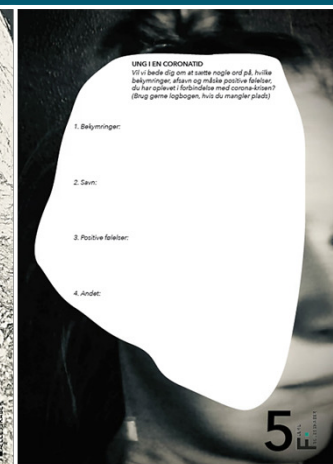
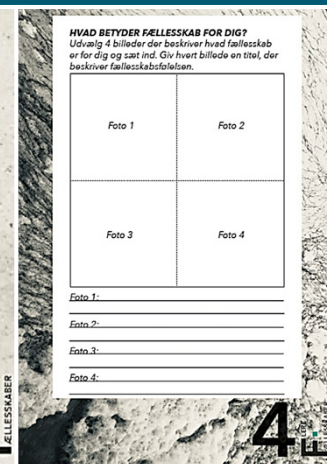
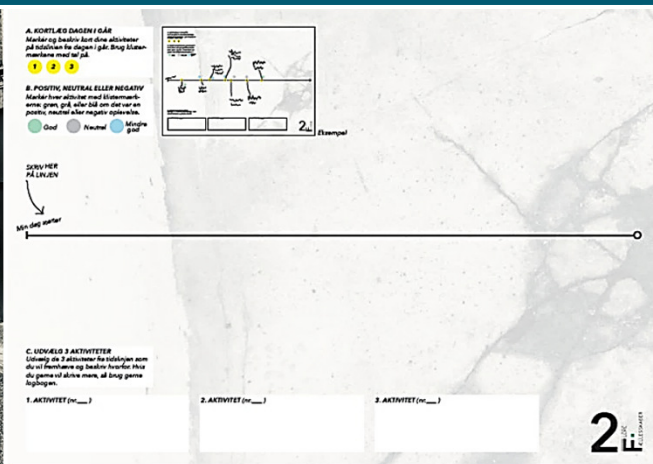




Loneliness in young adults: Experiences in the transition to adulthood - A qualitative study

Berit Kjærside Nielsen, Lise Arnth Nielsen, Mathias Lasgaard





Is loneliness always a problem?



- Loneliness can function as a psychological warning signal that motivates people to seek connection (Hawkley & Cacioppo, 2010)
- However, prolonged loneliness can lead to a negative spiral, making it difficult to restore social connections



Understanding loneliness



A personal perception of a mismatch between desired and actual social relationships

(Peplau & Perlman, 1982)

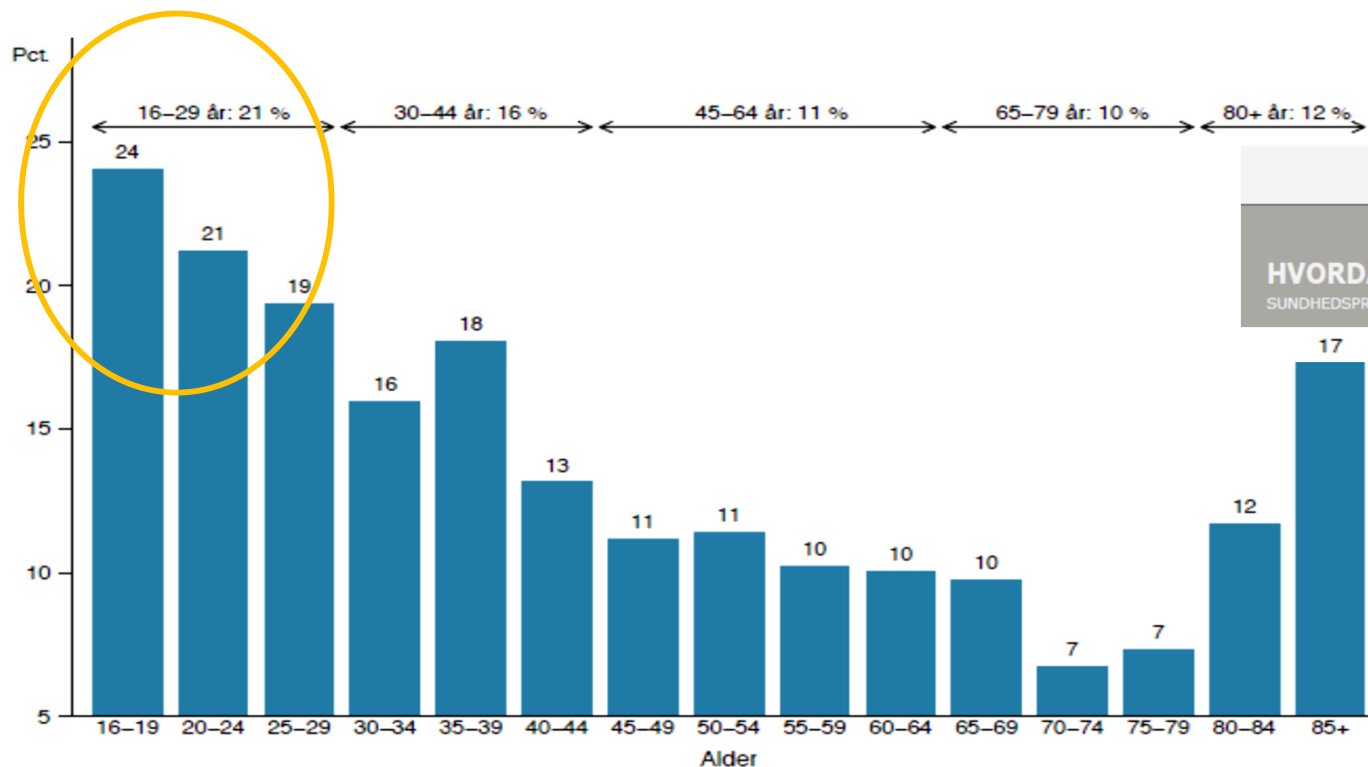


Loneliness follows a U-shaped age curve

- Highest among young adults and older adults (Lasgaard et al., 2016)

Figur 8.15

Andel ensomme – histogram, der viser fordelingen på 5-årsintervaller



Berit Kjærside Nielsen



Emerging adulthood

A time for:

- Identity exploration
- Instability
- Self-focus
- Feeling in-between
- Possibilities



John Benson / Flickr

(Arnett, 2000)



Loneliness in emerging adulthood: A qualitative study using cultural probes and in-depth interviews

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ABSTRACT

Background: Loneliness has become a great public health concern in the Western world, with emerging adults being particularly vulnerable. Prolonged loneliness in emerging adults is associated with poor mental health such as symptoms of depression and anxiety that may have negative implications for health and well-being in later life.

Aim: To explore and gain a deeper understanding of how loneliness develops over time and how it is experienced by emerging adults in their everyday life.

To gain a deeper understanding of how loneliness arises and how young adults experience and articulate loneliness in their everyday lives

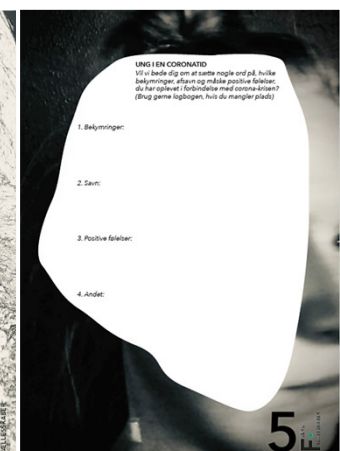
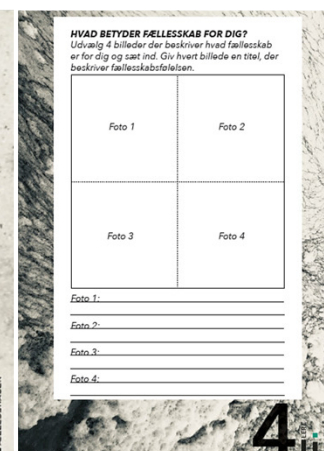
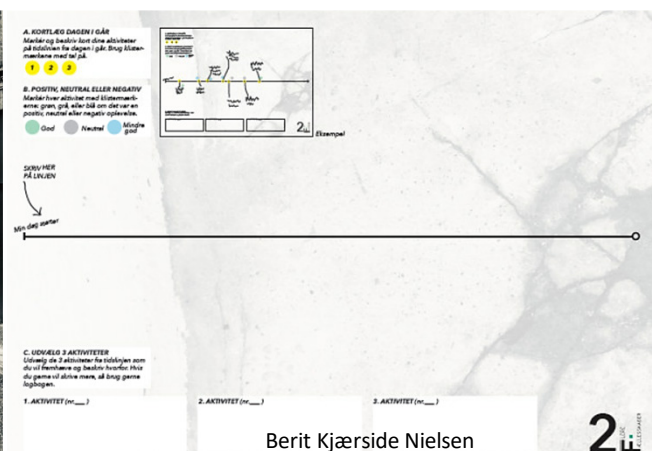
primary types of loneliness, 2) The interplay between low self-esteem, intrusive thoughts, and mental health in shaping loneliness, and 3) The duality of coping strategies.

Conclusion: The findings from this qualitative study offer in-depth insights into the experience of loneliness among emerging adults, highlighting its multifaceted nature and interplay with mental health. Participants' narratives revealed a duality of coping strategies, where engaging in distracting activities provided temporary relief but perpetuated long-term loneliness, and attempts to reconnect with others were sometimes hindered by



The cultural probe

- An approach to capturing experiences of loneliness beyond spoken language
- It allows participants to express their experiences in unique ways
- Offers a more nuanced picture of the contexts in which they live
- Particularly useful when researching sensitive topics like loneliness





If you were to show someone what loneliness looks like to you, what would you photograph at home? or when you are around others?

Take a moment to imagine it!



”

*I especially feel the lack of a
close social circle when I have
no one to share the joy of
getting a dog with...*

(Loneliness when I'm at home)



”

It symbolizes a place, where the only thing you can hear is your own echo when you speak, and otherwise only your own footsteps. It's like being completely alone in the world. There is no one thinking about me, no one noticing that I exist, and if I suddenly weren't here anymore, then no one would notice.

(Loneliness when I'm around others)



‘Walking with Vera’

- A traveling exhibition based on the rich data from cultural probes



<https://youtu.be/E98hbNqPILk?si=bRP5dotEQHB4DJjr>

↑
Or copy link



Participants

- 21 young adults aged 18–25 years
- 3 men and 18 women
- Half of them live with others
- More than half report current or past mental health challenges (self-reported)

Berit Kjærside Nielsen



Self-portrait task

- Participants “dressed” a blank figure with stickers (clothes, shoes, accessories)
- Completed the prompt: “To me, loneliness is...”
 - Described feeling disconnected - even when not alone
 - Expressed invisibility, emotional absence, and longing for recognition
 - Highlighted how facades in social situations often led to deeper disconnection





Unpacking loneliness: methods and findings

Themes	The many faces of loneliness	The interplay between low self-esteem, intrusive thoughts, and mental health	The duality of coping strategies
Sub-themes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The hidden dimensions of social exclusion and bullying • Life interrupted • Disconnected in a connected world 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Trapped in self-doubt • Labelled and lonely (Mental health) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reconnecting with others • Distracting activities

Loneliness in the transition to adulthood

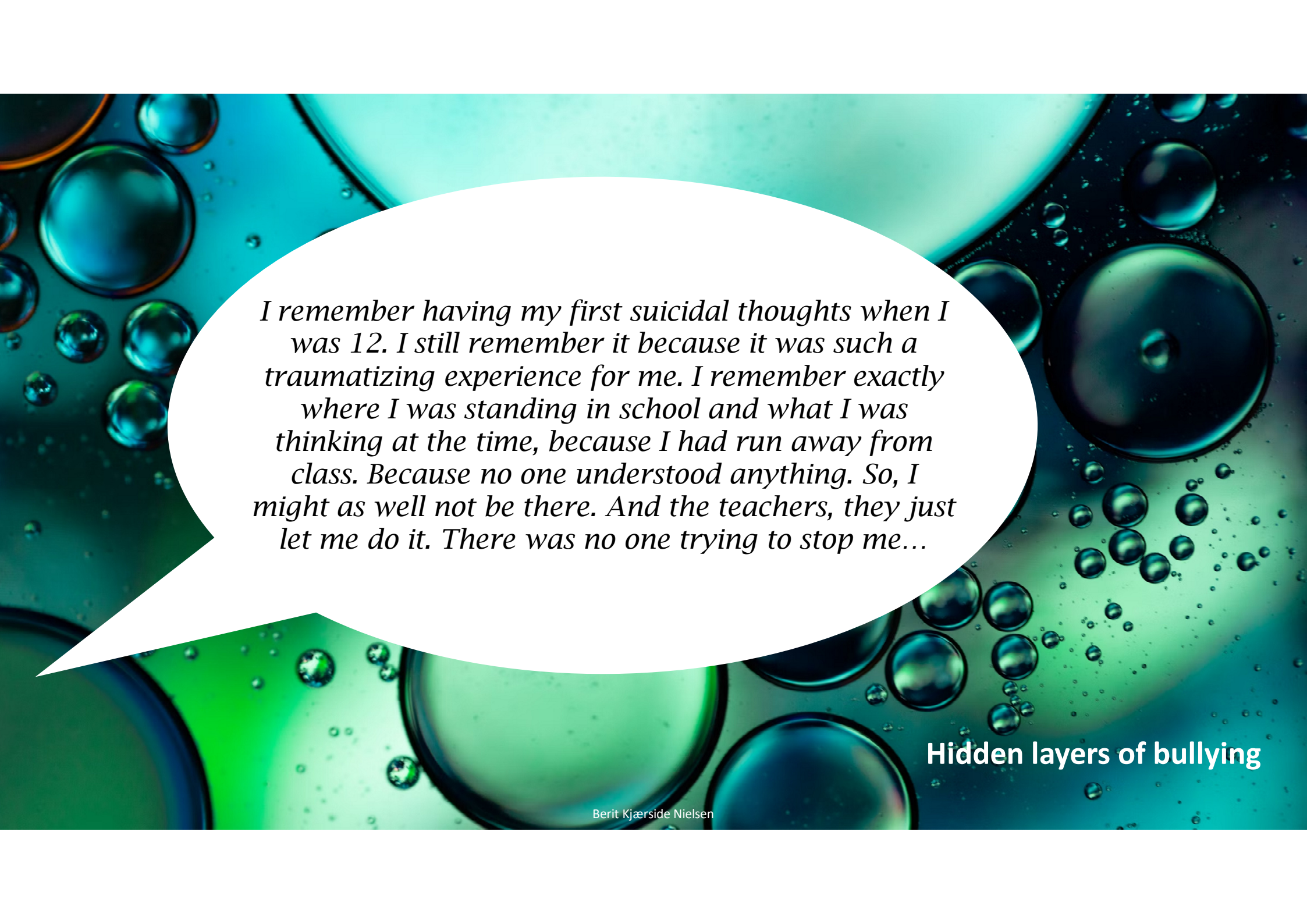




The many faces of loneliness

- Early life experiences like bullying, family difficulties, illness, and frequent moves were strong contributing factors to loneliness
- Social exclusion during school years led to low self-esteem and reinforced feelings of loneliness
- Many participants struggled to form meaningful relationships and felt socially disconnected as young adults

Themes	The many faces of loneliness
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I remember having my first suicidal thoughts when I was 12. I still remember it because it was such a traumatizing experience for me. I remember exactly where I was standing in school and what I was thinking at the time, because I had run away from class. Because no one understood anything. So, I might as well not be there. And the teachers, they just let me do it. There was no one trying to stop me...

Hidden layers of bullying



When life is interrupted

I grew up with my mother, who has schizophrenia. It was a very turbulent childhood. I was isolated with her, changed schools and kindergartens, had few friends and never long-lasting relationships because my mother broke them for me. This has followed me into adulthood; I find it very hard to maintain relationships. I can form them but struggle to keep them.



*It was also in some youth groups where
you met one evening a week... But I just
never got into the community. I just came
and felt like I was sitting in a corner alone
and being a bit invisible and then went
home again.*

Alone in a connected world




The interplay between low self-esteem, intrusive thoughts, and mental health

- Low self-esteem, negative thoughts, and poor mental health often created a self-reinforcing cycle that deepened loneliness
- Many participants overanalyzed social situations, making it hard to participate naturally
- Mental health issues and diagnoses reinforced feelings of otherness and social isolation

The interplay between low self-esteem, intrusive thoughts, and mental health

- Trapped in self-doubt
 - Labelled and lonely
- (Mental health)



I think a lot about everything, including what I say to other people. So sometimes, even though I feel like talking to someone I don't know, I overthink it and worry that I might say something wrong. As a result, the conversation either shifts to a different topic or I decide not to say anything at all.

Trapped in self-doubt

Berit Kjaerside Nielsen



Between diagnosis and loneliness

The hardest thing for me, especially after I got my diagnosis, has always been making friends. There aren't many people who can relate to it, or who supports you or think it's something they want to deal with.




The duality of coping

- Participants used different coping strategies. Some provided positive, lasting support, while others gave only temporary relief or even reinforced isolation
 - Reaching out to others could have long-term benefits, but fear of rejection often led to withdrawing
- Online communities and creative activities were highlighted as important safe spaces and sources of support

The duality of coping strategies


- Reconnecting with others
- Distracting activities



When I get a small hint of loneliness, it quickly becomes overwhelming. It's like a domino effect. I withdraw because everything feels dangerous. You don't want to be rejected or criticized, so I take control and pull away myself.

Reconnecting with community

Berit Kjaerside Nielsen



In the online gaming world, you can get angry when you lose or really happy when you win — but it's also the shared experience of doing something big together. In the clan I'm part of, when we defeat a massive boss, that sense of community is amazing.

I once texted a girl, "Sorry, I just can't handle this whole thing of replying to messages, but I like that you write to me." I wrote that to a person, and it was really nice.

I joined Ventilen and have started reaching out when I feel lonely.



What does this mean going forward?

Understanding the roots of loneliness

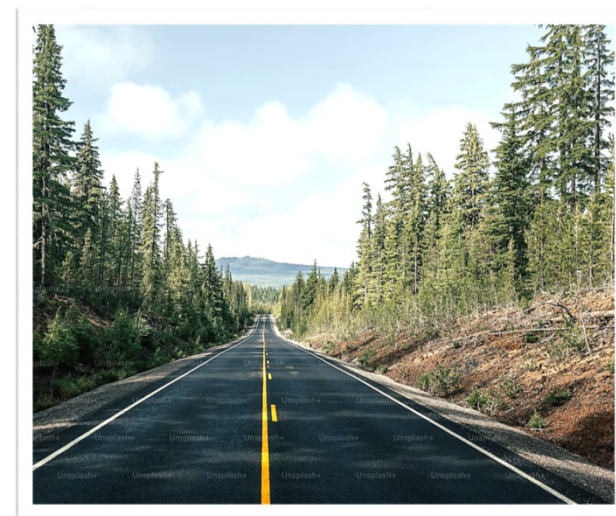
- Loneliness can be part of the emotional landscape of emerging adulthood
- Early experiences like bullying or exclusion may leave lasting traces
- Supporting identity development early on might make a difference

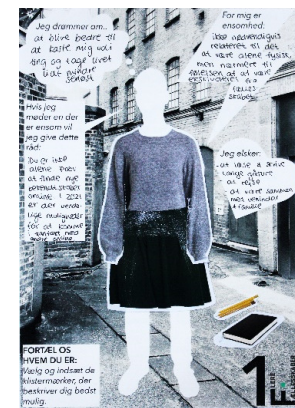
Challenging societal norms

- Rethink expectations of confidence, independence, and social ease
- Make room for other ways of being
- Create spaces where young people feel seen and allowed to be vulnerable

Engaging with the digital world

- Social media can offer connection, but also deepen isolation
- Hold space for both realities





**Many stories. One shared message.
Loneliness deserves to be heard.**

