Isolation and loneliness in adults

Definition of loneliness

Loneliness is not the same as being alone. Many people feel contented when alone; and many people who have lots of contact with people can feel very lonely. It is a very personal experience. You don't have to live alone to be lonely – you could be surrounded by family and friends and still feel lonely. Loneliness is prevalent where people feel they are not understood, accepted or loved.

Loneliness can be split into three areas:

- Emotional loneliness – the absence of a partner or close friend, with whom you have a meaningful relationship.
- Social loneliness – the lack of a wider social network where someone can experience belonging and community
- Existential loneliness – a sense of feeling disconnected from others. People can feel their life lacks direction and meaning.
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Who might be affected by loneliness?

Many people recognize that the elderly are particularly vulnerable to loneliness, but it is increasing in younger age groups. There are different risk factors which can lead to loneliness, such as:

- starting university,
- starting a new job,
- moving to a new area,
- becoming a parent,
- going through a break-up
- being widowed
- being between 16 and 24 years old
- living alone

Some life situations can increase the risk of feeling lonely too. Issues such as having little money, being neurodivergent, racial/sexual/gender discrimination, abuse, and being estranged from family and disability can be very isolating.

For all of us in the modern world, we communicate by messaging more than we do face-to-face. This online communication can be brief and lack the depth that is so important when sharing time with a trusted person. There is evidence to suggest that modern life leaves less time for friendships and families, meaning that loneliness is more likely to increase. Having a meal with someone, or just chatting builds positive and meaningful connections that can help someone to overcome loneliness.

Loneliness and Mental Health

Although loneliness is not in itself a mental health problem, poor mental health can exacerbate loneliness. Anxiety and depression can reduce a person's ability to

manage social situations, as they could feel overwhelmed. This means people can stop doing things they enjoy, and miss having chance to connect with people in person.

Many neurodivergent people can feel cut off from others, or misunderstood in the neurotypical world they find themselves in. This can lead to heavy masking, and a feeling that no-one knows the real person inside, resulting in a disconnect and a lack of deeper relationships. There is a higher prevalence of poor mental health and loneliness in the neurodivergent population.

Loneliness affects physical health too. It can lead to poor sleep, and higher levels of cortisol in the body on waking. This leads to higher anxiety, and can induce a 'loop' of loneliness and anxiety. A lonely person is statistically more likely to have increased GP visits, longer hospital stays, have increased likelihood of entering residential care and diabetes.

An anxious or depressed individual could easily start to lose self-esteem and start to feel a burden to others. Some people feel there is a stigma attached to being lonely - it is common for people to feel a sense of shame around loneliness. Withdrawing from people is likely to minimize chance to talk to others about the way someone is feeling, increasing feelings of loneliness. In this way, poor mental health and loneliness feed into each other. This is a problem for individuals and society at large.

How to relieve loneliness – self help

Strategies will vary from one person to another, and people should try selecting those which most suit their needs. Suggestions could be:

- Building up to feeling more comfortable when alone. This could include building a level of self-care. Self-care could mean cooking meals from scratch, enjoying craft/creative activities, enjoying podcasts/TV shows, or getting a pet.
- Build deeper connections with people you know. Choose a trusted friend, colleague or family member to explain how you feel. Validation from others builds connections. Be aware though that you may like to 'start small', rather than getting straight into deep conversations, as you can feel awkward to start with.
- Consider a routine to your days off, maybe building in trips to places of interest like the library, a local museum or art gallery. You may meet other like-minded people and start to chat. If this feels too uncomfortable, you could join an online group where there is no expectation to talk or share a video link. Meetup is a useful site.
- Local Facebook groups or volunteer groups can be a useful way to meet people, either online or in-person. Helping others is a recognised way of supporting your own mental health. useful contacts is a good site in which to find local opportunities for volunteering.
- If you need more support before you can consider more social actions, local Mind can provide peer support in order to allow you to build confidence first.

- Don't be tempted to be taken in by other people's social media posts! Others can appear to be having a better time, being happier or busier, with no problems of their own. This can make people feel even more lonely, but an online impression is not necessarily an accurate picture of another person's life.
- Get out in nature, try to keep fit, spend time with animals. These are all well known ways to feel replenished and positive. If you don't have a pet of your own, you could even borrow one! Borrow my Doggy.

How to help someone else

In order to help others, we need to address practical, structural and psychological barriers to connection.

Supporting someone with childcare, transport, and other caring responsibilities are practical ways you could support someone experiencing loneliness. Structural problems in society like prejudice can be overwhelming when you are lonely – putting the person in contact with suitable helplines and providing a listening ear are useful ways to help. Psychological barriers include anxiety and lack of confidence in social situations. Accompanying the person to maybe the local shop or a quiet pub may be gentle ways to widen their horizons and slowly increase confidence again.

It is also important for someone's self-esteem for them to feel that they make a difference in another person's life. This can involve some kind of volunteering, but it can be simple things like being explicit in your thanks when they have supported you in some way. If they can gain positivity around making an impact, this really helps with loneliness – they have made a connection which is meaningful.

Links for support

House of Commons Tackling Loneliness CBP-8514.pdf

15 things to do if you're feeling lonely | Mental Health Foundation

Tips for everyday living | About loneliness | Mind

Podcasts Our podcast series on loneliness | Campaign to End Loneliness

Myths about loneliness | How we can help | Samaritans

Bibliography:

Why More Adults Are Experiencing Loneliness In The Age Of Social Media | Relationship News - News18

House of Commons Tackling Loneliness CBP-8514.pdf

Loneliness and Mental Health report - UK | Mental Health Foundation

15 things to do if you're feeling lonely | Mental Health Foundation

Tips for everyday living | About loneliness | Mind

MHAW22-Loneliness-UK-Report.pdf

This information has been written using the above websites, and is believed to be correct on the day of writing. This leaflet is not designed to take the place of advice from your GP.

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