



Communication and Marketing Department  
Isebe loThungelwano neNtengiso  
Kommunikasie en Bemarkingsdepartement

Private Bag X3, Rondebosch 7701, South Africa  
Welgelegen House, Chapel Road Extension, Rosebank, Cape Town  
Tel: +27 (0) 21 650 5427/5428/5674 Fax: +27 (0) 21 650 5628

[www.uct.ac.za](http://www.uct.ac.za)

**14 May 2025**

## **Alarming levels of loneliness found among South African adolescents – UCT study**

A new study conducted by researchers from the University of Cape Town (UCT) revealed that loneliness is highly prevalent among South African adolescents. The study found that more than 90% of participants experienced either moderate or severe levels of loneliness, regardless of their HIV status.

Funded by the National Institutes of Health (NIH), the study found that loneliness rates were nearly the same among adolescents living with HIV and those who are uninfected, challenging the assumption that HIV status alone causes emotional isolation in young people.

The study identified key risk factors for loneliness – including being female, having symptoms of depression, and a history of trauma exposure. Loneliness was also strongly linked to mental health issues such as anxiety and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), as well as negative coping styles and reduced psychological resilience.

Titled "[Loneliness in South African youth and its association with HIV infection, substance use and mental health](#)", the study was led by Dr Gabriella Stein, a psychiatry registrar in the [Department of Psychiatry and Mental Health](#) at UCT.

"My interest in adolescent mental health inspired the study. There is very little information on loneliness in adolescents in sub-Saharan Africa, especially in those living with HIV," said Stein.

Stein and her colleagues conducted a cross-sectional, descriptive, exploratory study involving youth aged 17 to 24 years, which included both perinatally HIV-infected (PHIV) participants and those who were HIV-negative. They assessed levels of loneliness and its associations with depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), trauma exposure, coping strategies, resilience and substance use. Among the 122 youth surveyed, 92.6% reported experiencing a moderate to high level of loneliness.

Reporting the findings in the [International Journal of Adolescence and Youth](#), Stein noted that the high prevalence of loneliness was unexpected. "It was surprising that use of substances was not associated with loneliness and that those with HIV did not experience more loneliness than those who were HIV uninfected," she said.

Based on the results, Stein said that group and peer-based interventions that promote social connection and a sense of belonging; and address depression, anxiety and overall mental health should be strengthened and prioritised for adolescents.

***ENDS***

***Issued by: UCT Communication and Marketing Department***

**Ridovhona Mbulaheni**

Media Liaison and Monitoring Officer  
Communication and Marketing Department  
University of Cape Town  
Rondebosch  
Tel: (021) 650 2333  
Cell: (064) 905 3807  
Email: [ridovhona.mbulaheni@uct.ac.za](mailto:ridovhona.mbulaheni@uct.ac.za)  
Website: [www.uct.ac.za](http://www.uct.ac.za)