

RECOGNIZING AND ADDRESSING LONELINESS

We can feel both happy and lonely, we can be young and feel lonely, we can hold down a full-time job and/or have a family and friends and feel lonely. Often, we don't want to say anything for fear of embarrassing ourselves or other people. In a wider context, we can unintentionally stigmatize loneliness even further by the way we talk about it.

1. Loneliness is a natural feeling

Most of us will experience loneliness at some point in our lives. Loneliness doesn't mean there's anything wrong with you – it's your body's way of letting you know that you're not getting your social needs met. Consider it like a warning sign that you need to address your social needs - like hunger is a warning sign you need to eat.

2. Loneliness isn't just something older people feel

People aged 16-24 are now the most likely group to be affected by loneliness, while women and people from ethnic minorities were amongst the groups most affected by loneliness during the pandemic. 45% of adults in England (25 million people) say they feel occasionally, sometimes or often lonely.*

3. There are different types of loneliness

Some loneliness is situational, where we might have moved to a new place or live somewhere where we don't have the right level of connection. Loneliness can be linked to a specific life event like bereavement, a relationship breakdown or becoming a new parent. Workplace loneliness can be felt at work if you are not getting the right level of connection. Emotional loneliness can happen in relationships and families, where you have people in your life but you don't feel close to or understood by them.

There is no 'one size fits all' to loneliness and more often than not, you won't know someone is feeling lonely unless they say.

4. Think about how you describe loneliness

Very often it's described as something we 'suffer' from and that we 'admit' to having. There is nothing to feel embarrassed or shameful about. Try swapping in 'experience' instead of suffering and 'telling' instead of admitting. Using kinder and more accepting language around loneliness will help to further remove the stigma. Or, if you're feeling lonely and don't feel comfortable saying it, you don't have to explicitly name it.

Try saying something like: 'I feel like I need some more contact or company.' This could also work if you feel someone is lonely but don't know how to broach it and need a gentler way in.

5. Loneliness is fixable

Often it can feel overwhelming and something that we will feel forever, but we can take immediate steps to feel better. Tell someone you trust how you're feeling, think about what you need (we are all different) and make a plan to start getting those social connections you need. If you feel that loneliness is having a deeper detrimental impact on your life, reach out to a health professional.

6. Loneliness is not a mental health condition

It is a normal human reaction when we're not getting our social needs met. If left unchecked, loneliness can start to affect our mental and physical health but it's important to know that first and foremost, it's a normal and natural feeling. However horrible it can feel when you're in it, there is always something you can do to feel better. Most loneliness is temporary.

CHANGING THE LANGUAGE AROUND LONELINESS

Avoid negative words

As well as talking about loneliness, it's important how we talk about it. Loneliness is often described in medical terms as an 'epidemic' and something we're at risk of catching. We say that someone is 'suffering' from loneliness, or that loneliness is something we 'admit' to having. The truth is that there's nothing wrong or shameful about loneliness. It's best to use neutral or positive language to describe it instead.

Destigmatize the language of loneliness:

Swap 'suffering' for 'experiencing'

Rather than 'admitting' to feeling lonely, replace it with 'telling' someone.

Instead of using the term 'epidemic' in blanket terms, try using more relatable and fact-based language such as: 'Statistics show that lots of us are experiencing loneliness these days.'

Try to avoid using terms such as 'end' or 'got rid of' or 'tackling loneliness', as it can make people feel even worse. Instead, use practical and positive terms like 'helping' or 'improving.'

Reframe your language. Instead of talking about curing someone of loneliness, say: 'How can we build up your connections?'

Don't define a person by their loneliness. Avoid describing someone who is feeling lonely as a 'sad person' or a 'social misfit'. People might feel lonely but first and foremost they are a unique human being with different interests, talents and qualities.

Take a softer approach

How to ask someone if they are lonely: Sometimes people don't want to say they're lonely or they don't want it pointed out to them. Instead of being direct and asking someone if they're lonely, try saying: 'Do you think you'd benefit from seeing more people?' It might open up the conversation to someone talking about being lonely.

If you're feeling lonely: If you don't feel comfortable saying you are lonely, try something like: 'I feel like I'm not seeing enough people and I would benefit from more social contact.' The subtext is there and the other person will understand. It also helps you feel that you are taking control of the situation and are doing something about it. Don't feel embarrassed, get practical instead!

Use empowering language

Rather than saying 'I am lonely' try saying 'I feel lonely.' That way you feel like you have more control over your loneliness and that it's something you are experiencing right now, rather than it being a permanent state of being.

Use technology proactively

Technology has been blamed for rising levels of loneliness but it can still be good for social interaction. Social media is still a great way to connect with others but notice how it makes you feel when you use it.

Do you feel happier and more connected, or the opposite? Instead of scrolling through other people's timelines, use social media to join new groups or like-minded communities so you feel part of something.

In real life, try swapping communicating via a screen for a real-life interaction. Meet up with a friend or call someone for a chat, rather than WhatsApping or emailing them. Does using social platforms like WhatsApp, Instagram and Facebook make you feel more or less connected?

It may be time to look at different ways of communicating that suit you more (i.e more real-life interactions and fewer online ones).

If we don't use the Internet it can feel like the rest of the world is online, which can make us feel even more shut out. If you feel you'd benefit socially from being online, look into Internet courses at your local library or community centre. Since the COVID-19 pandemic, there are also lots of telephone activities which you can get involved in, including reading groups, reminiscence chats and exercise classes.

Finding friends

Whether you live in a bustling city or a rural village, most places have opportunities to meet new people. Could you start a course, or do some sort of physical exercise, or take up a new hobby as a way to meet like-minded people who have similar interests?

Volunteering is also a great way to meet new people and feel part of a cause or community. Research shows that being kind to others increases our own levels of happiness as well as theirs.

WHAT TO SAY TO A LONELY PERSON

"People aren't responsible for me being lonely"

"People can get very uncomfortable when I say I get lonely," says Ron, 78, a retired widower. "I think they think that they should be doing something about it, but that's not the case at all. People can't help me miss my wife less but a friendly ear helps or just things like having a cup of tea together. It's the company. Just being able to tell someone how I'm feeling makes me feel like I'm not going mad and loneliness isn't something to be ashamed of. I don't feel so alone keeping these feelings inside of me."

"Just having someone listen really helped"

"It was a real shock to me when I got lonely," says Ali, 43. "I have lots of friends and family so I didn't think I was the type of person who got lonely. I felt really embarrassed about it at first because there is this stigma around loneliness. I remember ringing a close friend to tell her how I was feeling and I felt so nervous beforehand. But she just listened without trying to give me loads of advice or telling me that I had nothing to feel lonely about. At the end she said: "I'm really sorry you've been feeling this way, is there anything I can do to help?" It was the perfect response: empathetic and practical and no feeling of judgment. It really helped me go on and talk about feeling lonely with other people."

“I don’t want people feeling sorry for me.”

“I think people don’t ask me how I am because they’re worried I’ll start crying or get upset,” says Jason, 28, who lives alone. “But you can still have a laugh when you feel lonely. I don’t want people feeling sorry for me. People tend to get very serious when they talk about loneliness like there’s been a death in the family, the only death has been my social life! Or even worse, people don’t talk about it at all. It’s like the big elephant in the room. When people ask me how I am, I might be having one of those days and say that I’m feeling lonely, but the next time they ask me I could be fine. I feel like the more we talk about it, the more it becomes part of everyday conversation and everyone gets more comfortable with it.”

Think about how you describe loneliness

Telling someone that you’re lonely is an important step but it’s also how we talk about it. We still use words like ‘admitting’ to and ‘suffering’ from, which can unintentionally add to the belief that something is wrong with us. There is absolutely no shame in feeling lonely and changing the language around loneliness is a positive and liberating step forward.

The more we talk about it, the more we normalise it and we can move towards a society where it can be spoken about openly. When you tell someone that you’re feeling lonely, or someone is telling you, try to discuss it in a neutral and open manner. Remember that loneliness is normal.

We believe that loneliness should be accepted and understood more, rather than something that necessarily has to be eradicated.

Reach out and tell someone

Look at your life and try to identify the areas where you do have support or someone to talk to. Can you talk to a family member or a friend? Or is there someone at work or in your community you can reach out to? When we’ve been lonely for a long time it can start to affect our mental health and wellbeing. If you feel that is the case, make an appointment to see your GP to make sure that you are getting the right support.

When you’re lonely it can feel like there is no one there for you but loneliness isn’t something that can always be noticed from someone’s outward appearance. It’s not that people don’t care or aren’t there for you, it’s more likely that they don’t know how you are feeling. It goes two ways: once you start reaching out to people, they will respond accordingly and your social network can start to flourish.

Know what you need

We're all different and we all need varying levels of social contact. Some of us like to have face-to-face interaction several times a day. For others, it's a regular phone call, or being part of an online group or forum. What does your mood feel like if you go a few days without seeing or speaking to anyone?

Some people will find a busy social life too overwhelming, so it's about finding the level of contact that you feel comfortable with. Work out what you need and then look at how you can fill those gaps in your life with the right amount of connections. It's also important to distinguish the difference between being alone and feeling lonely. Many people are happy with their company for much of the time and find it to be a positive experience. We might be a loneliness charity but we believe in having enough beneficial alone time!

Build up your daily community

We live in a world where a lot of the time, we don't really connect with people for work, shopping or leisure activities. Or we might live away from friends and family and feel like we don't have a local network or community.

Think of the ways you can build connections back into your daily life. For example, shopping locally in the same places or choosing a staff-manned check out at the supermarket rather than always using self-service, or walking regularly in your local park or outside space. Even the smallest things like seeing the same faces on a regular basis, or saying hello to your neighbours will help you feel more anchored to a community.

While we're here, what does the idea of a daily community feel like to you? What does it stand for and who is in it? All of us will have a different idea: depending on our personal circumstances and whether we live in a city, town, village or a remote rural location. What community connections are available to you and how can you make the most of them? If you don't feel there is something there for you, how can you build up the contact or a sense of community that you feel you're currently lacking?