

Loneliness in Substance Use Disorder Patients

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BACKGROUND

- Loneliness is a widespread public health problem in the US, with demonstrated negative health effects including increased depressive symptoms, obesity, CVD, all-cause mortality and more.¹
- The connection between loneliness and ability for patients with substance use disorder to seek and stay in treatment was apparent well before the COVID-19 pandemic.²
- It is important to understand the current connection between the degree of loneliness people experience and the connection to and impact on their ability to seek out and stay in treatment in order to provide these patients with better resources.
- To our knowledge, few studies have addressed populations with substance use disorder who are struggling with loneliness to identify possible improvements in treatment.

OBJECTIVE

- The connection between loneliness and substance use disorder has not been studied in depth, and the COVID-19 pandemic laid bare the importance of community when that community and support is not available to these patients.¹
- Therefore, better understanding the association between loneliness and ability for patients with substance use disorder to stay in treatment will be critical to improve substance use disorder treatment.

METHODS

Design: Survey + Recorded Interview

Setting: Inpatient Substance Use Treatment Center

Participants: English-speaking patients, age 18 and older, admitted to an inpatient treatment facility for Substance Use Disorder

Instrument:

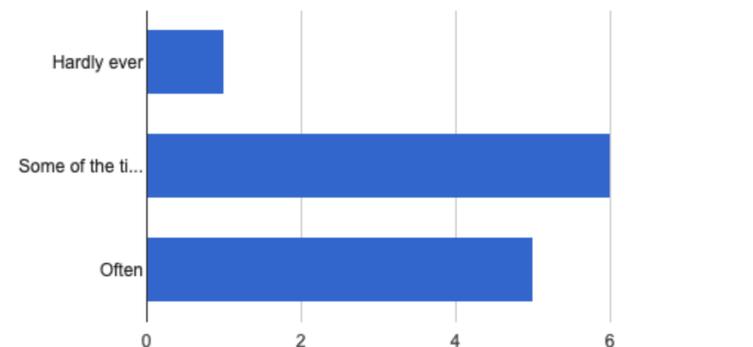
- An interview guide included questions regarding the history of substance use disorder, experience with relationships and loneliness, the impact of relationships and loneliness on treatment for SUD, and the impact the COVID-19 had on loneliness and substance use disorder.
- The survey had a validated survey about social support and loneliness, total time and number of times in treatment, what type and level of their substance use disorder and demographic information

Analysis: Qualitative data was analyzed using a rapid qualitative analysis looking for common words and themes and survey data was analyzed using REDcap

RESULTS

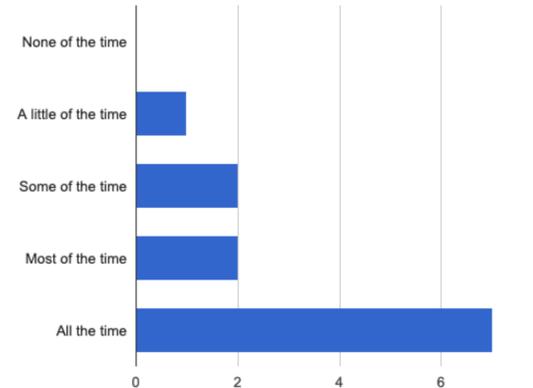
- **Demographics:**
Male: 67% Female: 33%
Ethnicity: 100% White
Relationship Status: 41% Single
Employment Status: 41% Unemployed
Unique aspects of our population: High rate of depression, insomnia and most people are being treated for first time

Figure 1. Isolation in SUD patients



RESULTS (cont'd)

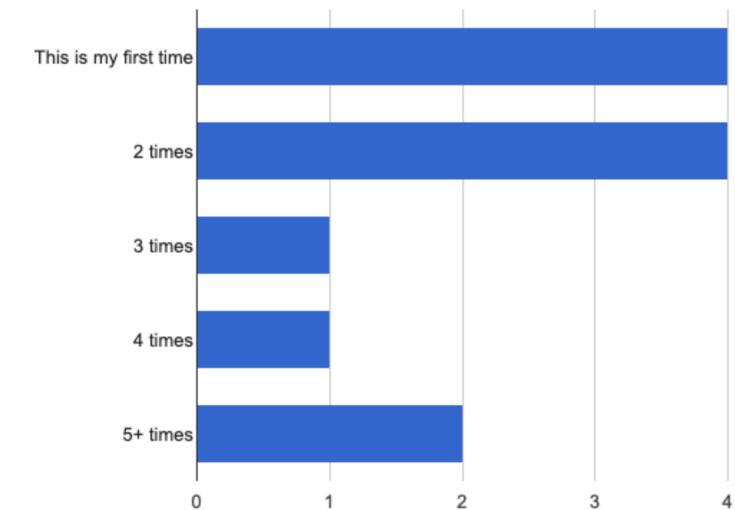
Figure 2. Social Support in SUD patients



Preliminary Common Themes from Interviews:

- 1. Many patients manage loneliness with substances**
- "The feeling that loneliness brings is very easily filled by substance abuse"
- The need for connection is often diminished by substance use, and brought back with sobriety
- 2. The struggle of having lack of purpose was exacerbated during the COVID-19 pandemic**
- Some participants discussed being socially isolated before pandemic, all discussed increased isolation during pandemic
- Many discussed increased "downtime" or feeling of a "void"
- COVID quarantine resulted in increased isolation and boredom which increased substance use
- 3. Impact of COVID-19 pandemic on substance use**
- A majority of participants report that addiction worsened during COVID
- 4. Importance of making connection**
- Many reported lack of functional relationships (partners)
- Many push away friends during active addiction
- Need people who understand what addiction is to help with loneliness
- Negative influence of others with addiction, and positive influence of sober community
- "Connection is the opposite of addiction"

Figure 3. # of times in SUD Treatment



CONCLUSIONS

- "Connection is the opposite of addiction"
- Access to in-person access to a sober community is extremely important to prevent relapse in SUD patients
- The experiences of loneliness were surprisingly similar across all SUD inpatients, regardless of age and time in treatment, particularly during pandemic
- Interview analysis showed that either loneliness was a precipitant of SUD, worsened by lack of purpose/"downtime", but also loneliness can be a result of their isolating addiction.
- Loneliness needs to be considered an important factor in SUD and the treatment of substance use disorder, and early interventions may prevent future relapses

NEXT STEPS

- Data analysis to look at association between loneliness and social support, associations between social support, AA meetings, and confidence in their recovery

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