potential competing interests:

Pamela Qualter, Manuela Barreto, and Christina Victor report a relationship with the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) in that they gained funding for the BBC Loneliness Experiment. All other authors state that they have no conflict of interest.

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Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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