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Ambulatory Assessment of Solitude and its Implications for Mental Health

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Solitude can have tremendous negative effects on physical and mental health, including intense feelings of loneliness, depression, anxiety and elevated stress levels. For people suffering from mental illnesses, who already experience social exclusion, prolonged solitude can become a way of life, resulting in social deficits, withdrawal, permanent isolation, and the stigmatization, in turn causing individuals to withdraw further from social interactions. The complexity of daily-life environmental factors poses a challenge in accurately assessing and understanding the unique social contexts and subjective feelings within controlled laboratory settings. Traditional methods like paper pencil questionnaires and clinical settings have limitations that affect the accuracy and granularity of data. To address this issue, there is a pressing need for innovative and ecologically valid assessment methods, especially in the field of mental health care.

A novel approach called Ambulatory Assessment offer researchers and clinicians a more accurate and ecologically valid understanding of the dynamic interplay of psychopathology and environmental factors by capturing real-world experiences, overcoming recall and response biases, and providing high-temporal resolution data. First, the integration of subjective e-diaries and continuous mobile sensing, which includes actigraphy and GPS tracking, provides with a comprehensive view of psychiatric patients' symptoms and social interactions in daily life, which may not be captured by traditional assessments. Second, AA can help identify triggers for symptoms such as social withdrawal, facilitating early detection of changes in mood and behavior and creating personalized treatment plans to meet individual's unique needs to reduce isolation. Third, AA can enhance patient engagement and treatment satisfaction by offering a tailored approach. It can be used to promote effective strategies, such as physical activity engagement or social support and networking that mitigate social isolation using feedback, reminders, and psychoeducational materials in ecological momentary interventions.

Overall, Ambulatory Assessment (AA) has shown great potential to identify specific triggers of social isolation and social withdrawal, to monitor intervention effectiveness in enhancing social functioning, and creating personalized treatment plans for psychiatric patients. It is proven well-accepted and feasible tool for exploring various facets of daily life, even during significant crises like the COVID-19 pandemic, across a broad spectrum of mental disorders, holding the potential to greatly transform mental health care.