



**LONELINESS**

**L**oneliness is becoming an increasing problem in many societies, especially for people who are suffering from mental health problems. This brochure is designed to provide information about what is meant by loneliness, as well as highlighting how many people are affected and what effects being lonely can have. We will also discuss the potential options people have to reduce their feeling of loneliness.

This brochure is primarily aimed at those people who are suffering from loneliness but may also be beneficial to family members of those suffering and people with a general interest in the area.

## What is loneliness?

This may seem like a redundant section to this brochure. After all, we are all aware of what it means to feel lonely. It is when a person feels a void in their life. Feeling lonely is actually a perfectly natural response to many different situations, with there being an argument for loneliness having the function of warning a person to seek more social contact. For example, if you are left out of a conversation at a party, or if your friends omit to invite you to an event, you may feel left out and lonely. This is the normal response to these situations and will pass fairly quickly.

When feelings of loneliness do not pass, or when they don't appear to have an environmental trigger, is when loneliness becomes problematic, and this is the main focus of this brochure. It is important not to confuse loneliness with a person simply being alone. For many people, a life of solitude is what they desire and leaves them feeling content and happy. For others, a small group of friends is more suited to their needs, and others will require many social interactions to feel socially satisfied. It is also possible for somebody to feel very lonely, despite having many social interactions and people around them. If the interactions do not make a person feel understood or appreciated then this can leave them feeling lonely. This means that there are scenarios where people who are alone do not feel lonely and those within a crowded gathering do feel lonely, and vice versa. This shows the inherently subjective nature of loneliness, which can sometimes make it hard to quantify or to objectively see.

It is important to note that loneliness is in itself not a diagnosable mental health condition, despite the potential negative impacts that it can have on a person. That does not mean it is not often associated with mental health problems, as well as other conditions. Nor does it mean there aren't solutions to loneliness, because there are, some of which we will outline in the sections below.

## What causes loneliness?

There is no one single cause for a person to feel loneliness, which is unsurprising when we think of the subjective nature of the condition. While we cannot outline specific causes, we can look at groups of society that are often affected. This helps to highlight who may be most at risk and, therefore, who may benefit from efforts to reduce loneliness.

Firstly we should talk about those suffering from mental illness. It is well documented that suffering from a mental health condition can lead to isolation and loneliness. This is unfortunately a cyclical relationship, as the mental illness is then made worse by the isolation and loneliness. Many conditions are associated in some way with loneliness both directly and indirectly due to symptoms. For example, conditions like depression and social anxiety cause a person to avoid social contact and isolate themselves. While indirectly, the stigma around mental illness can lead to people feeling alienated and lonely, or this may lead people to conceal their condition, impacting the ability to form meaningful relationships. The lack of understanding of a condition can also lead

people to isolate themselves from those around them, leading to increased loneliness. This lack of understanding and stigma is why there is also an increased level of loneliness in the physically disabled and those suffering from addiction problems.

Many life events are also thought to be triggers of loneliness in some people. Separation, divorce, and bereavement can all be triggers for a person becoming lonely. This is especially the case for people who do not have large social support networks and families. These events also signal the immediate loss of a person who is close and, consequently, the termination of a previously close relationship.

It is becoming increasingly clear that older age is being related with the onset of loneliness, with there being suggestions that, in the elderly, loneliness is a disease in itself. There are many reasons theorised for this that include a loss of independence and mobility. This loss of mobility often leave older adults housebound without interaction with other people for extended periods of time, leading to feelings of loneliness.



## What effects does loneliness have?

Unsurprisingly, loneliness has a number of negative effects on a person's life and wellbeing. Firstly, being lonely causes a depressed mood and impacts a person's self-esteem. This is especially problematic as this, much like with mental illness, becomes cyclical. By this we mean that when a person feels lonely, their self-esteem is impacted, which in turn makes it harder for a person to make new connections, which leads to further isolation and loneliness. A depressed mood is not the only mental health impact loneliness has. We have previously mentioned this relationship in the section above, but loneliness can not only worsen a person's current mental health conditions, but it can lead to the development of depression and other related conditions. Further to this, loneliness is known to cause an increased level of stress and can impact a person's sleep cycle. The sleep cycle is known to relate to mental health and wellbeing, so loneliness once again impacts on mental health.

Loneliness can also greatly affect a person's behaviours, with chronic or long term loneliness being associated with negative behavioural patterns. This includes turning to the use of illicit substances, which often lead to further isolation. This also includes risky sexual behaviours. It has been found that those who are chronically lonely are more likely to engage in risky sexual behaviours with multiple partners. This may be an attempt to reduce loneliness by finding a partner, but conversely has the effect of causing further feelings of loneliness, as these are only fleeting encounters.

It may surprise many readers to learn that loneliness is also associated with a number of negative physical health outcomes, such as affecting the cardiovascular and immune systems. This is supported by research that shows that those who are lonely are more likely to experience worse symptoms when they are unwell<sup>1</sup>. This is further shown by self-reported methods showing those who rated their health as 'poor' were twice as likely to be lonely as those who rated it as 'excellent'.

Unfortunately, loneliness is also known to be a risk factor in suicide, with those who are feeling lonely more at risk of taking their own lives. If you are reading this and feel that this applies to you, then it is important that you seek assistance immediately. Information to help with suicide and suicidal thoughts, as well as a selection of helpful resources, are available on our website.

## How many people are affected?

It can be difficult to accurately predict how many people are suffering with loneliness. Not only is it a highly subjective experience, it is also one that is often concealed by the sufferer. Couple this with the fact that loneliness is not itself a disorder, and so information is not always collected about this problem, and it can become quite difficult to predict the number of people who are suffering. It is therefore important to keep in mind that, when reviewing this section, the true number of people suffering is likely to be higher.

What we do know is that loneliness is not affecting a small subset of the population; it is impacting many millions of people worldwide. Loneliness in Great Britain have increased since spring 2020, due to the lockdown restrictions and social distancing (ONS, 2021)

- According to a UK government report, in 2020, 5% of people in Great Britain (equivalent to about 2.6 million adults) stated that they often or always felt lonely (ONS, 2021).
- As of February 2021, this figure increased to 7.2% of the adult population (equivalent to 3.7 million adults) (ONS, 2021).

Whilst there are conflicting estimates of loneliness, what this brief outline does show is that loneliness is a problem worldwide and is affecting many millions of people. It also shows that if you are suffering from loneliness, you are not alone. There are many people out there who are also feeling how you feel.

## What can you do if you feel lonely?

Loneliness carries a certain amount of negative stigma that unfortunately prevents a lot of people from reaching out when they feel lonely. Whilst it can be very difficult we do encourage anybody who is feeling lonely to reach out and tell somebody. Who a person reaches out to is down to the sufferer. They may decide to confide in a close friend or relative or they may feel better talking with their doctor. If you have a number of friends but still feel lonely, you may wish to talk to a close friend about why you may feel that way. Maybe you feel you are being ignored in social situations, or that your views aren't being listened to.





For some people, the thought of reaching out in person can be too much. In these scenarios, we would suggest reaching out through an online post. This may be through a personal blog or through a forum. Online forums can be a powerful resource for people who are feeling isolated and lonely, especially for those people who are physically far away from their friends. By utilising a forum related to mental health and wellbeing, a person is likely to find that a number of people online will understand what they are going through and will be able to provide advice from their own personal experiences. The Shaw Mind Foundation does offer an online forum where we would encourage you to reach out to others in the community. This forum is accessible via our website.

While the internet can be a great resource for seeking help, it can also have its pitfalls when it comes to loneliness, primarily through social media. Social media can be a great way to connect to new and old friends but it also provides a large platform for people to compare lives. This is problematic as those who are feeling lonely are likely to make social comparisons to people who are active on social media, and may become depressed due to the disparity between their own social situations and those shared. This can also make people feel they are the only ones who are lonely. What we would say here is that social media is a place where people can choose how their lives are presented. It is important to remember that what you see on social media is far from the full picture of a person's life and so comparisons are likely to be flawed.

Another suggestion for tackling loneliness is to join a group or a class that interests you. This not only provides a forum to meet new people, but it is also going to consist of people who have similar interests to you. This can feel a bit overwhelming and as such you can build up to this. To begin with you may ask if you can observe the group for a few weeks. For example, if you want to join a book club, you may choose to sit and watch before taking part in the conversation. A class may be an easier step for some as the structure of a class new people, in a less formal situation than in a paid work environment. Much like with the classes, volunteering will often involve a shared goal, for example running a shop, which can draw focus away from the social aspects. This will help to remove some of the anxiety associated with new social interactions.

You may also find that you may benefit from some sessions with a therapist. While loneliness is not itself a mental health condition, in many cases it may stem from some relationship issues or anxieties. By talking with a therapist about these problems, the symptoms will reduce, which in turn is likely to relieve the feelings of loneliness.

## What can you do if you feel a friend or family member is suffering?

It can be difficult to spot when somebody is suffering with loneliness, after all they may still be present at group events. However, you may notice that they are not engaging in the conversations, and you may notice that they start to pull away from the group, often deciding not to come at all. If you notice this, or if anything else in this brochure makes you think of somebody, then it might be an idea for you to reach out and let them know you are available for them to talk to. It can be difficult to reach out, but if you do choose to do so, then make sure you do this in a compassionate way. Avoid being accusatory and simply let them know you are there if needed. They may let you know that they aren't lonely, but something else is happening, or they might not be suffering at all. If you reach out, you have to be prepared to accept that the person may not be lonely, or they may not want to talk. Don't push the issue, but let them know you are available. If they do decide to talk with you, try not to be combative. While you may not think they are left out or overlooked, that is how the person may be feeling and it is important to talk this through instead of shooting it down.



The most important thing you can do if a person comes to you is to listen and be supportive. Along with this you may also suggest a number of the suggestions in the section above such as volunteering, taking classes, or seeking advice from a doctor. What can be really useful in these scenarios is if you can make yourself available to be there to show support during these events. This could be by going to a doctor's appointment, or helping look for places to volunteer, or even attending a class together to meet new people. It may be best for you to attend a few classes together and then attend the class together but make a conscious effort to sit with different people to encourage making new relationships whilst still building on your own.

Many of us will have older relatives and these people are more at risk of suffering from loneliness so you could make a directed effort to make sure they are visited regularly. If you have a large family, you could get together and work out a plan so that a different person visits every few days. That way the older relative is not left isolated, and the responsibility is not falling on just one family member. Also taking the time to regularly talk on the phone, especially if the relative is living far away, can be a great way to relieve some feelings of loneliness.

It is important to remember that loneliness is subjective, so along with these tips, the person suffering may be able to guide you in the best way to help them.

We hope this brochure has helped to highlight that loneliness is a condition that affects many people and can have many negative impacts on a person's life. We also hope we have shown those who are suffering, or who know someone who is suffering, that there are solutions out there to help.

**References (APA, 6th edition.)**

Office for National Statistics (2021). Mapping loneliness during the coronavirus pandemic. Retrieved from: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/wellbeing/articles/mappinglonelinessduringthecoronaviruspandemic/2021-04-07>

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