



## THE PHENOMENON OF LONELINESS AND THE PSYCHOSOCIAL PROFILE OF UNMARRIED ADULTS

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### ABSTRACT

This article examines how loneliness manifests among unmarried adults and how cultural context (Uzbekistan vs Western societies) shapes their psychosocial profiles. We define loneliness as a subjective distress when social needs are unmet and review global trends showing that single individuals often report higher loneliness than married ones. In Western settings, singles often forge broad social networks and report personal growth whereas in traditional Uzbek culture unmarried adults (especially women) face strong marriage norms and stigma outline factors like social support, stigma, and health outcomes, citing psychological studies that report unmarried adults may have more depression and social isolation. The review highlights differences: Western singles often value independence and maintain extensive, while Uzbek singles may rely primarily on family networks but feel societal pressure. Concluding, we find that in collectivist Uzbekistan the pressure to marry and strong family-centric values contrast with the more individualistic West, leading to distinct experiences of loneliness and well-being among unmarried adults. These insights underscore the importance of cultural context in understanding singlehood and loneliness.

### KEYWORDS

Loneliness; psychosocial profile; social support; stigma; Uzbekistan; Western culture; mental health; marriage norms.

### INTRODUCTION

Loneliness is a universal human experience characterized by a distressing feeling that one's social needs are not being met. It is distinguished from mere solitude: individuals can live alone without feeling lonely, or feel lonely in a crowd. Globally, loneliness is increasingly recognized as a public health concern. For example, Gallup reports that 23% of people worldwide feel lonely much of the day. In the U.S., a recent survey found 30% of adults felt lonely weekly, with 10% lonely daily; notably, single adults were almost twice as likely as married adults to report frequent loneliness (39% vs. 22%). [1] These data suggest that unmarried status is a key factor associated with loneliness. This article reviews research on the psychosocial characteristics of unmarried adults, comparing Western and Uzbek contexts. We explore how cultural norms influence social support, stigma, mental health, and overall well-being. In Western societies, delayed marriage and singlehood have grown common - for instance, over half of U.S. adults - and much recent research highlights both challenges and strengths of single life. In contrast, Uzbekistan is a collectivist society where early marriage is normative (average marriage age 22 for women) and remaining single is socially unusual. We compare findings from psychology



and sociology to draw a cross-cultural picture of unmarried adults' experiences of loneliness and psychosocial functioning.[2]

Loneliness can be defined broadly as a painful feeling of social disconnection. Psychologists Hawkley and Cacioppo emphasize that loneliness arises from a perceived shortfall in the quality or quantity of relationships. It is often described as the "social equivalent of hunger" - a biological signal to seek connection. Chronic loneliness affects up to 15-30% of people and has serious health effects: increased risk of cardiovascular disease, depression, poor sleep, and even mortality. U.S. Surgeon General Murthy famously noted that loneliness can be as harmful as smoking 15 cigarettes a day. Psychologist Bella DePaulo emphasizes that many single people thrive. Single adults often invest in careers, community, and broad social ties. For example, single Americans value meaningful work more than married people and maintain closer connections with parents, siblings, friends, neighbors and coworkers. "When people marry, they become more insular," notes DePaulo. Studies also show lifelong singles can exhibit strong self-determination and continued personal growth. Indeed, a study found that among singles, greater self-sufficiency was linked to fewer negative emotions.[3] In surveys of older adults, unmarried individuals (whether cohabiting, dating, or single) often report lower well-being than married ones, but older cohabiters and even daters can have mental health comparable to marrieds. In general, however, Western research finds singles are "at risk" of poorer well-being relative to married people, though not inevitably so. The key insight is that social support, rather than marital status per se, underlies much of this difference: singles may lack spousal support but often compensate with friends or family. In fact, in Western contexts singles often cultivate strong friendship networks and community ties. Common psychosocial factors for unmarried adults include:

**Social Support:** Singles may rely more on peers and extended family (which in some studies leads to richer social networks), but lack inbuilt spousal support. Many engage in community or friendship groups to offset loneliness.

**Emotional Health:** Unmarried adults report more loneliness on average; e.g., U.S. data show 39% of singles felt lonely weekly vs. 22% of marrieds. They also have somewhat higher rates of depression/anxiety according to some studies.

**Personal Growth:** Many singles enjoy greater freedom and self-determination. They often focus on personal goals and report significant self-development.

**Life Satisfaction:** Findings are mixed; selection effects imply the happiest people marry, but when controlling for that, differences shrink. Some polls find singles as happy as marrieds once other factors are controlled.

**Stigma and Identity:** In individualistic West this is minor, but older never-married adults sometimes feel misunderstood (as Erikson's intimacy vs isolation stage suggests), though those who embrace singlehood often cite meaningful, self-directed lives. Multiple surveys confirm unmarried status is associated with higher loneliness. Globally, Gallup found that 28% of non-married adults reported feeling lonely "a lot" versus 19% of married/partnered adults. In the U.S., single adults nearly twice as likely as married adults to feel lonely weekly. This aligns with the general idea that partnership provides a buffer against loneliness, whereas singles must rely on broader support networks. Nevertheless, Western singles often compensate by forming diverse social connections, which can mitigate loneliness for many.[4]

Uzbekistan is a predominantly Muslim, collectivist society where family and marriage are central social pillars. Women typically marry young (average age ~22), and the state actively promotes marriage (divorce rates are very low due to social/political pressure). Young Uzbek

women are often raised with the expectation that their “real home” will be their husband’s family, not their natal home. In fact, as one Uzbek source notes, daughters are often called “guests in their own homes,” reflecting that marriage is viewed as destiny. From childhood, girls are socialized to prioritize marriage and motherhood: maintaining a happy marriage is seen as the mark of a “modern woman,” and society teaches girls that their main role is to build and sustain the family. This cultural backdrop means that unmarried adulthood is unusual. Empirical data on Uzbek singles are scarce, but by analogy to neighboring countries and research in other Muslim contexts, we can infer significant effects: In collectivist, family-centered cultures, never-married adults often face social disapproval and isolation. Studies from Iran (culturally similar) report that single women experience loneliness, low self-esteem, and life dissatisfaction, and perceive stigma and exclusion. Similarly, research on older never-married women in the Philippines (another family-oriented society) found negative perceptions and “social consequences” for being unmarried. It is likely that Uzbek singles, especially women beyond prime marriage age, encounter analogous pressures - feeling they deviate from the norm, and thus facing psychosocial burdens. **Family Structure:** Many Uzbek families are multigenerational and patriarchal. Unmarried adults typically remain with parents, which provides material support but can also reinforce dependence. There is little social infrastructure (e.g., independent living support) for single adults, especially women. **Social Expectations and Stigma:** Cultural and religious norms emphasize virginity and marriage; single adults may be viewed as “lost” or problematic if beyond a certain age. The BMC study notes in Iran that singles may feel “they were a burden” and “refuse to be seen” in community, leading to isolation. This stigma likely applies in Uzbekistan, though systematic studies are needed.

**Marriage Norms:** Uzbekistan’s laws and customs (e.g., joint civil/Muslim weddings, expensive celebratory obligations) create high economic and social incentives to marry. Couples often co-reside with extended family, and unmarried adults may lack the economic independence to set up separate households.

**Gender Roles:** Uzbek women have traditionally been discouraged from and have stringent roles within marriage (e.g., strict obedience to in-laws). On the other hand, these expectations mean women often perceive marriage as desirable, reducing the “choice” to remain single.

**Individualism vs. Collectivism:** Western cultures tend to value individual choice and autonomy; singlehood is often seen as a valid lifestyle choice. In Uzbekistan, collective norms dictate marriage as an expected life step. Consequently, Western singles often frame their status positively (pursuing careers, friendship, self-growth), while Uzbek singles may experience their status as involuntary or anomalous.

**Social Support Networks:** Western unmarried adults frequently build robust social networks of friends and colleagues. In contrast, Uzbek singles primarily rely on family (parents, siblings) for social support. This can be double-edged: family support may be strong, but there can also be pressure and lack of peer socialization. For instance, an unmarried Uzbek woman living at home may have fewer opportunities to connect with peers than a Western single in a metropolitan area.

**Stigma and Self-Perception:** In the West, stigma for being single is generally low, especially among younger adults and in urban areas. Conversely, in Uzbekistan an unmarried adult (especially a woman over mid-20s) may face negative labeling (e.g., “old girl” or social pariah). Such stigma can damage self-esteem, as noted in Asian studies where single women internalize being seen as less-than-ideal. **Emotional Outcomes:** Western singles often report pride in self-

sufficiency, yet they may still face loneliness. U.S. surveys show single adults with higher loneliness rates, but also note that single people find many positive life aspects. In Uzbekistan, data are lacking, but qualitative reports from similar Muslim societies suggest higher risk of depression and anxiety among involuntarily single people. The Uzbek context of early marriage means that “leftover” adults may struggle more than their Western counterparts, for whom later marriage is common and socially accepted.

**Changing Trends:** Like much of the world, Uzbekistan has seen a slight decline in marriage rates post-1990, possibly leading to a growing unmarried cohort. However, societal change is slower than in the West. In Western societies, an “unmarried norm” has emerged, whereas in Uzbekistan the traditional model still dominates. As the BMC study notes, even in Asia the number of single women is rising, but cultural acceptance lags. Overall, the psychosocial profile of single adults differs: Western singles often report extensive external social ties and personal freedom, whereas Uzbek singles may have strong family ties but carry greater loneliness and stigma. Both groups risk social isolation, but the sources differ (voluntary solitude vs. cultural marginalization).

Another famous scientist, Austrian psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud, emphasized in his research: Marriage and family are connected to a person's psychological experiences in childhood, and these relationships play an important role in determining a person's mental health or conflicts.[5]

Another psychological factor is the increased demand for relationships and the fear of unsuccessful marriage. Today's young people are becoming more careful in choosing their life partners. The view that “only if there are real feelings, deep psychological compatibility and mutual respect, one should enter into marriage” is becoming increasingly popular among them. This demand also affects the duration of relationships. The period of free dating - that is, when young people meet for a longer period of time before marriage to test each other and anticipate possible problems in life - is becoming commonplace. Another factor that has increased such caution among young people is the statistical data on the high number of divorces in families built after short dating. According to the report of the Committee for Family and Women of the Republic of Uzbekistan for 2022-2023, 36% of divorced couples were those whose premarital dating period was less than 6 months [18]. This situation is increasing the awareness of young people about the possibility of divorce and strengthening their conscious approach to marriage. The high demand of young people for starting a family and the fear of unsuccessful marriages indicate that the culture of relationships in society is becoming more complex. This requires the need to take into account new psychological criteria in political, religious and cultural approaches to marriage issues.[6]

## CONCLUSION

Loneliness among unmarried adults is a complex phenomenon shaped by cultural, economic, and personal factors. Globally and in the U.S., singles report higher loneliness and lower well-being than married counterparts, yet many also thrive on strong friendships and autonomy. Against the background of changing values in society, the approach to marriage among young people is taking place on the basis of a conscious, planned and independent decision. This, on the one hand, serves to qualitatively strengthen the institution of marriage, and on the other hand, requires the introduction of mechanisms by the state aimed at strengthening



psychological and social preparation. The increase in the level of education, especially among women, directly affects the age of marriage. This process also plays an important role in renewing the role of women in society and strengthening gender balance

In Uzbekistan, the cultural emphasis on early marriage and family roles suggests that remaining single (especially involuntarily) may carry substantial psychosocial costs, including stigma and social exclusion. Psychologists emphasize that loneliness is not inevitable for singles, but mitigating it requires broad social support. Interventions might include community programs and destigmatization efforts. Our review finds that while unmarried adults in the West increasingly view singlehood positively, in traditional Uzbek society being single is still largely seen as "abnormal". Future research should empirically assess loneliness in Uzbekistan's unmarried population and compare it to Western benchmarks. Recognizing the cultural context is key: the "psychosocial profile" of singlehood differs greatly between a society where marriage is compulsory and one where it is optional. Ultimately, addressing loneliness among singles will require both policy attention and cultural change in both contexts.

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