

УДК 159.9-053.6:37.013.42

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ALIENATION AND LONELINESS AMONG YOUTH – A WORKSHOP ON ESTABLISHING AND MAINTAINING PEER RELATIONSHIPS

Summary.

The article describes the course of psychoeducational workshops conducted by members of a student scientific association. The sessions were aimed at high school students and were designed to be interactive and integrative. This initiative emerged in response to needs identified by the teaching staff, particularly the difficulties in establishing and maintaining satisfying peer relationships, which are increasingly observed as a consequence of the growing phenomenon of loneliness among young people. These issues often lead to social isolation and decreased mental well-being. The main goal of the workshops was not only to expand participants' knowledge of interpersonal functioning, but also to develop communication skills, build trust, and strengthen a sense of belonging to a group. The workshops were attended by students from a psychology and pedagogy-focused class at Cardinal Wyszyński High School V in Opole. During the sessions, observations were made regarding how the students interacted, formed relationships, and behaved in group settings. The insights gathered constitute a valuable resource that may help optimize future educational and preventive initiatives targeted at young people.

Keywords: mental health; youth; psychoeducation; mental health promotion; workshops.

ВІДЧУЖЕННЯ ТА САМОТНІСТЬ СЕРЕД МОЛОДІ – ТРЕНІНГ ІЗ НАЛАГОДЖЕННЯ ТА ПІДТРИМКИ ВЗАЄМИН МІЖ ОДНОЛІТКАМИ

Анотація.

У статті описано перебіг психоосвітніх тренінгів, проведених членами студентського наукового товариства. Заняття були спрямовані на учнів старших класів і мали інтерактивний та інтегративний характер. Ініціатива виникла у відповідь на потреби, визначені педагогічним колективом, зокрема труднощі у встановленні та підтримці задовільних взаємин між однолітками, що дедалі частіше спостерігаються як наслідок зростання явища самотності серед молоді. Ці проблеми нерідко призводять до соціальної ізоляції та зниження психічного благополуччя. Головною метою тренінгів було не лише розширення знань учасників про міжособистісне функціонування, а й розвиток комунікативних навичок, формування довіри та зміцнення відчуття приналежності до групи. У тренінгах взяли участь учні класу з поглибленим вивченням психології та педагогіки Ліцею № V імені кардинала Стефана Вишинського (Ополе, Польща). Під час занять здійснювалися спостереження за тим, як учні взаємодіяли, формували взаємини та поводитися в групових ситуаціях. Отримані результати становлять цінний ресурс для оптимізації майбутніх освітніх і профілактичних ініціатив, спрямованих на молодь.

Ключові слова: психічне здоров'я; молодь; психоосвіта; промоція психічного здоров'я; тренінги.

Introduction. The need for belonging, manifested in a strong desire to form and maintain relationships with other people, is deeply rooted in human nature. It is fulfilled through establishing sufficiently frequent and long-lasting contacts that bring positive emotions and are based on care. The processes involved in forming and developing relationships are associated with positive emotions, whereas any disruptions in these processes (not only actual but also anticipated) carry negative consequences for well-being. Belonging is a genuine human need, and its lack of fulfillment is associated with negative consequences for both physical and mental health. Research shows that lonely individuals more often experience mental health disorders [1, p. 57–89].

For students, the peer group is of considerable importance, as emphasized by S. Korczyński [2, p. 89–110]. It provides young people with a sense of acceptance and community with others, which constitutes an important resource in difficult times. Feelings of rejection or isolation are among the most common stressors at this age. Difficulties in social functioning may lead to negative consequences for a child's socialization process and personality

development. Maladaptive behaviors and personality traits may emerge, such as low decisiveness, passivity, or lack of initiative.

Contact with others is important for young people, as is being part of a peer group. Conversely, the opposite state – loneliness – is associated with difficulties and isolation from others, and even certain forms of violence from the group. This may result in various mental health disorders as well as an aversive attitude toward school [3, p. 131–144].

Among the causes of loneliness in adolescents, alongside rejection by peers and insufficient social skills, difficulties in initiating and maintaining peer relationships can be identified. Loneliness is a phenomenon that should not be ignored in educational institutions, as it is associated with a range of negative consequences [4, p. 399–410]. K. Wasilewska-Ostrowska [5, p. 63–74] encourages undertaking various activities aimed at preventing loneliness, including organizing preventive meetings focused on this phenomenon. From this perspective, it seems fully justified to place emphasis on practicing and developing competencies related to building and maintaining social bonds among adolescents in order

to prevent the harmful consequences associated with loneliness.

Such initiatives, including organizing workshops for external groups, are also undertaken by the University of Opole. The University consists of twelve faculties and nineteen research institutes that cooperate with other institutional units, such as the Office for Research and Project Support, the Center for New Technologies, and the Academic Career Center, creating a modern, dynamic, and comprehensive academic and teaching center [6, p. 131–144]. The Psyche and Logos Student Scientific Association, operating within the Institute of Psychology, actively undertakes initiatives to promote mental health among young people by implementing various workshops and educational projects. The Association also focuses on popularizing psychology as a science and supporting the academic development of its members. It enables the expansion of knowledge and competencies through participation in research trips (e.g., to the Research Center in Bydgoszcz) and attendance at conferences, such as the conference “Quality of Life at Work and Beyond” organized by the Institute of Psychology of the University of Opole in 2024, or the Congress of Psychology Graduates and Students, in which members of the Association have participated twice since 2023. Additionally, students belonging to the Association have the opportunity to take part in specialist workshops conducted by experienced practitioners, such as workshops on systemic therapy.

A previous project organized by the Association was the “ŚwiadoMY” project, implemented as part of the “Rządźmy Się Sami” grant from the Sapere-Aude Foundation between November 24 and December 8, 2023. Among those involved were the authors of this article – Katarzyna Gumkowska, Emilia Pośpiech, Zofia Pulit, and Hanna Woźnica. The project aimed to draw attention to the deepening mental health crisis among young people and to develop soft skills. The workshops were attended by female students from a psychology and pedagogy profile class at Cardinal Wyszyński Upper Secondary School No. V in Opole, who participated in the proposed activities with great engagement.

The workshops were met with a very positive response, as evidenced by the school counsellor’s willingness to continue cooperation. This time, she requested similar activities to be conducted in a first-year class with an IT profile. In response to this demand, the authors of the article declared their readiness to continue cooperation with the school. Based on information provided by the school counsellor regarding a high level of social alienation and weak relationships within the class, the students decided to thoroughly familiarize themselves with the specifics of the situation in order to better tailor the scope and methodology of the planned activities to the students’ needs.

Aim of the workshops. The aim of this article is to demonstrate how important group belonging is for adolescents and how the problem of loneliness can be prevented through the organization of workshops.

With the transition from childhood to adolescence, interpersonal relationships outside the family circle begin to gain increasing importance. Initially, these relationships are homogeneous in terms of individual characteristics such as gender or ethnic background. Over time, however, this homogeneity decreases, and group members begin to differ from one another [7, p. 1447–1460]. The main goal of integration with peers is the desire to be accepted by them. Adolescents strive to gain popularity and a high social position, which translates into higher self-esteem and contributes to the formation of their identity. However, when such approval is not achieved, it may result in alienation. A rejected individual feels that there is no one who could provide support. Consequently, feelings of tension increase, as does aggression. Another possible reaction is apathy, which may give rise to destructive behaviors. Most often, however, alienated youth avoid activity, adopt an attitude of resignation, and perceive the surrounding world negatively [8, p. 61–73]. There is no single method that would completely prevent rejection among peer groups, but several strategies can be implemented to minimize the early stages of marginalization. An important factor is conducting interviews with students to identify the causes of alienation. It is also crucial to improve relationships between students, increase mutual acceptance, and foster peer integration [9, p. 3–9].

Course of the workshop sessions. The creation of the project began with an initial idea, which subsequently underwent modifications aimed at improving it so that it would best fulfill its purpose. The workshop method was chosen as the primary form of activity. Exercises were selected and appropriately tailored to the intended goal and the characteristics of the target group. Materials from several textbooks focusing on the design of psychoeducational activities for children and adolescents were used. The work was based on the book “*Psychological Games and Group Exercises*” and drew on knowledge and materials inspired by the authors’ participation in SST and ART training courses. A detailed plan was developed, including descriptions of the exercises, the time required for their implementation, and the objectives of each activity. At the final stage, the developed content was reviewed and approved by the academic supervisor, Dr. Ewelina Wojtarkowska-Forczek.

The project consisted of two meetings. The first focused on establishing interpersonal relationships in the school class as well as in other environments. The second addressed the maintenance and further development of existing social bonds. Each meeting lasted three class hours and took place during school hours at the University of Opole.

Workshop 1 “Establishing peer relationships”

The first of the planned workshops took place on May 20, 2024, in the building of the Institute of Psychology at the University of Opole and was led by Katarzyna Gumkowska and Zofia Pulit. Participants were initially briefed on the workshop schedule and organizational matters. The presenters and participants introduced themselves. Stickers and markers were used to create personalized business cards with their names. A written contract was then developed with the participants, which was then posted in the room. The proposed rules included ensuring mutual respect and safety, accepting diversity, and active participation. Additionally, it was agreed that participants would limit their cell phone use to better focus on integrating with their peers. Each student accepted the rules by signing the contract.

Then, the workshop proper began. The first exercise was titled “Who’s Like Me...” Participants were asked to come to the center of the circle and share an interest or characteristic, for example, “Who likes reading books, like me?” Those who identified with this statement were then asked to stand up and swap seats with the speaker. The person who didn’t find a free seat, due to a lack of a chair, had to say another thing, starting the sentence with “Who, like me...”. The goals of this exercise were to raise the group’s energy, identify similarities between participants, and familiarize themselves with public speaking.

The next exercise was “Find Someone Who...”, in which participants were instructed to prepare a card with three characteristics/attributes/similarities, which they then had to identify in other classmates. The condition was that this should always be a different person. After finding a similarity, the participant wrote down the name of the person in whom they found it. The exercise concluded with a discussion of its purpose, which was primarily to teach students to overcome the fear of interacting with new people, express their interests, and find common ground with other participants.

A short break followed by an exercise called “Guard and Inmate”, which aimed to boost the students’ energy. It also required quick reactions and the ability to interpret subtle facial cues from other players. The students paired up in the pairs they felt most comfortable with. They then formed a circle of chairs. One person in the pair sat in the circle as the inmate, and the other stood behind them, holding their hands behind their backs, as the guard. One chair was left empty, but a guard was also placed behind it. During the game, the guard behind the empty chair was tasked with “stealing” another inmate by gently winking at them. The guards in charge of the inmates had to react quickly enough (by touching their shoulder) to prevent the other inmate from getting up and moving to the person

who was causing the incitement. The final task of the workshop was creating posters. Participants were divided into groups, with the understanding that working in smaller teams could facilitate integration, which would be further strengthened by activities focused on achieving a common goal. Each team created a mind map under the theme “Establishing Relationships”. Participants wrote down their associations and thoughts, after which the groups presented their posters. A discussion ensued, during which participants and their facilitators discussed what establishing relationships meant to them and its importance. The exercise was designed to encourage reflection and develop creative thinking. It also aimed to create a safe and supportive space for sharing their opinions. After this activity, the first meeting concluded, preceded by a discussion of the main conclusions and an evaluation of the workshop.

At first, the students seemed stressed and shy, but over time, they became more open and confident in taking on tasks. The first meeting was a success. Workshop participants demonstrated a positive attitude toward the topic of establishing peer relationships and future activities.

Workshop 2 “Maintaining peer relationships”

The second part of the workshop, led by Emilia Pośpiech and Hanna Woźnica, took place on May 21, 2024. The workshop began with an introduction to the topic of maintaining existing, close relationships with others. Students were then divided into small groups to complete the first exercise – “Engineers”. Their task was to nonverbally present a randomly drawn word, ensuring that each team member was part of it (e.g., “train”). Each group then presented a previously assigned word, and the remaining groups were tasked with guessing it. This exercise aimed to stimulate creativity among young people and strengthen bonds through collaborative work. They also developed communication skills such as active listening and creating messages understandable to the group.

After completing the previous exercise, participants received blank cards on which they were to complete the sentence: “I would like my class to...” These were then collected in a hat, randomly selected by the instructors, and discussed together. This was intended to encourage students to develop empathy and highlight difficult situations in the classroom.

After a short break, a discussion was held in which the students discussed what they believed an ideal relationship should look like. They listed components such as mutual respect, commitment, and spending time together. Groups were then randomly formed. Two groups created a poster highlighting important aspects when meeting new people, while the other two created posters highlighting the qualities essential for maintaining a relationship. The groups then presented their project to the public, and during a debriefing

session, they collectively identified similarities and differences in their work.

At the end of the workshop, two exercises were conducted to maintain participants' excitement and engagement, encouraging even greater openness to others. The first activity was "Houses and an Earthquake", where students formed groups of three. Two of them joined hands to form a "house", while the third person from the group stood between them as the "residen". When given a given phrase: "houses", "residents", or "earthquake", participants were tasked with moving from their spot to create a new configuration. The second exercise was "Samurai", based on the rules of the well-known game "rock, paper, scissors". The students were divided into two equal groups. Their task was to gain a point advantage over the other team. To do this, they were to choose, and after a count of three, present one of three characters: a samurai, a tiger, and the samurai's mother. The basic principle of the exercise was: "The samurai kills the tiger, but loses to the mother. The tiger, on the other hand, wins against the samurai's mother".

After the game, an evaluation took place. The most important aspects summarizing the entire workshop, which focused on concepts such as empathy, integration, and cooperation, were presented. The students also had the opportunity to express their opinions on the exercises and how they could apply the knowledge they had gained in their daily lives. After the second workshop, participants were observed to be more open, both in the forum discussions and in conversations with each other. Compared to the first meeting, young people were more willing to initiate contact with their peers and the facilitators. Based on the positive feedback from participants, the authors believe that the workshop's stated goal was met.

Conclusion. The increasing prevalence of mental health-related disorders among adolescents was the main reason behind conducting the workshops [10, p. 101–104]. Research indicates that short health interventions lead to a better understanding of the importance of mental health and its impact on well-being among students [11, p. 257–269].

During the workshops, the main focus was on developing and maintaining interpersonal relationships

among young people, as these constitute a protective factor against many mental disorders, including loneliness [12, p. 10]. In particular, emphasis was placed on strengthening the mental health component that includes the development and maintenance of interpersonal relationships [13, p. 2–6].

A similar initiative was carried out in 2015 by members of the Institute of Therapy and Social Education. The objectives of the mental health promotion programme "Youth Mental Health Profile – Healthbook" included, among others, education in the field of mental health promotion and increasing awareness of mental health problems among adolescents. After analyzing the results, the program facilitators observed an increase in participants' awareness of mental health issues, which was also evident during the workshops described in this article.

It is worth noting certain limitations associated with the conducted workshops. Unfortunately, due to their organization – the workshops were held during students' regular class time – participation was not voluntary. This may have influenced the level of engagement among participants as well as the way the content was received. However, in the authors' assessment, this did not significantly affect the degree of adolescents' involvement in individual exercises. Additionally, in the future, apart from the evaluative discussion held at the end of each meeting, it would be useful to conduct an evaluation survey. Such a survey would make it possible to obtain feedback from participants regarding the course of the workshops, their format, and their subject matter.

Due to the positive reception of the workshops by students, it is planned to repeat them for other classes. An analysis of participants' statements during the evaluative discussions revealed an increase in adolescents' awareness of mental health issues, particularly with regard to establishing and maintaining interpersonal relationships, which were the focus of the workshops. Raising awareness in this area is currently extremely important, further underscoring the significance of repeating this type of initiative.

Acknowledgements. The authors would like to thank Dr. habil. Eng. Fabian Andruszkiewicz for his academic supervision.

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Прийнято 13 лютого 2026 року.

Затверджено 6 березня 2026 року.

Опубліковано 31 березня 2026 року.

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