

You're not alone in feeling alone

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Feel like everyone else has more friends than you do? You're not alone— but merely believing this is true could affect your happiness. A new study from the University of British Columbia, Harvard Business School and Harvard Medical School has found that new university students consistently think their peers have more friends and spend more

time socializing than they do. Even when that's untrue, simply believing so affected students' wellbeing and sense of belonging.

"We know the size of your social networks has a significant effect on happiness and wellbeing," said study lead author Ashley Whillans, assistant professor at Harvard Business School who carried out the research while a PhD candidate at UBC. "But our research shows that even mere beliefs you have about your [peers](#)' social networks has an impact on your happiness."

The researchers used data collected from a survey of 1,099 first-year students at UBC. Students were asked how many friends they had made and to estimate how many friends their peers had made since starting school in September.

The researchers found a greater proportion of students (48 per cent) believed other students had made more close friends than they did. Thirty-one per cent believed the opposite.

A second survey tracking 389 students across their first year found students who believed their peers had more friends at the beginning of the year reported lower levels of wellbeing.

However, several months later, the same students who thought their peers had moderately more friends than they did at the beginning of the year reported making more friends compared to students who thought their peers had many more friends.

"We think students are motivated to make more friends if they think their peers only have one or two more friends than they do," said Whillans. "But if they feel like the gap is too big, it's almost as if they give up and feel it isn't even worth trying."

Frances Chen, the study's senior author and assistant professor in the UBC department of psychology, said the public nature of social activities is likely why students feel their peers are doing better socially.

"Since [social activities](#), like eating or studying with others, tend to happen in cafes and libraries where they are easily seen, students might overestimate how much their peers are socializing because they don't see them eating and studying alone," said Chen.

The findings could help inform university initiatives to support students' transition to university life, possibly through an intervention to correct social misperceptions and promote friendship formation, said Chen.

More research is needed to determine whether the same pattern emerges among new immigrants, or people moving to a new city or starting a new job, said Chen.

"These feelings and perceptions are probably the strongest when people first enter a new social environment, but most of us probably experience them at some point in our lives," she said.

More information: Ashley V. Whillans et al, From Misperception to Social Connection: Correlates and Consequences of Overestimating Others' Social Connectedness, *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* (2017). [DOI: 10.1177/0146167217727496](https://doi.org/10.1177/0146167217727496)

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