Coping with Loneliness

A recent survey by the Mental Health Foundation found that in the UK one in ten people often feel lonely and 48% of respondents believed we are getting lonelier in general. The media has warned that we are facing a loneliness epidemic, and a recent US study suggested that loneliness increases mortality risk by 26%. It may be that modern life is contributing to this, with greater reliance on social technology rather than face to face interactions, and more and more people living away from their extended families and losing vital support networks. The risk of social isolation is greater than ever before.

Everybody feels lonely at times but persistent loneliness can lead to further problems. Loneliness does not necessarily cause mental health issues, and mental health issues do not necessarily cause loneliness but the two are often linked. It can be a particular challenge for the elderly who may live alone, have suffered loss or have mobility issues but the reality is that loneliness can affect people of any age. Taking steps to understand and overcome loneliness can improve our overall health and lead to more fulfilling lives. We will offer some suggestions in this Helpsheet to help you on your way. If you are affected by loneliness and would like further support you can speak with one of our trained counsellors on our Adviceline.

“Loneliness and the feeling of being unwanted is the most terrible poverty.”
Mother Teresa

“Loneliness expresses the pain of being alone and solitude expresses the glory of being alone.”
Paul Tillich

“The eternal quest of the individual human being is to shatter his loneliness.”
Norman Cousins
What is loneliness?

Loneliness is a complex emotional response to a lack of connection or companionship with others. Being alone is not the same as being lonely. A person can spend a great deal of time alone and find it very rewarding, and equally a person can be surrounded by others and still feel lonely.

We may experience loneliness in numerous ways: the heartache after a break-up, being misunderstood in the context of a committed relationship, after the death of a loved one, as the single person in a group of couples, when we don’t fit in, when we become isolated due to caring or child-rearing responsibilities, the sense that nobody is looking out for you, living alone or the persistent feeling of being alone no matter where you are or who you are with.

The causes of loneliness can be social, mental, emotional and physical. In many cases it stems from a lack of relationship or sense of belonging, whether with a romantic partner, family or friends. Psychologists such as John Bowlby have argued that humans are inherently relationship seeking. Just as a baby seeks comfort when they cry, or shares a smile with another, adults need to have people in their lives who can empathise with them, notice them and share good times with.

A report commissioned by the Lonely Society in 2010 suggested that people who are lonely often share certain characteristics. These include a history of loss or trauma or a childhood in which they experienced negative criticism or harsh parenting. Experiences like these can make it challenging, though not impossible, to forge good relationships and may affect the way we think about ourselves.

The requirement for contact with others will vary from person to person; some people thrive on an active social life and like being part a large network of people while others prefer a few close confidantes. It depends on what your individual preferences are.

The Effects of Loneliness

Loneliness appears to have significant effects on physical and psychological wellbeing. Psychologist John Cacioppo of the University of Chicago has been tracking its effects of and shared his findings:

- Living alone increases the risk of suicide for young and old alike.
- Lonely people reported higher levels of perceived stress when exposed to the same stressors as non-lonely people.
- The social interactions that lonely people have do not tend to be as positive as it they are for non-lonely people, the relationships that they have do not buffer them from stress as well as for non-lonely people.
- Increased levels of stress hormones were found amongst lonely people and blood pressure was higher. Loneliness undermined the circulatory system so that the heart muscle had to work harder.
- Loneliness adversely impacted the quality and efficiency of sleep. It was less restorative, both physically and psychologically.

Loneliness and self-esteem

A frequent contributing factor to loneliness is a critical inner voice, for instance telling ourselves we are a ‘loser’, or that we are lacking or deficient in some way. We might believe we are incapable of being loved or too flawed to make friends. However, while these beliefs feel powerful it does not mean they are true. When we get stuck in negative thinking about ourselves we can perpetuate the problem and risk falling into depression or relying on unhelpful ways of coping such as drinking or withdrawing from others. Being kind and compassionate towards ourselves can help us to understand why we are lonely and hurting.
Overcoming loneliness

Loneliness does not have to be a life sentence. Even if it feels impossible to change there are things that you can do to ease the pain and begin making meaningful connections again.

Admit you are lonely. One of the first things you can do is to recognise that you are lonely. Once you have acknowledged this you can try to understand it and begin the process of figuring out how to address it.

Understand what loneliness means for you. Being alone and lonely can be difficult as, without distractions, it forces us to confront our own thoughts. However, it is only when you allow yourself to be curious about these thoughts that you can identify what is missing or not working for you. Loneliness can be linked with a range of issues: boredom, isolation, not liking yourself, a wish for friendship or a partner. Staying with the difficult feelings may be uncomfortable but it will help to recognise the underlying problem(s). Journaling or writing down your feelings can be a helpful way of making sense of things and allows you to express how you are feeling. Talking with a close friend, counsellor or psychotherapist can also help.

Heal old wounds. Issues in childhood such as neglect, abuse or trauma can leave us feeling unworthy of love, angry, empty or reluctant to trust others. Later events in life can also leave us disillusioned and pessimistic about our possibilities. Sometimes it is helpful to enlist professional support in order to make sense of things, heal and take steps to make our lives more fulfilling.

Don’t allow your inner critic to sabotage your efforts. Pay attention to the ways in which your negative voice prevents you from meeting new people, for instance ‘I’m not interesting / good looking / healthy / successful / smart enough for anybody to value me.’ If we tell ourselves that we are ‘not good enough’ or ‘nobody would ever want to be with me’ then we are likely to make it difficult for anyone to get close to us and we won’t be open to possibilities. Reflect on your history and try to find examples that counter your thinking, think about what others have appreciated about you. This will probably feel difficult at first but can become easier with practice. Think of it as breaking an old habit.

Use positive affirmations. Combat negative self-talk with positive affirmations such as ‘I am deserving of love’ or ‘I am lovable just as I am’. It can feel odd to say affirmations at first but they can be a useful springboard to thinking differently about ourselves. If we can tell ourselves that we are valid and worthwhile then we have taken a step towards accepting and loving ourselves.

Nurture your support network. Even if there is only one person in your life you can build on that. Know that you have a lot to offer.

Share. Be willing to open up and be vulnerable with people. Loneliness results in feelings of isolation; if you are able to share more of what you feel, your memories, aspirations and experiences the more you are going to feel understood.

Ask for what you need. Don’t be afraid to ask directly for support to alleviate the loneliness. Friends or family may not realise what you need until you ask them and you may be surprised by the response.

Go out. If relationships are lacking and you don’t have people to spend time with it can be tempting to stay in and do little, but this can leave you stuck in a rut. A change of scene allows you to take in other perspectives, provides stimulation and can be energising. If this feels like a big hurdle start with a small outing like a walk to a local park, do some window shopping, visit the library or a café. You can then build up to other outings – the leisure centre, a gallery, a day trip, meeting old friends or colleagues.

Focus on what makes you happy. Take time to be good to yourself. Find out what you enjoy – whether it is a hobby, travel, volunteering, or learning a new skill.

Be open and take risks. For change to happen you need to do things differently. Say yes to invitations. If there is someone that you like take a risk and suggest meeting for a coffee, or sign up for a course or activity where you can learn about something that interests you and meet others. Accept that it will feel uncomfortable at first but do it and see what happens. Some risks might pay off and others might not but you will be taking more responsibility for your situation. Don’t wait for something to happen.
**Make your environment happy.** If you are spending a lot of time at home try to ensure that it is a place that feels good and is nurturing to spend time there. Keep it tidy, clean and have things around you that you love.

**Consider a pet.** If you enjoy animals and your circumstances allow you to care for them responsibly a pet could be a source of companionship. While a pet is not a replacement for human contact some studies have suggested that they have therapeutic benefits, can help to relieve stress and may help to cope with loneliness. Dog owners in particular are more likely to exercise regularly while taking them for walks, and may find a social outlet through meeting other dog walkers. Pets can provide a conversational ice-breaker and encourage interaction.

**Access support groups or be-friending services.** There are a number of organisations that offer be-friending services or offer online chat rooms for people to share their experiences of being lonely and to support one another. Some examples are listed below.

**Adopt a healthy lifestyle.** A balanced diet and regular exercise not only keeps us physically stronger and more alert but will also help to manage any mental health issues.

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### Further Resources

- **Age UK** – information about loneliness and be-friending services: [www.ageuk.org.uk](http://www.ageuk.org.uk)
- **Campaign to end Loneliness: Connections in Older Age** – charity that campaigns to end loneliness and supports elderly in making new connections: [www.campaigntoendlonelines.org](http://www.campaigntoendlonelines.org)
- **Mind, the Mental Health Charity** - [www.mind.org.uk](http://www.mind.org.uk)
- **NCVO Championing Voluntary Action** - information and volunteering opportunities: [https://www.ncvo.org.uk/ncvo-volunteering](https://www.ncvo.org.uk/ncvo-volunteering)
- **www.weboloneliness.com** - support for lonely people
- **Meetup** – Meetup brings together people in numerous cities to do more of what they want to in life e.g. marathons, getting outdoors, cooking etc. Using their website or app you can organise your own meetup or join one that interests you: [www.meetup.com](http://www.meetup.com)

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**Further help and information**

**CIC – Supporting Organisations**

[www.well-online.co.uk](http://www.well-online.co.uk)

24-hour Confidential Care Advice Line, providing emotional and practical support.

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