



# Existential isolation/ loneliness and depressive feelings: A developmental perspective

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# About me

- Studying Psychology at the University of Wisconsin – Whitewater
- Minor in Women's and Gender Studies
- Aim to get a PhD in Social Psychology and go into geriatric research and counseling





# Meaning Research Late Life Lab

- Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences of KU Leuven in Belgium
- MeReL team is led by prof. dr. Jessie Dezutter
- Part of the broader Meaning & Existence Research Center
- Focus on existential topics in advanced age:
  - Tiredness of life and existential anxiety
  - Geriatric depressive symptoms and existential distress
  - Meaning, existential loneliness & mental health in nursing home residents
  - Meaning in life and psychological functioning in dementia
  - Grace and forgiveness
- <https://www.jessiedezutter.be/>



# Existential isolation/ loneliness

Individual is aware of a fundamental separateness between themselves and the universe

Feels like an unbridgeable gap between oneself and others

Type of loneliness doesn't go away with personal connections or strong community ties

Most common in vulnerable populations: older adults, people with terminal or chronic illness, and those close to death

Feeling that no one else will truly understand the unique and subjective experiences one goes through

(Álvarez et al., 2023)



# EL/EI and Depression

- Positive correlations found between existential isolation and depression
  - Costello (2017) – CES-D, EIS – University students
  - Helm (2019) – BDI, EIS – University students
  - Helm et al. (2020) – BDI-II, EIS – University Students
- Existential isolation and loneliness interact to predict greater depression and suicide ideation – high loneliness + high existential isolation = highest depression (Helm 2019; Helm et al., 2020)
- Existential isolation positively associated with insecure attachment (Helm et al., 2020)

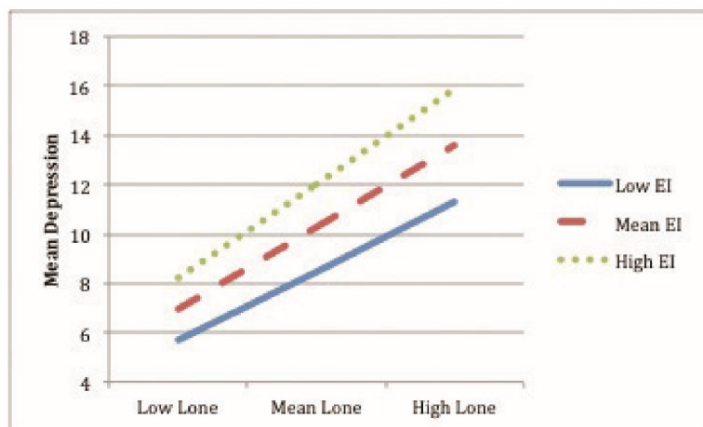
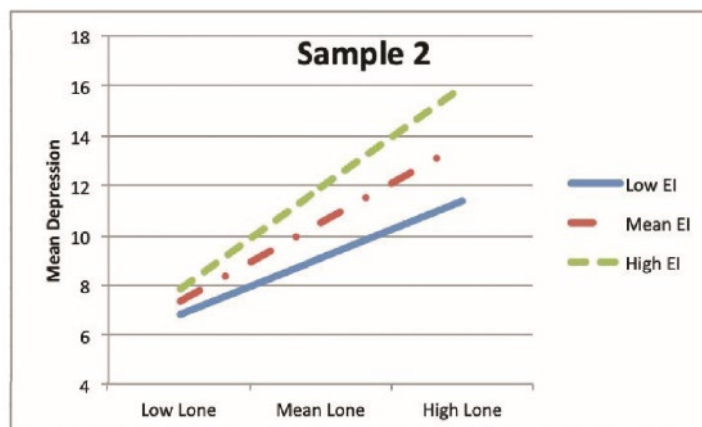


FIGURE 1. PROCESS output for EI × loneliness interaction predicting depression. EI Low =  $-1 SD$ , EI High =  $+1 SD$ . At low, mean, and high loneliness, High and Low levels of EI are significantly different from one another.



Figures from Helm et al., 2020

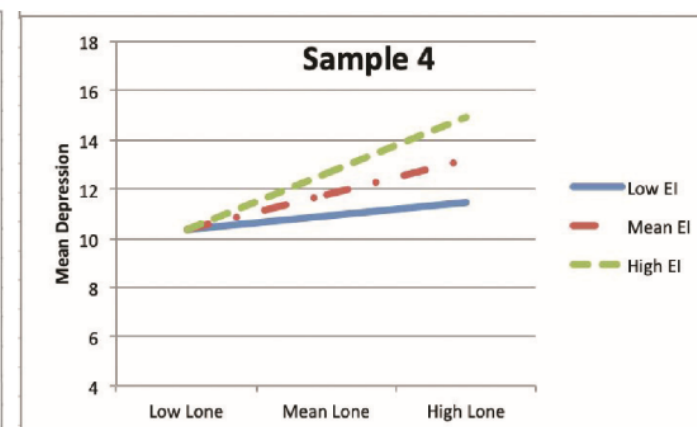
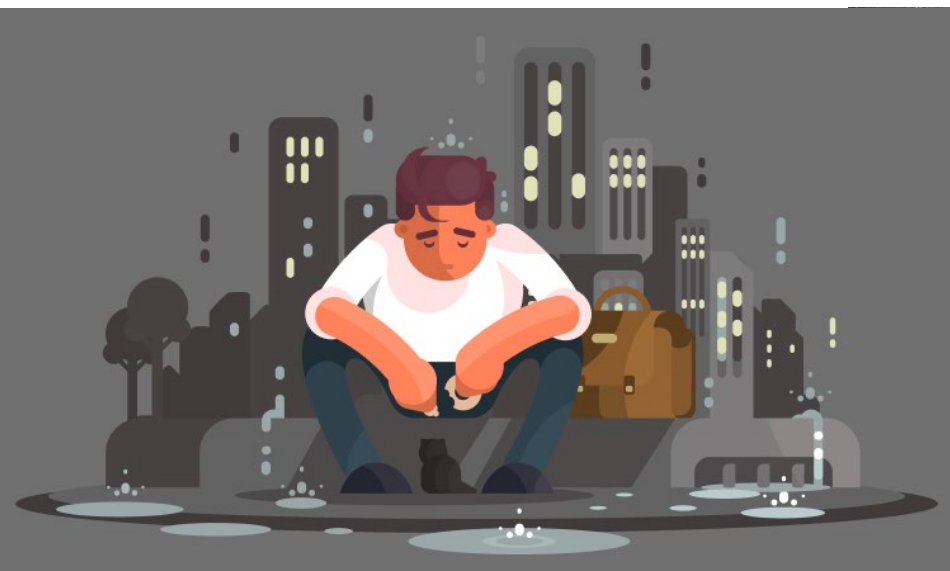


FIGURE 3. PROCESS output for existential isolation × loneliness interaction predicting depression for Samples 2 and 4. In both samples, at mean and high loneliness, varying levels of existential isolation are significantly different from one another.



# Next Steps

- Existential Loneliness and its relation to depressive symptoms in Emerging Adults vs Older adults
  - Literature review on developmental perspectives of Existential Loneliness and Depressive Disorders
  - Create a hypothesis on how Existential Loneliness and its relation to depression changes as individuals age
  - Create hypothesis on how different measurement scales and definitions impact relationship between depressive symptoms and Existential Loneliness
  - Conduct analysis to answer my hypothesis



# References

- Gil Álvarez, M., Haugan, G., Larsson, H., Saarelainen, S.-M., Duppen, D., & Dezutter, J. (2023). Mapping Existential Loneliness: A Scoping Review on Existential Loneliness/Isolation Conceptualizations and Operationalizations. *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, 0(0). <https://doi.org/10.1177/00221678231193780>
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