

Culture & Society

Pet rocks: Is the viral South Korea trend a cure for loneliness? Experts weigh in

The trend of young South Koreans keeping “pet rocks” has resurged as a way to cope with rising loneliness and burnout, but experts say genuine human interaction is needed for mental well-being over such substitutes

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The simplicity and low maintenance of a pet rock can provide not only a comforting form of companionship but also a tool for emotional and self-regulation. Image: Shutterstock

In 1975, US-based businessman and advertising director Gary Dahl's 'Pet Rock' took the world by storm. It wasn't actually a complex toy; it was literally a smooth rock in a box with air holes packaged to look like a pet carrier and accompanied by a care r

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The humour of the Pet Rock lay in its utter lack of features. It was the ultimate low-maintenance pet – never needed feeding, walking, or grooming, and was pre-trained to “sit” and “stay” (because, well, it was a rock).

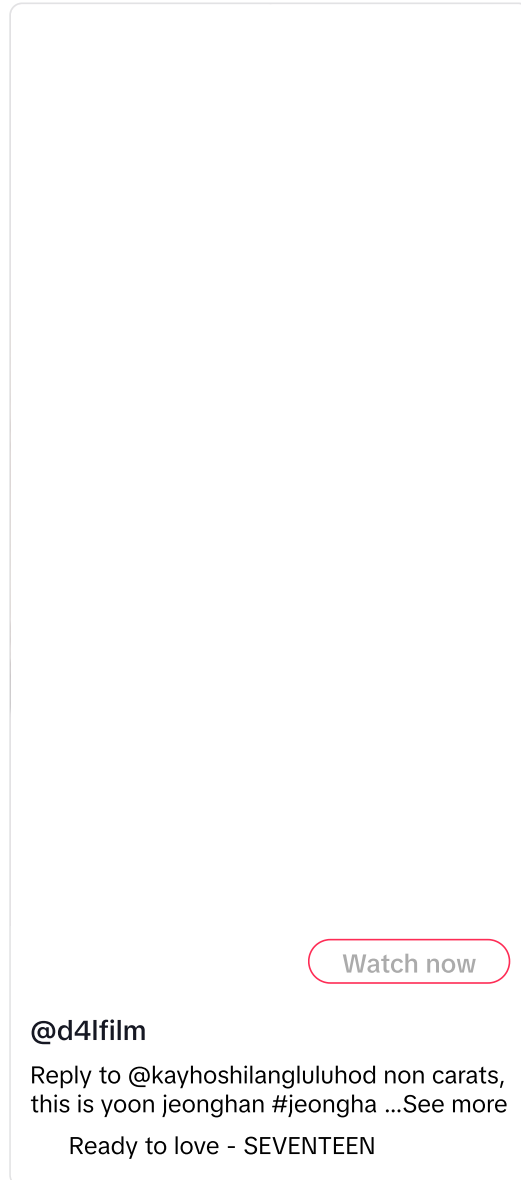
[Embracing empathy at work, how to battle the 'loneliness endemic'](#)

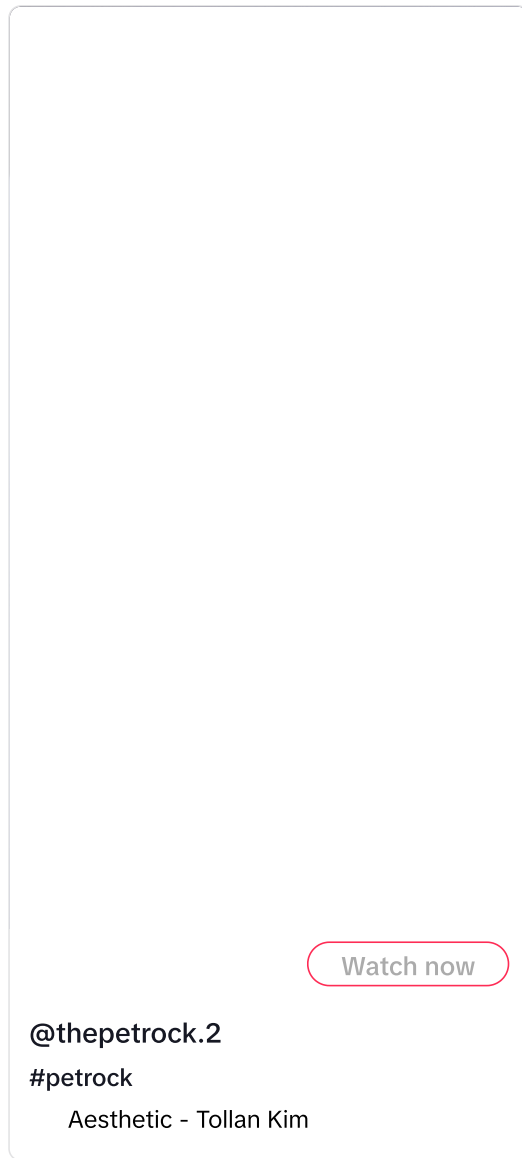
However, the Pet Rock fad was short-lived, lasting only about six months. But in that time, Dahl sold over a million Pet Rocks, making him a millionaire.

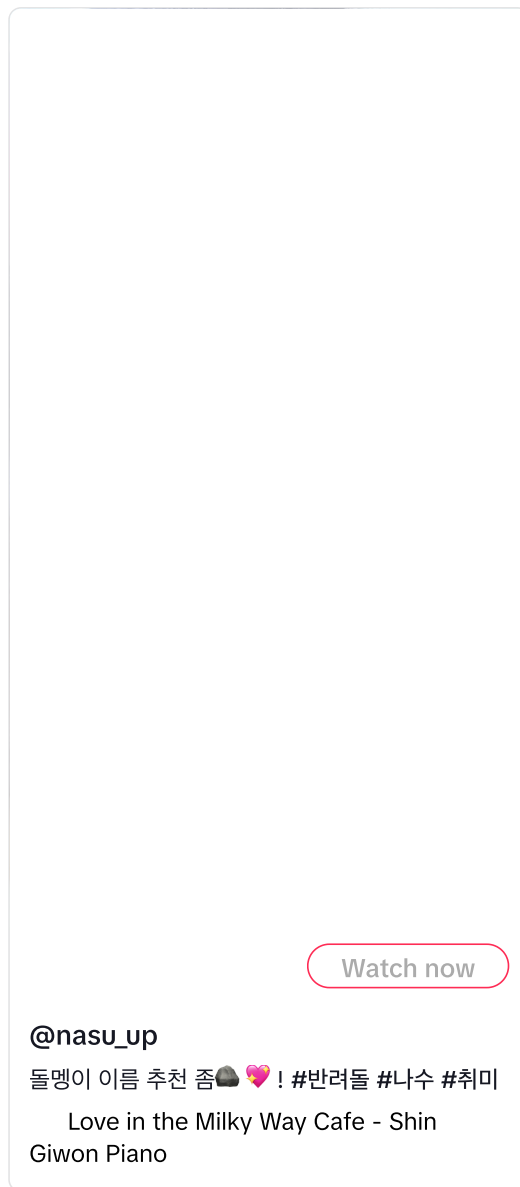
And while Dahl basked in the success of his product and its clever marketing then, it has found its place in society once again – in South Korea, among lonely, burned out workers. Except this time, the “pet rock” is any rock that is appealing to its owner.

A solid, low-maintenance bond between man and rock

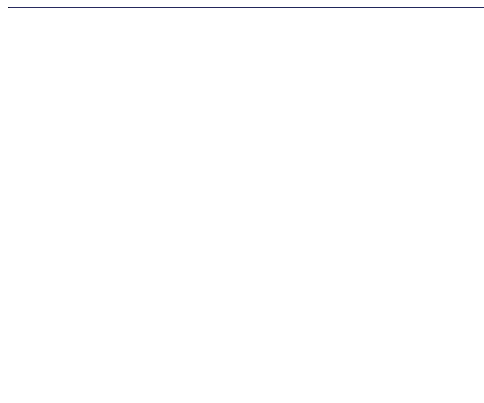
According to a [report](#) by the *Wall Street Journal (WSJ)*, 30-year-old pharmaceutical researcher and pet rock owner Lee So-hee identified her pet rock as a girl and also made it a winter blanket from an old towel. "I occasionally complain to my rock about what a tiresome day I have had at work," she told *WSJ*.







Another pet rock owner is 33-year-old Seoul office worker Koo Ah-young.



“There was some sense of serenity, knowing that this natural rock had weathered a lot over the course of time to reach its current state,” she told *WSJ*, adding that her pet rock is named ‘Bang-bang-i’, which means ‘jumping in happiness’.

Koo carries Bang-bang-I in her pocket, taking it along with her to the gym or when going for walks.

While the trend may seem peculiar to most, it is a cause for concern

Official statistics reveal worrying levels of loneliness and burnout affecting many young adults across South Korea.

The Ministry of Health and Welfare in South Korea conducted a nationwide survey last year which found that around 5 percent of the 19-39 age group, equating to over half a million people, experience high levels of social isolation and loneliness.

A phenomenon known as “Emotional Social Withdrawal (ESW) – a term for social isolation and loneliness” is increasingly common.

Several reports showed that the lonely population in South Korea, are at serious risk of so-called “lonely death” due to having no close social contacts. Whilst older individuals are more vulnerable, younger sections of society are not immune either.

According to these reports, societal factors are likely contributors to these troubling statistics. South Korea’s competitive culture places immense academic and career pressures on individuals from a young age, with a long working-hour culture leaves little time for rest and relationships.

How to battle the "loneliness endemic"



So, why are many individuals are feeling lonely?

"Loneliness can be understood as a profound sense of disconnection and isolation, despite being surrounded by people, leading to feelings of emptiness, exclusion, and a lack of meaningful relationships," Wesley Kew, Clinical Psychologist at Lighthouse Arabia told *Arabian Business*.

Kew added that many times, one can feel more alone while in a relationship than without. To be with another but feel unable to relate or feel seen by them can be more troublesome than solitude.

However, he said, "being alone is not the same thing as being lonely."

"You can also have a very active social life and feel very lonely. And many times people have a minimal social life and still feel fulfilled. For business people and high performers, it can feel like a heavy, invisible barrier that saps motivation and joy, even amidst success," he said, revealing the 5 main reasons why people might be lonely today:

- Too much time online or in the virtual world
- Remote working reduces the time for social interactions and personal relationships
- The pervasiveness of social media can make people engage in social comparison and social comparison can be very isolating
- Difficulty balancing work demands with personal life straining personal relationships
- Senior leaders or managers may experience more isolation due to the nature of their roles and the need to maintain professional boundaries

In addition, the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic has led to a "lack of deep, meaningful personal interactions," Christina Rahme, Clinical Psychologist at The Human Relations Institute & Clinics (HRIC) in Dubai said.

“The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated this by enforcing physical distancing and isolation. Additionally, urbanisation and the breakdown of traditional community structures have left many people feeling disconnected. Moreover, the need for people to disconnect from their own feelings and to distract themselves adding to it the lack of emotional regulation skills could also be a reason for loneliness,” she said, adding that the latest trend of keeping pet rocks can be attributed to a “combination of social isolation, economic factors, and the appeal of simplicity.”

She further explained that the “underlying cause” of this trend is multifaceted, whereby it could be a response to modern society’s stresses, where chasing ease and productivity has sometimes come at the cost of authentic human bonds.

Rahme further explained that financial uncertainties and unpredictability also contribute, as people may find themselves concentrating more on work and less on socialising.

Psychological aspects could be involved, including lack of emotional control and physical connection, and pet rocks offer a form of company absent the complexities and duties of living pets.

Teenagers, young adults, creatives, introverts more prone to keeping pet rocks

When asked which age group is more prone to keeping a pet rock, Rahme said the trend seems to resonate most with young adults and teenagers as they are “navigating critical life transitions and often experience high levels of stress and uncertainty.”

“The simplicity and low maintenance of a pet rock can provide not only a comforting form of companionship but also a tool for emotional and self-regulation,” she said, adding that individuals often care for their pet rocks by painting them, giving them names, and creating “habitats” or displays for them.



Loneliness can be understood as a profound sense of disconnection and isolation, despite being surrounded by people, leading to feelings of emptiness, exclusion, and a lack of meaningful relationships. Image: Shutterstock

“Some might dress their pet rocks in tiny accessories or carry them in pouches. The act of personalising the rock turns it into a unique, cherished item, which can be a therapeutic and creative outlet,” she added.

However, Kew argued Rahme’s sentiment by saying that a pet rock is not limited to an individual’s age. “It’s more helpful to think about it in terms of personality traits rather than narrowing it down to an age group,” he said.

“Creative individuals who enjoy imaginative play and find joy in simple, whimsical objects may appreciate a pet rock. Those with a fondness for nostalgic items might keep a pet rock as a reminder of simpler times. Even introverted people who prefer solitary activities may find comfort in having a non-demanding companion like a pet rock,” he added.

But are pet rocks a cure for loneliness?

When asked if it is an effective way to cope with loneliness, Lighthouse Arabia’s Kew said that while a pet rock serves as a “light-hearted companion,” it is not a sustainable method of coping.

“True companionship and a sense of belonging come from meaningful interactions with other people, which are essential for emotional well-being, mental health, long-term happiness and resilience,” he said.

Agreeing with Kew’s sentiment, Rahme added that it is also important to recognise that trends such as keeping pet rocks highlight societal challenges – which is the need for connection and mental well-being.

“Addressing the root causes of loneliness and providing more support for mental health or seeking professional help, could help mitigate the reliance on such trends. Additionally, the creative and playful nature of the pet rock trend shows how people can find innovative ways to cope with current life’s challenges. While this trend may appear charming or appealing, it should provoke deeper reflection. Although it is beneficial for people to reconnect with nature, it should not substitute genuine human interaction nor professional advice,” she said.

Pet rocks: A passing fad or something with staying power?

HRIC’s Rahme further explained that as long as people continue to seek “low-maintenance” and comforting companions, the trend of pet rocks could persist or even evolve.

“While pet rocks might seem like a passing fad, the underlying reasons for their popularity, loneliness, stress, and the need for simplicity suggest that they could have staying power,” she said.



Creative individuals who enjoy imaginative play and find joy in simple, whimsical objects may appreciate a pet rock. Image: Shutterstock

Echoing the sentiment, Kew said that anything that helps improve well-being and resourcefulness is valuable, especially in high-pressure environments like South Korea.

“So there is no harm in keeping it around. I would add that while all these accessories are great to have, they are no substitute to human connection. The research is conclusive that the number one indicator of happiness is having meaningful, close relationships. So while we can have many different coping skills and accessories to help boost our wellbeing and productivity, we need to continue to step out, reach out, and have deep meaningful connections with those in our family and community,” he said.

Why do people want to 'disconnect' and 'distract' themselves?

According to Rahme, modern living has created many pressures that have led people to disconnect from their feelings and seek distractions instead. Stress from work responsibilities and financial concerns, along with the fast pace of daily life, means many use distraction as a way to escape these stresses temporarily.

Moreover, constant exposure to information online and through social media can overwhelm. Trending distractions such as pet rocks offer relief from this non-stop bombardment.

Mental health issues are also widespread, making dealing with intense emotions challenging for some. Societal expectations to appear successful and happy can lead individuals to mask true feelings. Distractions provide avoidance of emotions not aligned with these standards.

However, not everyone learns effective strategies for processing feelings in a healthy manner. Distractions then become a default for those without tools to manage emotions, she said.

Cultural norms value productivity and activity highly. Taking time for introspection is seen as unproductive, driving people towards distraction over reflection.

"These factors create an environment where distraction and using Pet rocks are often seen as a more accessible and immediate solution to emotional discomfort," she said.

What are the best ways to cope with loneliness?

According to Kew, there are a few ways in which individuals can cope with burnout, stress and loneliness.

Burnout needs serious consideration as it impacts physical and mental health. It's important to address it properly, he said.



Urbanisation and the breakdown of traditional community structures have left many people feeling disconnected

Take time off work. Burnout differs from stress and does not resolve after a weekend rest. Several weeks of care are needed to recover. Time off allows tending to health and avoiding further stress.

Kew also recommends working with a mental health professional to understand what caused burnout. People often burnout twice before realising it's not the work itself but how they work and their mind-set. Perfectionists tend to burn more, as do those with anxiety or juggling roles. Underlying issues may need addressing before returning to work.

He also advised individuals to establish work-life boundaries once back. Speak to HR and managers about clear boundaries between work and life. It's important to set work hours and avoid emails or calls after hours. Also learn to say no or not yet.

Incorporate self-care like exercise, yoga or hobbies into daily routines. Also implement regular breaks to rest and recharge during the workday.

For those coping with loneliness, Kew advised that the first step is to figure the root of loneliness.

Is it being new, surrounded by people without connection, or lacking community or connection with self? Or not having a partner? Understanding the reason determines how to address it, he said.

Foster social connections by regularly catching up with friends, family or colleagues, whether in person or virtually, he said, adding that it is essential to engage with industry networks, online forums or business groups for community and connections.

Participate in group activities like sports teams, book clubs or hobby groups to meet people and form connections.

Individuals can also opt to volunteer for charitable causes to connect with others while contributing positively, as it provides community feeling and meaning which helps challenge loneliness.

Manage technology use – video calls, social media and messaging apps maintain social interactions but also put away phones for eye-to-eye conversations with those around.

“As prominent psychiatrist, Dr. Carl Jung said “loneliness does not come from having no people about one, but from being unable to communicate the things that seem important to oneself, or from holding certain views which others find inadmissible”,” Kew concluded.

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