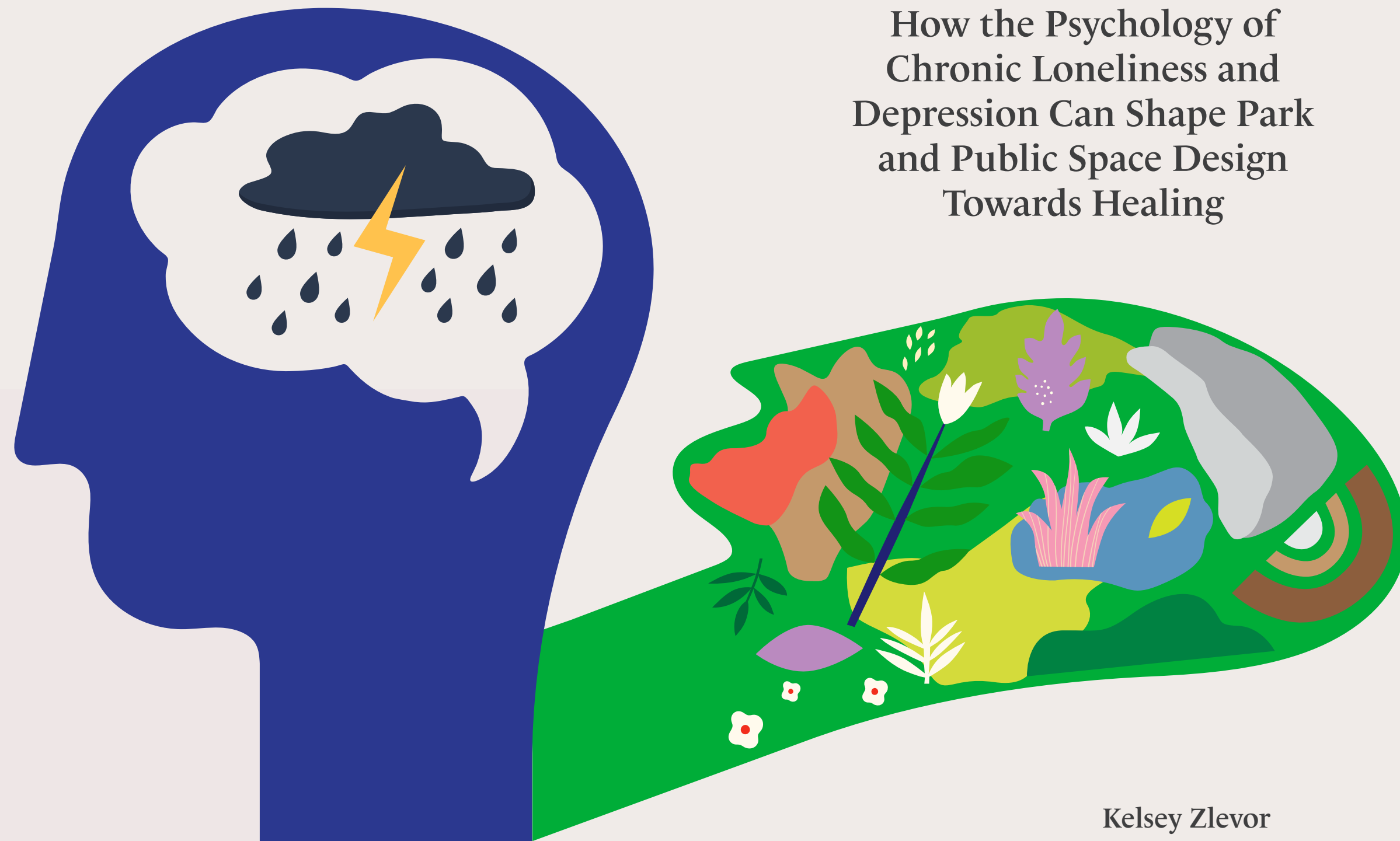# MENTAL LANDSCAPES

How the Psychology of Chronic Loneliness and Depression Can Shape Park and Public Space Design Towards Healing

Kelsey Zlevor

design research question

How might **park and public space design** reflect the lived experiences of people living with **chronic loneliness and depression** post-2020 in order to foster **healing and belonging**?

definitions

Depression (at least two of the following for at least two weeks): Feeling sad or having a low mood; loss of interest or pleasure in activities once enjoyed; feeling worthless or guilty; difficulty thinking, concentrating or making decisions.

Isolation: a physical state with negative social/emotional consequences. Isolation may cause loneliness.

Chronic Loneliness (at least two weeks): a negative emotional state, marked by a sense of isolation. One feels that some-thing is missing. Ironically, loneliness may compound isolation tendencies.

Solitude: a state of being alone without being lonely. It is a positive and constructive state of engagement with oneself.

Alone: a physical or emotional state, which can be positive (solitude) or negative (lone-ly/isolating).

background
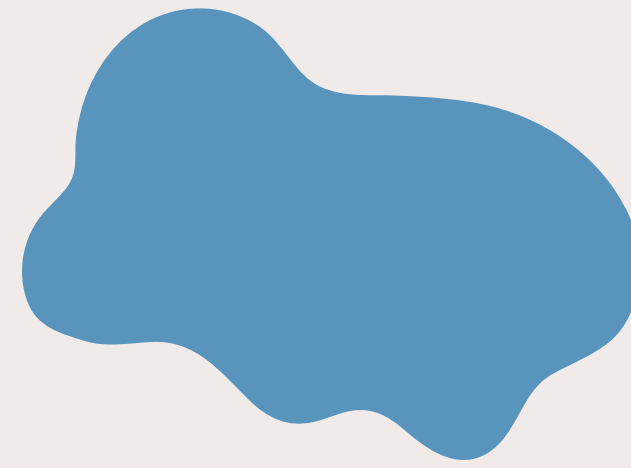
No one likes to admit they're lonely. Given the rise of technological communication and decline in civic life, loneliness was a cultural epidemic well before 2020.

According to a 2018 national survey by Cigna, nearly half of 20,000 U.S. adults reported they sometimes or always feel alone.[1] Now with lingering long-term effects of pandemic isolation, continued remote work, and political polarization, the rates of people reporting chronic loneliness and depression are at an all-time high, and these rates are even more severe for young people. The psychological toll of these conditions are also matched by a physical one: chronic loneliness increases chances of an early death by 20%.[2]

Depression and loneliness are two different forces: loneliness urges us to connect, while triggering threat and dread. Depression urges us to withdraw, while triggering apathy. However, according to John Cacioppo, a neuroscience expert on loneliness: "Where depression and loneliness converge is in a diminished sense of personal control, which leads to passive coping. This is one of the reasons that, despite the pain and urgency that loneliness imposes, it does not always lead to effective action. Within the struggle to self-regulate, loneliness and depression are at their core a closely linked push and pull. This facilitates a two-part decision—approach or withdraw—repeated endlessly as [humans] confront every stimulus." Over millienia, this sequence "has evolved into a vicious cycle of ambivalence, isolation, and paralysis… the standoff in which loneliness and depressive feelings lock into a negative feedback loop, each intensifying the effects and persistence of the other."[3]

While loneliness as an experience does not always lead to depression, social neuroscience shows that chronic loneliness impacts people on genetic levels, as well how they perceive their surroundings, similar to that of depressed people. In fact, a biological response to loneliness is depression and anxiety by design: without a tribe, our ancestors were more susceptible to injury, hunger, and death. The brains of lonely people therefore respond differently to stimuli: while loneliness increases our

motivation to connect, evolutionary mechanisms keep us from wanting to engage with others out of fear and self-preservation. Research suggests lonely people suffer from mindsets that make them more vulnerable to loneliness: they are more critical of themselves and others and are more likely to expect rejection.[2] Chronically lonely people therefore can be less effective at spotting or engaging in opportunities for connection because they are in preservation mode, inadvertently ruminating on their pain and anxiety. Studies show that the brain on loneliness focuses more and more on itself: getting out of loneliness therefore requires reciprocal connections, instead of unidirectional ones. These internal frames are similar to people experiencing depression.[3]

While built environment practitioners have considered how the design of public spaces can reduce loneliness, few, if any, have taken into account how people experiencing chronic loneliness or depression move through and experience the world with altered mental framing and perception. Attempts to reduce loneliness have focused on "pro-social" or "third spaces:" places like parks, libraries, and coffee shops that are informal and outside of home or work.[4] However, these places only reduce the immense psychological barriers to connection as effectively as the spaces are designed for people experiencing mental and emotional strain to navigate them. While these spaces can help people rebound from lonely or depressive episodes, no research exists that has engaged people with lived experience of chronic loneliness or depression in evaluating the efficacy of such spaces.

In order to begin shifting our understanding from a pre-2020 framing to a post-2020 framing (see next page), we need to collect feedback from people who have 1) experienced episodes of chronic loneliness and depression and 2) have spent time in parks and pro-social spaces about what activities and elements alleviated their symptoms, or exacerbated them. These initial findings can help address this unique moment: how people's existing chronic loneliness and depression impacts or has impacted their perception of the spaces that are supposed to be providing them relief, effectively designing with people experiencing these conditions, instead of hypothetically designing for them.

restlessness   *anxiety*   *fear*   *rumination*   *sadness*   *paranoia / confusion*

pre-2020 framing
what a space offers people

Premise: Chronic loneliness is bad for our health, and can lead to depression.

Conclusion: Parks, pro-social spaces, and third spaces can reduce loneliness.

Frame: "Build a space for people to go and they will feel less lonely."

Intervention: Build/construct/design spaces that encourage socialization and connection.

post-2020 framing
what people bring to a space

Premise: Chronic loneliness is bad for our health, can lead to depression, and both exist at alarming new rates.
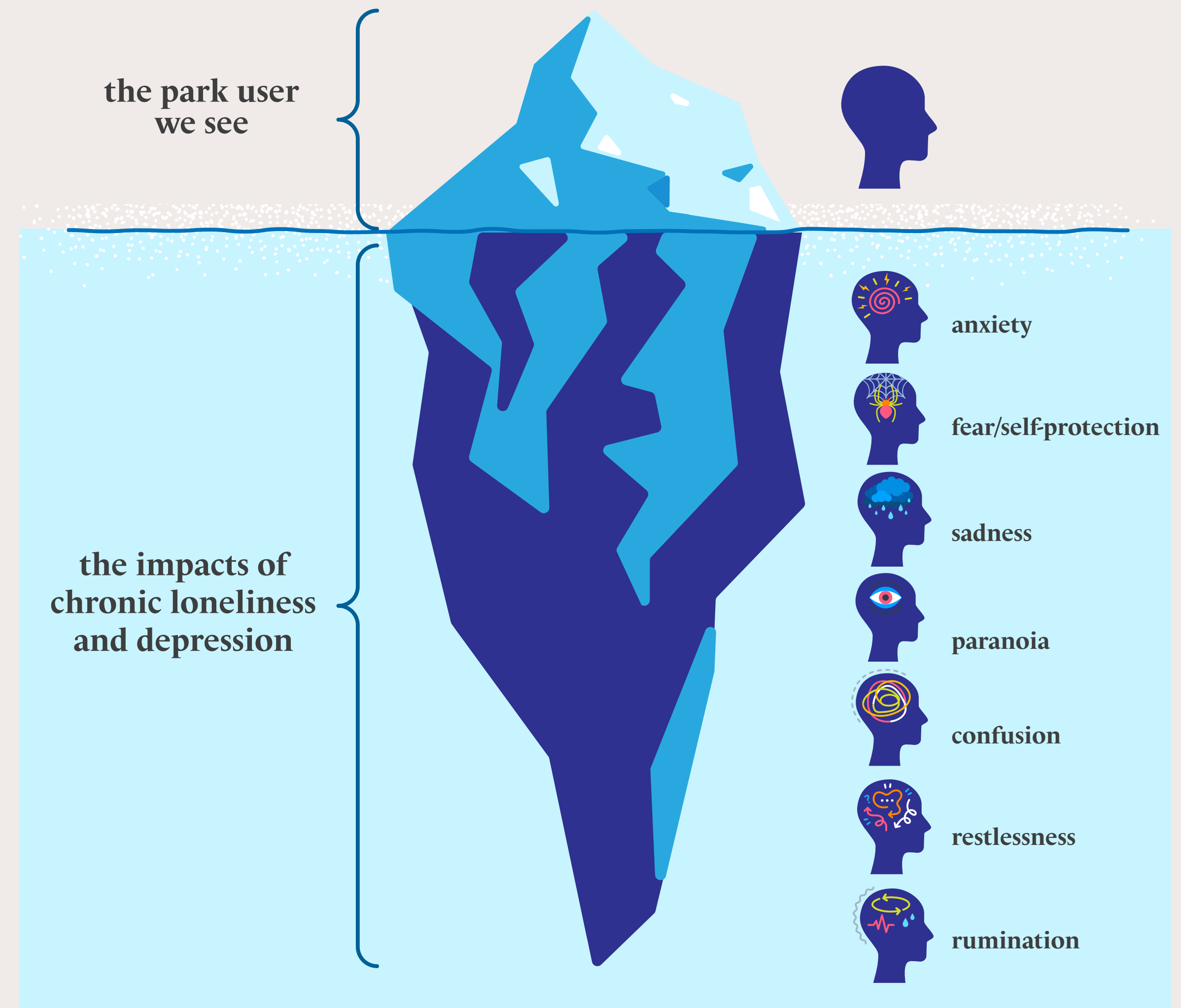
Social Neuroscientific Lens: Loneliness and depression can cause fear, sadness, and rumination. These symptoms may cause people experiencing loneliness and depression to enter into social spaces with different perceptions of and responses to stimuli, necessitating spatial interventions designed to reroute and soothe these responses.

Conclusion: Parks, pro-social spaces, and third spaces can counteract chronic loneliness and symptoms of depression if informed by the experiences of people who are familiar with these episodes.

Frame: "Acknowledge and investigate the dimensions of chronic loneliness and depression to build spaces that alleviate these symptoms."

Intervention: Build/construct/design spaces that are trauma-informed and encourage socialization while taking into account how perception is altered by chronic loneliness and depression.

mental landscape iceberg

the park user
we see

the impacts of
chronic loneliness
and depression

anxiety

fear/self-protection

sadness

paranoia

confusion

restlessness

rumination

project scope

Begin surfacing possible trends, needs, and considerations for how to incorporate the lived experiences of people who identify with chronic loneliness and depression into public space design. For this initial project as a solo and unfunded researcher, I seek to start building an understanding of chronic loneliness and depression as a preliminary lens through which to view park design by conducting voluntary semi-structured interviews with different park users. This research can open other avenues of inquiry, such as the role of structural constraints (access to parks), or specific intersections of oppression and their relationship to chronic loneliness and depression (race, class, language, age, gender identity, or immigration, housing, or disability status).

statement of responsibility

This research is an emergent process. My viewpoint as the sole researcher is intertwined with my outcomes. While I aspire to objectively collect and transcribe my findings, my life experiences cannot be separated from my interpretations, and I make no claims of approaching this study without these biases.[5] My data collection practices seek to encourage reflective story-telling through semi-structured interviewing, which has been shown to have the potential to be a "therapeutic encounter" for all involved.[6] Participant consent will be required and all identifying information will be removed in any final documentation.

design researcher profile

Kelsey (she/her) is a spatial strategist and social designer at the convergence of planning policy, climate justice, and social change. Practicing as a community park planning consultant for the last six years, Kelsey is an adept interviewer and collaborator around park and public space design. Kelsey's research and embodied approach draw directly from her lived expertise as a park-user living alone during the COVID-19 pandemic with a chronic illness. Kelsey's research seeks to better understand the park and recreation needs and aspirations of people living with depression and loneliness to shape public spaces that facilitate healing and belonging.
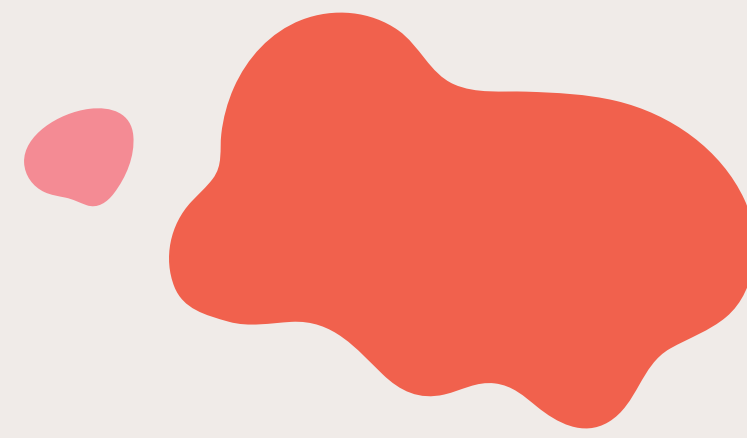
lineage

This research draws upon my study of the work of the following scholars, professionals, artists, and story-tellers, in no particular order:

- *Together: The Healing Power of Human Connection in a Sometimes Lonely World* – Vivek H. Murthy, MD
- *Seek You: A Journey Through American Loneliness* – Kristen Radtke
- *Lost Connections: Uncovering the Real Causes of Depression* – Johann Hari
- *Loneliness: Human Nature and the Need for Social Connection* – John Cacioppo
- *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and the Body in the Healing of Trauma* – Bessel van der Kolk
- *The Art of Gathering: How We Meet and Why It Matters* – Priya Parker
- *Palaces for the People* – Eric Klinenberg
- *Wintering: the Power of Rest and Retreat in Difficult Times* – Katherine May
- *Work Won't Love You Back: How Devotion to Our Jobs Keeps Us Exploited, Exhausted, and Alone* – Sarah Jaffe
- *Four Thousand Weeks: Time Management for Mortals* – Oliver Burkeman
- *Design Justice: Community-Led Practices to Build the Worlds We Need* – Sasha Costanza-Chock
- *Disability Visibility: First-Person Stories from the Twenty-First Century* – Alice Wong
- *Restorative Cities: Urban Design for Mental Health and Wellbeing: Ch. 5 The Neighborly City* – Jenny Roe & Layla McCay
- *Design as Democracy: Techniques for Collective Creativity* – David de la Pena, Diane Jones Allen, Randolph T. Hester, Jeffrey Hou, Laura J. Lawson, and Marcia J. McNally
- *Happy City: Transforming Our Lives Through Urban Design* – Charles Montgomery
- *Being Mortal: Medicine and What Matters in the End* – Atul Gawende
- *The Lonely City: Adventures in the Art of Being Alone* – Olivia Laing
- *How to Do Nothing: Resisting the Attention Economy* – Jenny Odell
- *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents* – Isabel Wilkerson
- *See No Stranger: A Manifesto of Revolutionary Love* – Valarie Kaur
- *Bowling Alone* – Robert Putnam
- *Cultish* – Amanda Montell
- Podcast: Happiness Lab – Dr. Laurie Santos
- Song: The Loneliness and the Scream – Frightened Rabbit
- Website: www.lonelinesslab.org

Endnotes

1   Weissbourd, Richard, et al. "Loneliness in America: How the Pandemic Has Deepened an Epidemic of Loneliness and What We Can Do About It ." Making Caring Common Project, Harvard Graduate School of Education, Feb. 2021, https://mcc.gse.harvard.edu/reports/loneliness-in-america.
2   Novotney, Amy. "The Risks of Social Isolation." Monitor on Psychology, American Psychological Association, May 2019, https://www.apa.org/monitor/2019/05/ce-corner-isolation.
3   Cacioppo, John T. Loneliness: Human Nature and the Need for Social Connection. W.W. Norton, 2010.
4   Peavey, Erin. HKS, Inc., 2020, Connecting IRL: How the Built Environment Can Foster Social Health, https://www.hksinc.com/how-we-think/research/connecting-irl-how-the-built-envi ronment-can-foster-social-health/.
5   Language adapted from *Narratives in Nature: Black, Indigenous, and Latinx Inclusion in Public Natural Areas* by Taylor Bowden, MLA, University of Oregon, 2021
6   Hirsch, Tad. "Practicing without a License: Design Research as Psychotherapy." Proceedings of the 2020 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems, 2020, https://doi. org/10.1145/3313831.33767