The experience of loneliness for people accessing treatment for substance use

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Introduction / Issues: Loneliness has been deemed a public health issue and predictor of morbidity and mortality akin to smoking, obesity and physical inactivity. Two studies have found that loneliness is highly prevalent and problematic for people accessing treatment for substance use disorders (SUD). Guided by cognitive theory of loneliness, this study sought to explore the contributors to, consequences, and alleviators of loneliness among people accessing treatment for substance use disorders.

Method: Individual semi-structured interviews were conducted with 20 participants. Interviews were conducted onsite at two residential treatment facilities in New South Wales, Australia. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed and an iterative categorisation approach was used to guide data analysis and reporting.

Key Findings: Four key themes emerged as contributors to and consequences of loneliness: cognitions (mistrust, perceived support from others, low self-worth, and fear of negative evaluation), quality and authenticity of relationships, unhelpful interpersonal behaviours, and the role of substance use. Participants indicated that overcoming the cognitive and behavioural perpetuators helped to alleviate loneliness and also described the utility of support groups, pursuit of authentic relationships, and activities that provide a sense of purpose as helpful.

Discussions and Conclusions: Cognitions related to mistrust, lack of perceived support, low self-worth, fear of negative evaluation, and identification and pursuit of meaningful relationships supportive of recovery should be key treatment targets for this population.

Implications for Practice or Policy: Based on these findings, a six session group-based intervention, called Groups 4 Belonging, was developed and trialled across residential substance use treatment services. Participation in the program coincided with reduced feelings of loneliness. Larger trials of Groups for Belonging are planned for future.