

Background

Feelings of loneliness or isolation can affect anyone at any time and at any stage of our lives. It is difficult at any age and none of us are immune. In January 2018, in response to the Jo Cox Commission report on loneliness, the government set out its first steps to tackle loneliness (1)

Since then loneliness has become a focus of conversation and a survey conducted by the charity **Campaign to End Loneliness** (2) found that a fifth of the UK population, over nine million people, say they are always or often lonely. Two thirds of the population said they wouldn't feel comfortable admitting it if they were, which is over 40 million people in the UK. Like mental health, it is a taboo subject for many who fear opening up about their feelings.

There are many people trying to cope with isolation or loneliness during the coronavirus pandemic but loneliness is not always the same as being alone. Even people that have lots of social contact, are in a relationship or part of a family may still feel lonely especially if they don't feel understood or cared for by the people around them. Likewise you can be alone and feel peaceful and content.

Feelings of Isolation and loneliness can happen because of many factors, however in this current period where COVID-19 is causing social isolation, it frequently arises because of the forced separation from those we love, bereavement or due to the lack of social connections with other people.

How loneliness can affect your health

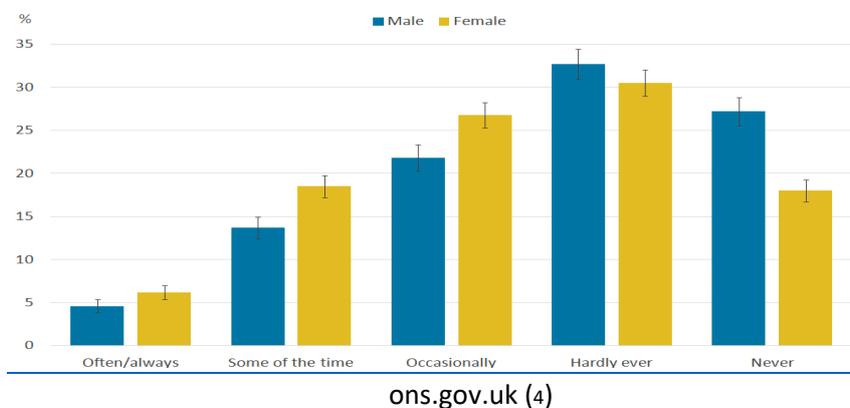


According to the **Mental Health Foundation**, long-term loneliness is associated with an increased risk of certain mental health problems, including depression, anxiety and increased stress. In addition it is also linked to physical health issues such as cardiovascular impairment, chronic pain, and fatigue with a study showing that loneliness increases the likelihood of mortality by 26% (3). You can find more helpful information on mental health at <https://safety.networkrail.co.uk/healthandwellbeing/a-d-v-i-c-e/>

Loneliness and gender

The **Office of National Statistics** (ONS) carried out an analysis of characteristics and circumstances associated with loneliness in England using the Community Life Survey 2016 to 2017 and found that women reported feeling lonely more frequently than men. They concluded that it was possible this could be reflected in differences in how men and women reflect on their personal experiences of loneliness and some research suggests that men may be more reluctant than women to report undesirable feelings such as loneliness.

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Suggestions on how to combat feelings of isolation and loneliness.

Stay Connected:

- Stay in touch via video calls, Whatsapp, Zoom or just regular phone calls.
- Keep to your routines where possible.
- Try out one of the online quizzes hosted on Facebook or Youtube

Don't keep it to yourself:

- Talk to someone you trust about your feelings of loneliness
- A recent study by the University of Oxford found that men bond better through face-to-face contact whereas women find it easier through phone conversations. With social distancing easing to allow contact outside of your household those face to face connections can be reignited.
- Consider using talking therapies such as cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) which may help and is often available through company Employee Assistance Programmes or your local NHS

Avoid negative thoughts and comparing yourself to others.

- Accept the situation we/you are in
- Control the controllable. Learn to understand what you can change and what you cant
- Try to switch off from social media stories where people are sharing their 'perfect' lives. Remind yourself that you do not know what their lives are like away from the screen.

Giving to others:

- Consider ways to volunteer - being furloughed will not stop you from being able to volunteer and if you are at work with evenings free you may still be able to fit some time in.
- Maybe you could offer to volunteer for the NHS as a 'check in and chat' volunteer or support your local school by helping to deliver school meals

Try to remain physically active:

- Physical exercise helps release endorphins in the brain, with unlimited exercise time being agreed last week, aim to get some physical activity into your every day

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- There are many online resources available to help you exercise safely at home or digs, whatever your fitness level. <https://www.nhs.uk/Conditions/nhs-fitness-studio/>

If you prefer to manage alone:

- The charity Mind suggests planning your week ahead and aiming to do something you enjoy
- Look at things you could do which you wouldn't normally have time for. The time you are saving by not commuting to work could be spent spring cleaning, meditating, preparing and cooking new recipes. If you are in digs and unable to socialise as normal after work you could still look at all of the suggestions above to keep yourself connected in other ways.

Support

Whether you are concerned about a young person, elderly relative or just want to find different social circle, these sources of information may help.

www.nhs.uk/conditions/stress-anxiety-depression/feeling-lonely - Provides a mood assessment and advice on what you can do if you are feeling lonely.

www.letstalkloneliness.co.uk - Provides practical advice, organisations and support helplines

(0800 1111) www.childline.org.uk - Childline is a counselling service for children and young people

(0800 4 70 80 90) www.thesilverline.org.uk - The Silverline is a free helpline for older people across the UK offering information, friendship and advice, link callers to local groups and services, offer regular befriending calls and protect and support those who are suffering abuse and neglect

meetup.com - Find or organise a local group. More than 9,000 groups in local communities, each one with the goal of improving themselves or their communities and make friends.

nextdoor.com - Nextdoor is the free private social network for you and your neighbours to talk online

do-it.org - Volunteer in your local community and give your time to help others.

mentalhealth.org.uk/coronavirus/coping-with-loneliness – support for mental health concerns

Sources

- 1) <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/loneliness-annual-report-the-first-year/loneliness-annual-report-january-2020--2>
- 2) <https://www.campaigntoendloneliness.org/loneliness-research/>
- 3) [Holt-Lunstad, J., Smith, T.B., Baker, M., Harris, T. and Stephenson, D., 2015. Loneliness and social isolation as risk factors for mortality: a meta-analytic review. Perspectives on psychological science, 10\(2\), pp.227-237](#)
- 4) <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/wellbeing/articles/lonelinesswhatcharacteristicsandcircumstancesareassociatedwithfeelinglonely/2018-04-10>