

## **A guide to managing feelings of loneliness**

We all feel lonely from time to time. Feelings of loneliness are personal, so everyone's experience of loneliness will be different. One common description of loneliness is the feeling we get when our need for rewarding social contact and relationships is not met. But loneliness is not always the same as being alone.

You may choose to be alone and live happily without much contact with other people, while others may find this a lonely experience. Or you may have lots of social contact or be in a relationship or part of a family, and still feel lonely – especially if you do not feel understood or cared for by the people around you.

Feeling lonely can be very difficult, but there are steps you can take that might help. Try our Quick Read (if you are in a hurry) or Detailed Read (if you have more time) for more information.

If you are struggling to cope, we highly recommend that you seek professional advice. Please do not suffer in silence.

### **Quick read**

Got five minutes? Take these simple steps to help reduce feelings of loneliness.

- Make new connections. If you are feeling lonely because of a lack of social contact in your life you could try to meet new or different people by joining a class, a club or becoming a volunteer. Online or in-person, you can make new connections with people who share your interests or values.
- Try peer support. Charities and mental health organizations sometimes offer a buddy service which offers support to people who are experiencing loneliness. Or you could join an online community and connect with others that way.
- Talk to someone you trust. Having someone listen to you can help relieve feelings of anxiety. If you can not talk to someone you know, contact a charity or organization that offers a helpline or peer support group. You could consider talking to a therapist or counsellor and developing coping skills with cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT). If you have access to an Employee Assistance Programme, they may be able to provide links and recommendations.
- It is easy to compare yourself to others, especially on social media, but it can help to remember that things are not always what they seem from the outside.
- Look after yourself. Physical exercise, a balanced diet, time spent outdoors, and sleep can all help manage anxiety levels. <<Find out more about how to improve your sleep here>>.

## Detailed read

What causes loneliness?

Loneliness has many different causes, which vary from person to person. We do not always understand what it is about an experience that makes us feel lonely.

For some people, certain life events may mean they feel lonely, such as:

- experiencing a bereavement
- going through a relationship break-up
- retiring and losing the social contact you had at work
- changing jobs and feeling isolated from your co-workers
- starting college
- moving to a new area or country without family, friends or community networks. Other

people find they feel lonely at certain times of the year, such as around The Holidays.

Some research suggests that people who live in certain circumstances, or belong to particular groups, are more vulnerable to loneliness. For example, if you:

- have no friends or family
- are estranged from your family
- are a single parent or care for someone else – you may find it hard to maintain a social life
- belong to minority groups and live in an area without others from a similar background
- are excluded from social activities due to mobility problems or a shortage of money
- experience discrimination and stigma because of a disability or long-term health problem, including mental health problems
- have experienced sexual or physical abuse – you may find it harder to form close relationships with other people.

Some people experience deep and constant feelings of loneliness that come from within and do not disappear, regardless of their social situation or how many friends they have.

There are many reasons people experience this kind of loneliness. You might feel unable to like yourself or to be liked by others, or you may lack self-confidence.

Thinking about what is making you feel lonely may help you find a way of feeling better.

How can I manage loneliness?

This section has some tips and suggestions for managing feelings of loneliness. Some people find these ideas useful but remember that different things work for different people at different times. Only try what you feel comfortable with and try not to put too much pressure on yourself. If something is not working for you (or does not feel possible just now), you can try something else, or come back to it another time.

Make new connections

If you are feeling lonely because of a lack of satisfying social contact in your life, you could try to meet more, or different people.

- Try to join a class or group based on your hobbies or interests, although you may be restricted on attending these classes in person, many have moved to be held online or virtually.
- If you are able to, volunteering is a good way of meeting people. Helping others can also really help improve your mental health. It is also a good idea to check that you will receive adequate support from the organization you are volunteering at

#### Try peer support

There are many different types of peer support service, which provide people with a space to use their own experiences to help and support each other, including experiences of loneliness and related mental health problems.

These are some different types of peer support which you may find useful:

- Try a befriender service. Various charities offer telephone and face-to-face befriender services, which put volunteer befrienders in touch with people feeling lonely.
- Join an online community. These communities can provide a place to listen and share with others who have similar experiences. They are normally available 24/7, most are free, and you can access them wherever you are.

#### Try to open up/Share Your Thoughts

You might feel that you know plenty of people, but what is actually wrong is that you do not feel close to them, or they do not give you the care and attention you need.

In this situation it might help to open up about how you feel to friends and family.

If you do not feel comfortable opening up to the people you know, you could try speaking with a therapist or a using a peer support service.

#### Talking therapies

Talking therapies allow you to explore and understand your feelings of loneliness and can help you develop positive ways of dealing with them. For example, therapy can provide a space for you to discuss the emotional problems that make it hard for you to form satisfying relationships.

If anxiety about social situations has made you feel isolated, cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) may help. This focuses on how your thoughts, beliefs and attitudes affect your feelings and behavior, and teaches you coping skills for dealing with different problems.

#### Be careful when comparing yourself to others

It is very hard to stop comparing ourselves to others. We all do it, but it can help to just be aware that things are not always what they seem from the outside.

For example, on social media, we very often only see what other people want to share about their lives, and this can make us feel like we are the only ones feeling lonely.

It is important to remind yourself that you do not know how other people feel when they are alone, or when their social media feeds are turned off.

#### Look after yourself

Feeling lonely can be very stressful and can have a big impact on your general wellbeing, which might make it even harder to make positive steps to feeling better.

Think about how some of the following are affecting how you feel and whether you can do anything to change them:

- **Try to get enough sleep.** Getting too little or too much sleep can have a big impact on how you feel.
- **Think about your diet.** Eating regularly and keeping your blood sugar balanced can make a difference to your mood and energy levels.
- **Try to do some physical activity.** Exercise can be really helpful for your mental wellbeing, and some people find it helps improve their self-esteem.
- **Spend time outside.** Spending time in an outdoor green space can help your wellbeing.
- **Spend time with animals.** Some people find spending time around animals can help with feelings of loneliness, whether through owning a pet or spending time around animals in their natural environment.
- **Avoid drugs and alcohol.** While you might want to use drugs and alcohol to cope with difficult feelings about yourself, in the long run they can make you feel worse and can prevent you from dealing with underlying problems.