



Assessment of Treatment Gains Following Social Skills Treatment: Perceptions of Social Loneliness in Young Adults with ASD



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BACKGROUND

- Individuals with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) tend to report fewer social relationships and poorer friendship quality (Jobe & White 2006).
- Research suggests that poor friendship quality correlates with greater feelings of social loneliness among individuals with ASD (Locke, Ishijima, Kasari, & London 2010).
- Studies also indicate that difficulty navigating the social world and a lack of social skills likely exacerbate levels of social loneliness among young adults with ASD (Jobe & White 2006).
- While many interventions to target social deficits exist, research has yet to extensively examine the impact of an effective social skills intervention on self-reported social loneliness among young adults with ASD.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

- The purpose of this study was to assesses changes in self-reported social loneliness among young adults with ASD following social skills treatment.
- We hypothesized that young adults would report lower levels of social loneliness following treatment.

PARTICIPANTS

Participants included 92 young adults with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) or other social challenges presenting for social skills treatment through the UCLA Program for the Education and Enrichment of Relational Skills (PEERS®; Laugeson 2017).

- All participants demonstrated **elevated autism symptomatology**, as evidenced by a T-score of 60 or greater on the Social Responsiveness Scale, 2nd Edition (SRS-2; Constantino & Gruber 2012)
- **Gender:** 74% Male ($n=68$) and 26% Female ($n=24$)
- **Age:** $M=22.65$, $SD=3.62$; Range 17-35 years of age

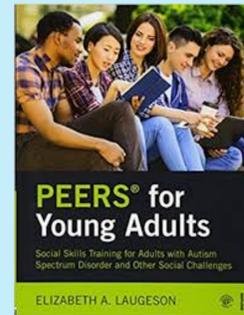
Caucasian	Hispanic	African-American	Asian	Other	Multiracial
64.1% ($n=59$)	6.5% ($n=6$)	2.2% ($n=2$)	9.8% ($n=9$)	4.4% ($n=4$)	13.0% ($n=12$)

MEASURES

- Social and Emotional Loneliness Scale for Adults (SELSA; Ditommaso 1993) was used to assess feelings of social isolation pre- and post-intervention, via self-report.
- SELSA includes Social, Family, and Romantic subscales, as well as a total score.
- Higher scores on the SELSA indicate greater feelings of loneliness.

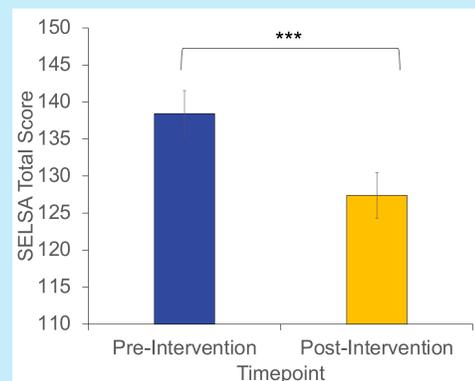
PROCEDURES

- Young adults and caregivers attended weekly 90-minute group treatment sessions for 16-weeks.
- Lessons from the UCLA PEERS® for Young Adults intervention focused on making and keeping friends, developing and maintaining romantic relationships and handling conflict and rejection.
- Targeted skills were taught through didactic lessons using concrete rules and steps of ecologically valid social skills, role-play demonstrations highlighting critical social cues, behavioral rehearsal exercises with performance feedback through coaching, and weekly in-vivo socialization homework assignments.
- Feelings of loneliness were assessed pre- and post-intervention using young adult self-reports on the SELSA (DiTommaso & Spinner 1993) and its respective subscales.



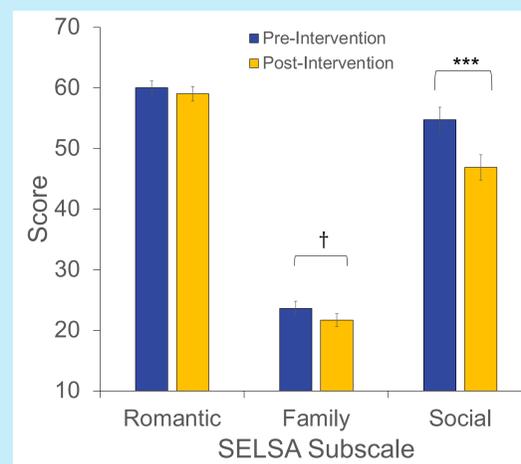
RESULTS

- Paired sample t-tests were conducted to assess differences in social loneliness, as measured by the SELSA, following the completion of the PEERS® for Young Adults program.



- Paired sample t-tests revealed a significant reduction in overall social loneliness from pre- ($M=138.43$, $SD=29.78$) to post-intervention ($M=127.39$, $SD=29.46$), $t(91)=4.54$, $p<.001$.

- Participants showed significant reductions on the SELSA Social loneliness subscale, $t(91)=4.70$, $p<.001$.
- There was a marginal decrease on the Family loneliness subscale, $t(91)=1.89$, $p=.063$, while no significant differences were observed on the Romantic loneliness subscale, $t(91)=0.97$, $p>.05$.



DISCUSSION

- Results support the original hypothesis that adults with ASD experience reduced feelings of social isolation following the PEERS® for Young Adults social skills intervention.
- Findings emphasize the importance of interventions that provide young adults with the tools to better understand and navigate their social worlds, if decreased loneliness is the goal.
- Increased awareness of social cues and broadened behavioral skills may enhance social interactions and promote social engagement, subsequently reducing feelings of social loneliness.
- Given the significant reduction in feelings of social loneliness after the 16-week PEERS® intervention, maintenance of treatment gains might examine treatment benefits after a longer period of time, such as 1 to 5 years.
- Future studies might also explore the relationship between reduced feelings of social loneliness following social skills treatment, and mental health issues such as anxiety and depression.

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