

**Loneliness:
What is it and how
does it affect us?**

 **Mind Devon**

The official theme of Mental Health Awareness Week (9th – 15th May 2022) is loneliness. Why loneliness?

Loneliness is affecting more and more of us in the UK and has had a huge impact on our physical and mental health during the pandemic.

A curse or a blessing?

- Solitude is the state of being apart from people
- For those who enjoy being on their own, for whom it is an informed choice, there may be little or no problem
- For those for whom it is not a choice, the impact may be very different
- Loneliness is also described as social pain – a psychological mechanism motivating individuals to seek social connections
- Loneliness is often associated with an unwanted lack of connection and intimacy
- Loneliness overlaps with, and yet is distinct from, solitude



Causes of loneliness are varied and may include:

- Genetic inheritance
- Cultural factors – for example, where not knowing your neighbours is the norm
- Lack of meaningful relationships
- Significant loss
- Overreliance on passive technologies such as the internet



Who is most impacted?

Research has shown that loneliness is found throughout society. It may include:

- People in marriages or other strong relationships
- Those with successful careers
- Students
- The elderly
- People in poor health, or with conditions that are 'limiting'
- People who rent rather than own their homes
- LGBTQ+ people

Most people experience loneliness at some points in their lives, and some feel it very often.

The effects of loneliness

- The potential effects of loneliness are varied
- Transient loneliness (which exists for a short period of time) is related to positive effects and may spur people on to address their circumstances, focusing sometimes on the relationships they do have
- Chronic loneliness exists for a significant amount of time in our lives and is linked to negative effects, including increased obesity, risk of depression, cardiovascular disease, risk of high blood pressure, and high cholesterol
- Chronic loneliness is also correlated with an increased risk of death and suicidal thoughts





**Loneliness can be as
harmful for our
health as smoking 15
cigarettes a day.**



Source: Social relationships and mortality risk: a meta-analytic review.
Holt-Lunstad J, Smith TB, Layton JB. PLoS Med 2010;7(7)

Cultural loneliness

- You can be lonely with people close by or around you!
- This can be an issue for students from other parts of the world, when family can only be contacted during the night
- Some BAME communities have large family networks, yet people within them may nevertheless experience loneliness due to having less involvement with peers or activities that interest them
- There are many family situations in which work demands rule and people pass like ships in the night
- Also common in workplaces where people sitting literally five or six yards apart email each other instead of talking

A slippery slope for mental health

Loneliness can cause the following symptoms:

- Increased feelings of stress
- Negative thoughts and low self-confidence
- Low mood
- Lack of motivation
- Poor memory
- Increased likelihood of experiencing depression and/or anxiety



A slippery slope for mental health

- Lonely people become more vigilant for threats and focused on self-preservation
- They can become less attentive to others' feelings
- They may exaggerate negative/positive interactions
- All this can impact relationships
- Among adolescents and young adults, loneliness is associated with poorer educational outcomes and a lowering of employment prospects
- Among adults, it impacts productivity at work and mental and physical health



Addressing the challenge

Nine ways to cope with loneliness:

Join a club or class

Volunteer

Find support online

Strengthen existing relationships

Adopt a pet

Talk to strangers

Practice self-care

Keep busy

See your doctor

What can we do to help lonely people?

- Normalise talking, and even more importantly listening to what is said in return when you ask a question
- Ask the question twice when asking how someone might be feeling
- Making time to do this with family, friends, or colleagues can make all the difference – it may help them take action and begin to take control of how they have been feeling



Five ways to wellbeing

- Like physical health, we can all benefit from looking after our mental health on a regular basis
- Research has identified five simple things we can do – the “Five Ways” developed by the New Economics Foundation
- When practiced regularly, these tips help build resilience, boost mental wellbeing, and offer some protection from developing mental health problems
- The Five Ways are beneficial for everyone, whether you experience mental health problems or not



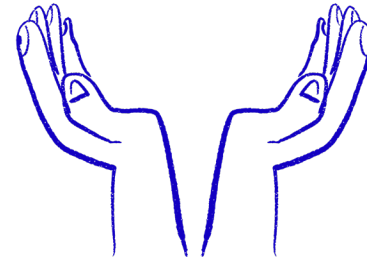
The Five Ways:



Be active



Keep learning



Give



Connect



Take notice