

Plain English summary of results

ISRCTN41755922 — RECONNECT: Remedying transient loneliness

Background

Many university students feel lonely, especially when starting university, moving to a new place, or finding it hard to make friends. This kind of loneliness is often short-term (“transient”) rather than long-lasting and can be a useful signal that pushes people to reach out and reconnect with others. We wanted to find out whether a simple, low-cost programme run by university staff and students, rather than professional therapists, could help students who felt this way to feel less lonely and more satisfied with life.

Who took part

Between 2022 and 2025 we ran the RECONNECT programme three times at a Dutch university. Students were invited campus-wide to join if they felt lonely or disconnected from their fellow students. In total, 169 students registered and completed a survey at the start; 83 of them completed the programme and also completed a survey at the end. We also recruited 205 students who did not take part in RECONNECT, as a comparison group, to see how RECONNECT participants differed from students in general.

What the programme involved

RECONNECT ran over five weeks. It included three one-hour talks given by university staff and students—such as the rector, teaching staff, or a senior student—who shared honest, personal stories about coping with setbacks and staying connected. Each talk was followed by an informal social gathering in small groups, and students were encouraged to organise their own further activities (such as cooking together or a museum visit) between sessions, staying in touch through a group chat.

What we found

Students who chose to join RECONNECT were, at the start, notably lonelier and reported lower life satisfaction and weaker feelings of social belonging than students in the comparison group, showing that the programme successfully reached the students it was designed for. After completing the programme, participants reported feeling less lonely and more satisfied with life than they had at the start; feelings of social belonging also improved, though this change was smaller and not statistically conclusive. We found no evidence that students who dropped out partway through differed from those who completed the programme.

What happens next

These results suggest that a short, low-cost programme led by university staff and students, rather than professional therapists, can help reduce loneliness and improve wellbeing among students who recognise they are struggling and choose to seek help. Because this study compared participants to a separate group of students rather than randomly assigning people to take part or not and did not follow students beyond the end of the programme, further research with a randomised design and longer-term follow-up is needed before recommending RECONNECT more widely.