Loneliness and Social Isolation

Edited by Justin Healey

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Loneliness and Social Isolation is Volume 459 in the ‘Issues in Society’ series of educational resource books. The aim of this series is to offer current, diverse information about important issues in our world, from an Australian perspective.

KEY ISSUES IN THIS TOPIC
Loneliness is a feeling of sadness or distress about being by yourself or feeling disconnected from the world around you, which is felt more over a long period of time. It is even possible to feel lonely in a crowd. Social isolation, on the other hand, is being separated from other people and your environment, due to either personal decisions or circumstances.

Chronic loneliness is on the rise in Australia; many of us, including seemingly connected young people, lack strong meaningful relationships to enrich our lives and protect our physical and mental health and general wellbeing. According to a recent report on loneliness, one in four Australians reported feeling lonely each week. Experts warn of a “loneliness epidemic” that could be our next public health crisis.

What causes social isolation and loneliness, and who experiences it? This book explores the extent and impacts of loneliness and isolation and offers advice on how to encourage social connections so that you don’t have to go it alone.

SOURCES OF INFORMATION
Titles in the ‘Issues in Society’ series are individual resource books which provide an overview on a specific subject comprised of facts and opinions.

The information in this resource book is not from any single author, publication or organisation. The unique value of the ‘Issues in Society’ series lies in its diversity of content and perspectives.

The content comes from a wide variety of sources and includes:

- Newspaper reports and opinion pieces
- Website fact sheets
- Magazine and journal articles
- Statistics and surveys
- Government reports
- Literature from special interest groups

CRITICAL EVALUATION
As the information reproduced in this book is from a number of different sources, readers should always be aware of the origin of the text and whether or not the source is likely to be expressing a particular bias or agenda.

It is hoped that, as you read about the many aspects of the issues explored in this book, you will critically evaluate the information presented. In some cases, it is important that you decide whether you are being presented with facts or opinions. Does the writer give a biased or an unbiased report? If an opinion is being expressed, do you agree with the writer?

EXPLORING ISSUES
The ‘Exploring issues’ section at the back of this book features a range of ready-to-use worksheets relating to the articles and issues raised in this book. The activities and exercises in these worksheets are suitable for use by students at middle secondary school level and beyond.

FURTHER RESEARCH
This title offers a useful starting point for those who need convenient access to information about the issues involved. However, it is only a starting point. The ‘Web links’ section at the back of this book contains a list of useful websites which you can access for more reading on the topic.
SOCIAL ISOLATION AND LONELINESS
A SNAPSHOT FROM THE AUSTRALIAN INSTITUTE OF HEALTH AND WELFARE

Social isolation and loneliness can be harmful to both mental and physical health. They are considered significant health and wellbeing issues in Australia because of the impact they have on peoples’ lives. Part of the challenge in reporting on social isolation and loneliness stems from a lack of information about these experiences. Also, there are no universally-agreed upon definitions.

How many people are lonely?
Most Australians will experience loneliness at some point in their lives (Relationships Australia 2018). One in 3 Australians reported an episode of loneliness between 2001 and 2009, with 40% of these people experiencing more than 1 episode, according to a study of loneliness using data from the longitudinal Household Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) Survey (Baker 2012).

Additionally:
• 1 in 10 (9.5%, or around 1.8 million based on 2016 population) Australians aged 15 and over report lacking social support (Relationships Australia 2018).
• About 1 in 4 report they are currently experiencing an episode of loneliness (Australian Psychological Society 2018)
• 1 in 2 (51%) report they feel lonely for at least 1 day each week (Australian Psychological Society 2018).

Most incidents of loneliness will last for 1 year or less, however, if loneliness lasts longer than this it is likely to last for 3 or more years (Baker 2012).

What causes social isolation and loneliness?
Although there is no guarantee that an individual’s family household composition will either lead to or protect against loneliness, some situations are more likely to be associated with loneliness than others.

According to the 2016 Census of Population and Housing, about 1 in 4 (24%) Australian households are lone person households and 71% are family households. Of family households, 45% consisted of a couple with children, 38% a couple without children and 16% were a one-parent family with one or more children (ABS 2016).

Living alone and not being in a relationship with a partner are substantial risk factors for loneliness (Flood 2005; Lauder et al. 2004; Relationships Australia 2011).

Relationship separation tends to result in an increase in loneliness across ages and genders, however, the effects are more pronounced for men than women. Recently separated men are more than 13 times more likely to develop loneliness than married men, as opposed to twice as likely for separated women compared with married women (Franklin & Tranter 2008). Single parents experience higher levels of social isolation (38% for men, 18% for women) than singles adults without children, or couples with or without children (Relationships Australia 2018).

Disconnection from community (Relationships Australia 2018) is a risk factor for developing loneliness. It has been suggested (for example, MacKay 2017) that social fragmentation, or disorganisation and isolation in a particular geographic area (Maguire & O’Reilly 2010) can influence social isolation and loneliness, although there appears to be little difference between levels of social isolation and loneliness in particular geographic areas (Baker 2012).

Unemployment, receiving income support (Relationships Australia 2018) and lack of satisfaction with financial situation (Baker 2012) are also substantial factors in the development of loneliness across age groups and gender.

Loneliness can be self-reinforcing if it is associated with an experience of depression and anxiety, particularly around social interactions (Australian Psychological Society 2018).

Social media
The relationship between social media and loneliness is complex and depends on the individual and their life circumstances. Users of social media experiencing loneliness have reported increased use of social media to communicate with family and friends (Relationships Australia 2011), while at the same time reporting fewer online ‘friends’ and being less likely to consider these as real friends than users who are not experiencing loneliness (Baker 2012).

Others have argued that online socialising can increase levels of loneliness as these relationships are generally fragile and shallow (Franklin 2009). The number of online friends appears less important than the quality and strength of the relationships.

Impact
Loneliness has been linked to premature death (Holt-Lunstad et al. 2015), poor physical and mental health
Social isolation and loneliness: a risk for premature death

The risk of premature death associated with social isolation and loneliness is similar to the risk of premature death associated with well-known risk factors such as obesity, based on a meta-analysis of research in Europe, North American, Asia and Australia (Holt-Lunstad et al. 2015). High levels of social isolation are also associated with sustained decreases in feelings of wellbeing (Shankar et al. 2015).

Social isolation and loneliness are risk factors for premature death, leading to serious health conditions such as cognitive decline, cardiovascular disease, diabetes, depression, and anxiety. Social isolation has also been linked to mental illness, emotional distress, suicide, the development of dementia, premature death, poor health behaviours, smoking, physical inactivity, poor sleep, and biological effects, including high blood pressure and poorer immune function (Hawthorne 2006; Holt-Lunstad et al. 2015). High levels of social isolation are associated with loneliness and lower measures of mental health, contributing to the risk of premature death. However, the relationship between social isolation and loneliness, or both, and premature death is complicated by the presence of other risk factors and the individual’s ability to cope with stress.

Who experiences social isolation and/or loneliness?

Social isolation and loneliness vary across age groups (Figure 1). Loneliness tends to be more common in young adults, males, those living alone and those with children, either singly or in a couple (Baker 2012). Men tend to report higher levels of loneliness than women (Flood 2005; Relationships Australia 2018). In a study using HILDA data, among adults aged 25-44, more men living alone experienced loneliness (39%) than women living alone (12%) (Baker 2012). This difference in loneliness may be due to women tending to have more social support than men (Flood 2005).

Studies investigating the relationship between age and loneliness often have contradictory findings, likely related to differences in study methods and sample variations. Some studies find higher levels of loneliness among older people (Relationships Australia 2018) while others find lower levels in these age groups (Relationships Australia 2011). Rates of loneliness may also vary according to relationship status, with another study finding that Australians aged over 65 who are married experience the lowest levels of loneliness (Australian Psychological Society 2018).

The relationship between income and loneliness varies depending on age and gender. For example, men aged 25-44 on high incomes are more likely to be lonely, while women of all ages on low incomes are far more likely to be lonely than those on high incomes (Baker 2012).

There are few differences in loneliness levels between urban, regional and rural areas (Baker 2012). Young men who live in regional areas, however, experience higher rates of social isolation than men in Major cities (Relationships Australia 2018).

Can social isolation and loneliness be prevented or reduced?

Having paid work and caring for others are important safeguards against loneliness. Engaging in volunteer work and maintaining active memberships of sporting or community organisations are also associated with reduced social isolation (Flood 2005). However, it is unclear whether community engagement can consistently act as a protective factor in the development of loneliness.

For example, one study found that loneliness is lower in people who spend at least some time each week volunteering (Flood 2005), while another study found no relationship between loneliness and volunteering, socialising and participating in sport and community organisations (Baker 2012). As social contact alone does not reduce loneliness (Masi et al. 2011), it may be that the building of quality relationships, rather than volunteering in and of itself, can reduce feelings of loneliness.

 Companion animals

In 2016, 62% (5.7 million) of Australian households owned a pet, with the two most common types of pet being dogs (38%) and cats (29%). Around two-thirds of dog and cat owners reported ‘Companionship’ as a reason for owning a pet and a similar proportion consider their pet a part of their family (Animal Medicines Australia 2016). Another survey found 60% of owners felt more socially connected as a direct result of owning a pet (Petplan Australia 2016). Pet ownership has been linked
to increased social contact, for example, through facilitating contact with neighbours and acting as a trigger for conversations (Wood et al. 2015), which may help counter social isolation (McNicholas et al. 2005).

Being in a relationship is a greater protective factor against loneliness for men than for women (Baker 2012). Women living with others and women living alone report similar levels of loneliness, while men living alone report higher levels of loneliness than those living with others (Flood 2005).

Government initiatives

Awareness of loneliness and social isolation as significant public health and wellbeing issues has increased in recent years, along with the development of targeted government and community support programs for affected Australians.

Federal, state and territory and local governments have all provided varying degrees of funding and support to local councils and community organisations for programs to address the social isolation and loneliness of Australians.

For example, the Australian Government funds a national Community Visitors Scheme, which supports local organisations to recruit volunteers who provide regular visits to Australians in receipt of Commonwealth-subsidised aged care services (Sutherland Shire Council 2018).

Where do I go for more information?

For more information on social isolation and loneliness, see:

- Household, Income and Labour Dynamics and Australia (HILDA) survey
- Psychology Week 11-17 November 2018 Loneliness study.

REFERENCES


Australian Psychological Society 2018. Australian loneliness report: A survey exploring the loneliness levels of Australians and the impact on their health and wellbeing. Melbourne: APS.


Loneliness is a feeling of sadness or distress about being by yourself or feeling disconnected from the world around you. It may be felt more over a long period of time. It is also possible to feel lonely, even when surrounded by people.

Isolation is being separated from other people and your environment. Sometimes this occurs through decisions we make ourselves, or because of circumstances e.g. doing a job that requires travel or relocation.

Some reasons you might feel lonely or isolated as you get older are:
- Losing a loved one or friend through death or relocation
- Lack of close family ties
- Living alone
- Difficulties in meeting new people due to access issues, an introverted personality, or feeling like you don’t belong
- Feelings of loss or grief
- Poor physical health, frailty, mobility issues
- A mental health condition such as depression or anxiety
- Fear of rejection from others or feelings of being “different” or stigmatised by society
- Inability to participate in activities due to access issues, mobility, illness, transport
- Retirement from work, home relocation, starting out in a new role or community
- Lack of purpose or meaning in life
- Language or cultural barriers, or reduced connection with your culture of origin
- Geographic isolation
- Feeling lost in the crowd.

HOW DOES LONELINESS AND ISOLATION AFFECT YOUR MENTAL HEALTH?

Everyone feels lonely from time to time, but long periods of loneliness or social isolation can have a negative impact on your physical, mental and social health. Some signs include:
- Physical symptoms – aches and pains, headaches, illness or worsening of medical conditions
- Mental health conditions – increased risk of depression, anxiety, paranoia or panic attacks
- Low energy – tiredness or lack of motivation
- Sleep problems – difficulty getting to sleep, waking frequently or sleeping too much
- Diet problems – loss of appetite, sudden weight gain or loss
- Substance use – increased consumption of alcohol, smoking, medications, drugs
- Negative feelings – feelings of worthlessness, hopelessness or thoughts about suicide.

WHAT HELPS?

Loneliness can be overcome.
- Connect or reconnect with friends and family – staying in contact with loved ones can prevent loneliness and isolation. If your family don’t live nearby, technology can help you stay in touch
- Get out and about – regular outings for social functions, exercise, visiting friends, doing shopping, or simply going to public places can help
- Get involved in your community – try a new (or old) hobby, join a club, enrol in study, or learn a new skill. Try looking online, at your local TAFE/Community College, library or community centre for things in your area that might be interesting to you
- Volunteer – helping others is a great way to help yourself feel more connected
- Consider getting a pet – pets are wonderful companions and can provide comfort and support during times of stress, ill-health or isolation
- Get support – if loneliness and social isolation are causing you distress, you should discuss your concerns with a GP, counsellor or a trusted person.

It’s official … living alone can make some people feel lonelier and less satisfied with life, according to research by the Australian Institute of Family Studies.

However, not everyone is lonely and it’s worse for men whose satisfaction with life fell sharply when they found themselves alone.

Senior Research Fellow, Professor David de Vaus said a quarter of all Australian households were now made up of people living alone, up from one-fifth in the mid-eighties and for some people it was a lonely existence.

“The study found that 26 per cent of people living alone reported feeling lonely often, compared to 16 per cent of people living with others. People living alone were also slightly less satisfied with their lot in life,” Professor de Vaus said.

“Fewer of those living alone had a sense that they had high levels of social support compared to people who lived with others and they were also more likely to say they got bored.

“Overall, almost a quarter of those living alone rated their health as below average, compared to 17 per cent of those living with others but interestingly, there was no difference in mental health.

“People experienced living alone differently. Some people value the independence and autonomy that living alone gives them, while others may find the use of social media helps to keep them in touch with others.

“The study found loneliness and lower life satisfaction levels were more evident among men who lived alone, than women, who typically adjusted more quickly to changing circumstances.

“Loneliness increased more sharply for men when they started to live alone than it did for women who appeared to ward off loneliness by increasing their involvement with friends and family.

“Overall, living alone led to a sustained increase in loneliness among both older and younger men. While older women experienced an increase in loneliness, this tended to be short-term.

“For men, the drop in life satisfaction is likely to be partly because their relationship has ended and this can be a difficult time especially when it involves less contact with their children.”

The study found that 26% of people living alone reported feeling lonely often, compared to 16% of people living with others. People living alone were also slightly less satisfied with their lot in life.

The study drew on data from the Household Income and Labour Dynamics In Australia (HILDA) and Living Alone In Australia Surveys.

Report co-author Senior Research Fellow, Dr Lixia Qu said the research found that solo men engaged in less healthy behaviours than those in shared living arrangements.

“Men who live alone were more likely to drink fairly heavily, defined here as consuming at least five to six standard drinks at a time,” Dr Qu said.

“However, these patterns appeared to be a continuation of a lifestyle that was already pretty well established before the men began living solo.

“For most people, living alone was a relatively short-term arrangement that acted as a transition between other family living arrangements. The exception was for older people who tended to live alone for longer periods.”

**FURTHER READING**

*Australian Family Trends No.9: The nature of living alone in Australia and Australian Family Trends No.10: Living alone and personal wellbeing.*

Feeling Isolated? You’re Not Alone. Here’s Why 1 in 4 of Us Is Lonely

Being lonely and isolated can take a tremendous toll on our relationships, health, wellbeing, and our survival, according to this ABC Life report by Grace Jennings-Edquist

Humans are social creatures. Our need to connect with others is deeply hardwired (and goes right back to when we’d hang out in groups so we could survive).

Times have changed, but not being connected to others can still take a tremendous toll on our relationships, health, wellbeing, and our survival. So when one in four Australians reports feeling lonely at least one day a week, it’s something we need to pay attention to.

The issue is so pervasive, and its effects are so damaging, that experts warn of a “loneliness epidemic” that could be our next public health crisis.

This is why ABC Life will be focusing on the issue of social isolation and loneliness: Who’s lonely in Australia; what we can do to start reconnecting; and what social isolation looks like in practice.

What’s Driving Our Loneliness?

Chronic loneliness is on the rise in Australia, says Dr Michelle Lim from Swinburne University of Technology and the scientific chair of the Australian Coalition to End Loneliness. Many of us – including young people who appear popular and connected – lack strong meaningful relationships to enrich our lives and protect our physical and mental health, and wellbeing.

“We’ve got to get out of that stereotype that it’s only elderly people that are lonely,” says Elisabeth Shaw, CEO of Relationships Australia NSW.

“It’s the under-65 people who’ve lost their partner. It’s the single parent. It’s the youth. Looking at some of those sort of areas makes us understand with more depth and texture what loneliness is really about.”

Some Australians are lonely because they’re socially isolated – disconnected from social support because of geography, a mobility issue or a life circumstance (although it’s possible to be socially isolated and not lonely).

Others experience loneliness because the relationships we do have don’t meet our needs, or leave us feeling unsupported and disconnected.

1. How we work

As a nation, we’re experiencing major economic and social changes that can contribute to increased social isolation, says Alan Woodward, Lifeline’s executive director of research and strategy.

One major driver of social isolation in Australia is changes to the way we work. Dr Lim says we now tend to live much further from our workplaces.

In the past, “many of us would work in a community and live in a community, but now people are willing to travel”, Dr Lim says.

“If I’m living in Hawthorn but working somewhere that, with traffic, is an hour away, that’s two hours of driving time every day. Those kinds of factors do influence our ability to connect.”

Mr Woodward says people are increasingly moving to pursue economic opportunities, whether interstate or overseas.

“The rise of different ways of working including the fly-in fly-out models mean that people are less likely to remain in place for employment,” Mr Woodward says.

How Many of Us Are Lonely?

> One in four Australians reported feeling lonely each week, the 2018 Australian Loneliness Report revealed.
> One in two sometimes or always feel alone and 30 per cent of people say they don’t belong to a friendship group, the report found.
> One in 10 Australians currently lack social support, a recent Relationships Australia study found.
> Earlier studies found that somewhere between 17 and 60 per cent of Australians say they are lonely.
> Exact figures on loneliness and isolation can be hard to obtain, because respondents are sometimes reticent to name their loneliness due to stigma, says Dr Michelle Lim of Swinburne University, lead Australian Loneliness Report researcher and chair of the Australian Coalition to End Loneliness’s scientific advisory committee.
2. How we live

“Our family size and family connections have changed,” says Mr Woodward.

For one thing, many more of us are living alone. Figures shows one quarter of private dwellings in Australia have only one person living in them. Over the last couple of decades, the proportion of the population aged 15 years and over living alone has increased from 9 per cent to 12 per cent, ABS data reveals.

The Australian Loneliness Report in 2018 found an even higher percentage of respondents – 17 per cent – were living alone.

Dr Lim says this increase in people living alone and a fall in our marriage rate have both contributed to an increase in social isolation.

“And of course we are a relatively large country, and sometimes we find ourselves living far away from loved ones,” Dr Woodward adds.

3. How we age

We’re also living in an ageing society that doesn’t always facilitate social connection for older Australians.

“We’re moving toward a situation where over one quarter of the population will be over 65,” Mr Woodward says.

“We have insufficient aged care facilities that actually promote community and social wellbeing,” adds Dr Lim.

ALL THE LONELY PEOPLE: WHO’S MOST AT RISK?

Age is a key factor. Dr Lim says international research suggests loneliness tends to be highest in young people (ages 16-25). Young Australians also report higher levels of loneliness, more depression symptoms and more social interaction anxiety, the Australian Loneliness Survey found.

Young people, despite typically being surrounded by schoolmates and acquaintances, don’t always connect with others in the way they may appear to on their social media accounts, Mr Woodward says.

In that age group “you have emerging mental illness as well, with high rates of anxiety and depression”, Dr Lim says. It’s also a stage of life marked by transitions – whether moving for work, building identities, or starting full-time employment and of course finishing school.

On the other end of the spectrum, “you have the older people, who experience loss of health, loss of mobility, loss of finances”, Dr Lim says.

While the Australian Loneliness Survey found over-65s to be the least lonely age group, Dr Lim tells ABC Life that study drew on a rather small group of respondents in that age group.

While older Australians in that study were less lonely than younger groups, “the moment you hit illness, or your partner dies, or maybe there’s a lot of health, you can’t get out of the house, it may be a completely different game”, Dr Lim says.

The Relationships Australia study found that people aged 55 to 64 experienced decreasing levels of social support and emotional loneliness associated with ageing. And after the age 64, social support rates continued to decrease – with one in four over-65s living alone – and emotional loneliness rates increased.

Loneliness and social isolation look different for men versus women, too. Overall levels of loneliness for men
are higher than women, the Relationships Australia study found. But women reported higher rates of subjective emotional loneliness than men for every year of available HILDA data studied by Relationships Australia.

Married people were less likely to be lonely than single, separated or divorced Australians, the Australian Loneliness Report found. The highest rates of loneliness were reported by younger men who were widowed, followed by divorced and separated men in the Relationships Australia research.

But being married or partnered isn’t a silver bullet for loneliness.

“The people who can look very connected and even have a partner can actually be really very lonely,” says Ms Shaw.

**SOCIALLY EXCLUDED GROUPS MAY BE MORE AT RISK**

Individuals with mental health issues can also be more vulnerable to social isolation and loneliness – especially if their condition, such as anxiety or depression, by its nature makes them less able to engage socially, says Mr Woodward.

“And if a person has a disability with mobility restrictions” or an accident or injury that prevents them from getting out to work or community or sporting events, “that’s going to be an issue” from a social isolation point of view too, Mr Woodward says.

Members of excluded groups or minorities – such as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islanders, recent migrants or the LGBTI community – may also be at higher risk of loneliness.

There is an increased risk for loneliness “wherever there are elements of social exclusion in our society, where people because of their background – whether it be their gender identity or sexual orientation or the nature of their work or ethnic background – wherever there are forces to exclude them socially”, says Mr Woodward.

According to ABS data, recent migrants are less likely than people born in Australia to have someone outside the household they could confide in.

Meanwhile, young LGBTI people are five times more likely to attempt suicide in their lifetime compared to straight people, and gay men have fewer close friends than straight people or gay women, studies out of the US have found.

**LIFE EVENTS CAUSING LONELINESS**

- 34 per cent death of loved one
- 31 per cent moving from friends/family
- 22 per cent isolation at school or work
- 21 per cent divorce or separation
- 17 per cent losing a job.

Source: Australian Red Cross survey, 2017

**LIFE TRANSITIONS CAN TRIGGER LONELINESS**

Major life transitions such as a major move, a relationship breakdown or the birth of a new child can also “have a flow-on effect in terms of a person’s social connections” and subsequently lead to social isolation, says Mr Woodward.

That includes those who have recently lost a loved one and those who are lonely due to divorce and separation, Red Cross Australia found in a 2017 survey.

Job loss can also cause loneliness. For both males and females, being employed was consistently associated with lower rates of loneliness, Relationships Australia found. Men in particular who are unemployed or on income support benefits were very lonely.

Single parents are very susceptible to loneliness. For both males and females from the younger cohort, single parents reported the highest level of social isolation – 38 per cent for males and 18 per cent for women.

And Relationships Australia’s research found the highest rates of social isolation for women were observed in the 25-29-year-old group – coinciding with the average age of becoming a first-time mother in Australia.

**WHAT TO DO IF YOU FEEL LONELY**

Whether it’s finding a new social club or sporting group to join, starting a conversation with neighbours or simply telling a trusted person about your feelings without shame or fear – there are several steps you can take to feel less lonely. Read the expert-approved tips (pp. 25-27), *Are you feeling lonely? Here are steps you can take.*

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Loneliness hurts more than our feelings – and it could be our next public health crisis

Despite the hyper-connectedness of the modern world, loneliness and isolation are still very much with us, reports Jacqueline Bouf for ABC Radio’s RN Breakfast

A
n analysis of Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) data from 2001 to 2017 has found more than one in six people report feeling lonely in any given year – and a staggering 1.5 million people have been lonely for a decade or more.

The report’s authors say lonely people are at risk of premature mortality at rates comparable with other well-established risk factors, including lack of physical activity, obesity, substance abuse, poor mental health, injury and violence.

Alison Brooks, the national executive officer of Relationships Australia, said loneliness was a pressing public health issue. But how do you define loneliness?

Ms Brooks said the report, An epidemic of loneliness 2001-2017, looked at several levels of loneliness in the HILDA surveys, from the subjective – whether the person was feeling the “emotional discomfort” we identify as being lonely – to objective measures of social connectedness gauged through a series of questions.

“There was a single loneliness question, which was about that subjective sense of how you’re feeling,” she said, “[and] a set of 10 questions [about] those more objective things, you know: ‘I often need help from people but I can’t get it’; ‘People don’t come to visit me as often as I’d like.’”

The HILDA survey, funded by the Federal Government through the Department of Social Services, is described on The Melbourne Institute website as a household-based panel study that collects valuable information about economic and personal wellbeing, labour market dynamics, and family life. It follows the lives of more than 17,000 Australians each year over the course of their lifetimes.

Although women reported higher subjective feelings of loneliness, the report showed a higher average experience of a lack of social support for men at all times.

Although the data did show “a small but steady decline” in overall rates of loneliness – from 21 per cent in 2001 to 16 per cent in 2009 – rates have remained relatively stable at a troubling 17 per cent for the past seven years.

The report also found that the number of people reporting a lack of social support remained consistent over the past 10 years at approximately 9.5 per cent.

However, Ms Brooks pointed out, what was grow-
ing was awareness of how damaging that could be.

“It’s also shown to be associated with poor cardio
health, and in fact very clearly quantified in some
research out of the University of Queensland earlier
this year [as] actually cutting your life short,” she said.

**VARIATIONS ALONG
GENDER AND AGE LINES**

Although women reported higher subjective feelings of
loneliness, according to Ms Brooks, the report showed
a higher average experience of a lack of social support
for men at all times.

And some of the most troubling spikes of super lone-
liness were seen amongst men, she said, particularly
between the ages of 45 and 64, and in certain categories.

“Single, male parents are very lonely – 40 per cent are
reporting being lonely,” she said.

“They’ve got men who are unemployed, and
men who are on income-support benefits, are very,
very lonely.”

Age was also a significant factor, with emotional
loneliness rates increasing after the age of 64 and
reaching their highest level of 19 per cent in people
aged 75 years and over, the report said. Interestingly,
the highest rates of social isolation for women
emerged in the 25-29 age group.

And there were subtle discrepancies along both
gender and age. Men and women who lost their
partner before the age of 65 reported higher levels
of loneliness than those whose partner died after 65.

“If you think that through, you could think that
perhaps that was an unexpected tragedy, or something
that was less expected than people who have been
married well into their later years,” Ms Brooks said.

**‘STAY CONNECTED’ TO BEAT LONELINESS**

So what can be done to beat loneliness? Ms Brooks
recommended a rigorous grass roots approach:
“Make people feel like they belong where they are,”
she said. She said there were three general principles.
First of all, she said, look after your family relationships.

**Age was also a significant factor, with emotional
loneliness rates increasing after the age of 64
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the highest rates of social isolation for women
emerged in the 25-29 age group.**

“Immediate family, extended family – keep them
well, keep them healthy, and stay connected,” she said.

“Lean into the difficult times because every family
has difficult times.”

Second, she said, look out for the people in your
community.

“There’s things that we can all do with the neigh-
bours who live around us, and we all know where there
are people living alone,” she said.

“Sometimes they’re prickly, sometimes they’re hard,
but even if it’s just a wave, that’s important.”

Finally, join special interest groups, she said, and the
more the better, citing research out of the University of
Queensland showing that joining one interest group
benefitted your health.

“If you join two, this is how much better you’ll be. If
you join three or more, you’re laughing,” she said.

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Bouf, J (21 September 2018). ‘Loneliness hurts more than our
feelings – and it could be our next public health crisis’, ABC News.
One in four Australians are lonely, which affects their physical and mental health

A quarter of Australians are lonely, a new report has found, and it’s not just a problem among older Australians – it affects both genders and almost all age groups. Report author Michelle Lim explains

The Australian Loneliness Report, released today by my colleagues and I at the Australian Psychological Society and Swinburne University, found one in two (50.5%) Australians feel lonely for at least one day in a week, while more than one in four (27.6%) feel lonely for three or more days.

Our results come from a survey of 1,678 Australians across the region. We used a comprehensive measure of loneliness to assess how it relates to mental health and physical health outcomes.

We found nearly 55% of the population feel they lack companionship at least sometime. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Australians who are married or in a de facto relationship are the least lonely, compared to those who are single, separated or divorced.

While Australians are reasonably connected to their friends and families, they don’t have the same relationships with their neighbours. Almost half of Australians (47%) reported not having neighbours to call on for help, which suggests many of us feel disengaged in our neighbourhoods.

Nearly 55% of the population feel they lack companionship at least sometime ... unsurprisingly, Australians who are married or in a de facto relationship are the least lonely, compared to those who are single, separated or divorced.

**IMPACT ON MENTAL AND PHYSICAL HEALTH**

Lonely Australians, when compared with their less lonely counterparts, reported higher social anxiety and depression, poorer psychological health and quality of life, and fewer meaningful relationships and social interactions.

Loneliness increases a person’s likelihood of experiencing depression by 15.2% and the likelihood of social anxiety increases by 13.1%. Those who are lonelier also report being more socially anxious during social interactions. This fits with previous research, including a study of more than 1,000 Americans which found lonelier people reported more severe social anxiety, depression, and paranoia when followed up after three months.

Interestingly, Australians over 65 were less lonely, less socially anxious, and less depressed than younger Australians. This is consistent with previous studies that show older people fare better on particular mental health and wellbeing indicators. (Though it’s unclear whether this is the case for adults over 75, as few participants in our study were aged in the late 70s and over). Younger adults, on the other hand, reported significantly more social anxiety than older Australians.

The evidence outlining the negative effects of loneliness on physical health is also growing. Past research has found loneliness increases the likelihood of an earlier death by 26% and has negative consequences on the health of your heart, your sleep, and levels of inflammation.

Our study adds to this body of research, finding people with higher rates of loneliness are more likely to have more headaches, stomach problems, and physical pain. This is not surprising as loneliness is associated with increased inflammatory responses.

**WHAT CAN WE DO ABOUT IT?**

Researchers are just beginning to understand the detrimental effects of loneliness on our health, social lives and communities but many people – including service providers – are unaware. There are no guidelines or training for service providers.

So, even caring and highly trained staff at emergency departments may trivialise the needs of lonely people presenting repeatedly and direct them to resources that aren’t right. Increasing awareness, formalised training, and policies are all steps in the right direction to reduce this poor care.

For some people, simple solutions such as joining shared interest groups (such as book clubs) or shared experienced groups (such as bereavement or carers groups) may help alleviate their loneliness. But for...
Loneliness and Social Isolation

Lonely Australians ... reported higher social anxiety and depression, poorer psychological health and quality of life, and fewer meaningful relationships and social interactions.

have come together after identifying a need to generate Australian-specific data, increase advocacy, and develop an awareness campaign. But only significant, sustained government investment and bipartisan support will ensure this promising work results in better outcomes for lonely Australians.

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT
Michelle H Lim receives funding from Barbara Dicker Brain Sciences Foundation.

Michelle H Lim is Senior Lecturer and Clinical Psychologist, Swinburne University of Technology.

THE CONVERSATION


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others, there are more barriers to overcome, such as stigma, discrimination, and poverty.

Many community programs and social services focus on improving wellbeing and quality of life for lonely people. By tackling loneliness, they may also improve the health of Australians. But without rigorous evaluation of these health outcomes, it’s difficult to determine their impact.

We know predictors of loneliness can include genetics, brain functioning, mental health, physical health, community, work, and social factors. And we know predictors can differ between groups – for example, young versus old. But we need to better measure and understand these different predictors and how they influence each other over time. Only with Australian data can we predict who is at risk and develop effective solutions.

There are some things we can do in the meantime. We need a campaign to end loneliness for all Australians. Campaigns can raise awareness, reduce stigma, and empower not just the lonely person but also those around them.

Loneliness campaigns have been successfully piloted in the United Kingdom and Denmark. These campaigns don’t just raise awareness of loneliness; they also empower lonely and un-lonely people to change their social behaviours.

A great example of action arising from increased awareness comes from the Royal College of General Practitioners, which developed action plans to assist lonely patients presenting in primary care. The college encouraged GPs to tackle loneliness with more than just medicine; it prompted them to ask what matters to the lonely person rather than what is the matter with the lonely person.

Australia lags behind other countries but loneliness is on the agenda. Multiple Australian organisations
1 IN 3 YOUNG ADULTS IS LONELY – AND IT AFFECTS THEIR MENTAL HEALTH

More than one in three young adults aged 18 to 25 reported problematic levels of loneliness, according to a new report from Swinburne University and VicHealth. By Michelle Lim

We surveyed 1,520 Victorians aged 12 to 25, and examined their experience of loneliness. We also asked about their symptoms of depression and social anxiety. Overall, one in four young people (aged 12 to 25) reported feeling lonely for three or more days within the last week.

Among 18- to 25-year-olds, one in three (35%) reported feeling lonely three or more times a week. We also found that higher levels of loneliness increases a young adult’s risk of developing depression by 12% and social anxiety by 10%.

Adolescents aged 12 to 17 reported better outcomes, with one in seven (13%) feeling lonely three or more times a week. Participants in this age group were also less likely to report symptoms of depression and social anxiety than the 18- to 25-year-olds.

Young adulthood can be a lonely time

Anyone can experience loneliness and at any point in life but it’s often triggered by significant life events – both positive (such as new parenthood or a new job) and negative (bereavement, separation or health problems).

Young adults are managing new challenges such as moving away from home and starting university, TAFE or work. Almost half (48%) of the young adults in our survey lived away from family and caregivers. Almost 77% were also engaged in some sort of work.

Young people at high school may be buffered from loneliness because they’re surrounded by peers, many of whom they have known for years. But once they leave the safety of these familiar environments, they are likely to have to put in extra effort to forge new ties. They may also feel more disconnected from the existing friends they have.

During the transition to independence, young adults may find themselves with evolving social networks, including interactions with colleagues and peers of different ages. Learning to navigate these different relationships requires adjustment, and a fair bit of trial and error.

During this transition to independence, young adults may find themselves with evolving social networks, including interactions with colleagues and peers of different ages. Learning to navigate these different relationships requires adjustment, and a fair bit of trial and error.

Is social media use to blame?

The reliance on social media to communicate is often thought to cause loneliness. No studies I’m aware of have examined the cause-effect between loneliness and social media use.

There is some evidence that those who are lonely are more likely to use the internet for social interactions and spend less time in real life interactions. But it’s unclear...
whether social media use causes more loneliness.

While social media can be used to replace offline relationships with online ones, it can also be used to both enhance existing relationships and offer new social opportunities. Further, a recent study found that the relationship between social media use and psychological distress was weak.

Is loneliness a cause or effect of mental ill health?

Loneliness is bad for our physical and mental health. Over a six-month period, people who are lonely are more likely to experience higher rates of depression, social anxiety and paranoia. Being socially anxious can also lead to more loneliness at a later time.

The solution isn’t as simple as joining a group or trying harder to make friends, especially if one also already feels anxious about being with people.

While lonely people are motivated to connect with others they are also more likely to experience social interactions as stressful. Brain imaging studies show lonely people are less rewarded by social interactions and are more attuned to distress of others than less lonely counterparts.

When lonely people do socialise, they are more likely to engage in self-defeating actions, such as being less cooperative, and show more negative emotions and body language. This is done in an (often unconscious) attempt to disengage and protect themselves from rejection.

Lonely people are also more likely to find reasons people cannot be trusted or do not live up to particular social expectations, and to believe others evaluate them more negatively than they actually do.

What can we do about it?

One way to address these invisible forces is to help young people think in more helpful ways about friendship, and to understand how they can influence others through their emotions and behaviours.

Parents, educators and counsellors can play a role in educating children and young people about the dynamics of evolving friendships. This might involve helping the young person to evaluate their own behaviours and thought patterns, understand how they play an active role in building relationships, and to support them to interact differently.

More specific strategies could include:

- Challenging unhelpful thinking or negative views about others
- Helping young people identify their strengths and learn how they’re important in forging strong, meaningful relationships. If the young person identifies humour as a strength, for instance, this might involve discussing how they can use their humour to establish rapport with others.

Educational programs can do more to address the social health of young people and these discussions can be integrated into health education classes.

Additionally, because young people are already frequent and competent users of technology, carefully crafted digital tools could be developed to target loneliness. These tools could help young people learn skills to develop and maintain meaningful relationships. And because lonely people are more likely to avoid others, digital tools could also be used as one way to help young people build social confidence and practise new skills within a safe space.

A cornerstone of any solution, however, is to normalise feelings of loneliness, so feeling lonely is seen not as a weakness but rather as an innate human need to connect. Loneliness is likely to negatively impact on health when it is ignored, or not properly addressed, allowing the distress to persist. Identifying and normalising feelings of loneliness can help lonely people consider different avenues for action.

We don’t yet know the lifelong impact of loneliness on today’s young people, so it’s important we take action now, by increasing awareness and giving young people the tools to develop and maintain meaningful social relationships.

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

Michelle H Lim receives funding from Barbara Dicker Brain Sciences Foundation. The Young Australian Loneliness report was produced by VicHealth and Swinburne University of Technology.

Michelle H Lim is Senior Lecturer and Clinical Psychologist, Swinburne University of Technology.

Loneliness and Social Isolation

L

 Loneliness and Social Isolation

Loneliness is a subjective experience of social isolation. It is related to the perceived quality – rather than quantity – of a person’s relationships. Loneliness is characterised by feelings such as social disconnection and feeling misunderstood. It is also associated with poorer physical and mental health outcomes and represents an emerging public health problem.

Loneliness can affect anyone, but it may be particularly common among young people. Adolescents and young adults are often well-connected to strong social structures such as families, friends, schools, universities, work environments, social media, sport, and interest groups. However, critical transitions that characterise youth (e.g. leaving school and/or home, beginning higher education or work) can be stressful and compromise these connections and supports, increasing social vulnerability, loneliness, and isolation.

While young people are often well-connected to strong social structures, critical transitions that characterise youth can be stressful and compromise these connections and supports, increasing social vulnerability, loneliness, and isolation.

Little is known about the extent and impacts of loneliness among adolescents and young adults. To address this gap, VicHealth commissioned the Young Australian Loneliness Survey to better understand this important issue in Victorians aged between 12 and 25 years.

ABOUT THIS RESEARCH

More than 1,500 young Victorians aged 12-25 completed an online survey between June and July 2019. These included:

- 650 adolescents aged 12-17 years
- 870 young adults aged 18-25 years.

The study aimed to:

- Determine how common loneliness and social isolation risk are among 12-25-year-old Victorians
- Examine the relationship between loneliness, social isolation risk, and other mental health outcomes.

The survey included measures related to loneliness, risk of social isolation, symptoms of depression and social anxiety, general emotional state (or ‘affect’), and how young people tended to respond to negative emotion (i.e. by either reframing their thoughts around the situation or suppressing the emotion).

Young adults reported higher levels of loneliness, social isolation, social anxiety and depressive symptoms than adolescents aged 12-17 years.

Greater levels of loneliness in young people were associated with the other factors explored including risk of social isolation, depressive symptoms, and social anxiety.

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN?

Loneliness and social isolation – and related mental health outcomes – appear to negatively affect young people from loneliness.

KEY FINDINGS

- Loneliness is common among adolescents and young adults and is associated with poorer physical and mental health outcomes.
- In the Young Australian Loneliness Survey, a significant proportion of young Victorians reported problematic levels of loneliness. This included one in six adolescents (aged 12-17) and more than one in three young adults (aged 18-25).
- Many were also at risk of social isolation, with young adults again reporting higher levels than adolescents.
- Young women reported higher levels of loneliness, social anxiety and depressive symptoms than young men.
- Lonelier young people are more likely to experience social anxiety and depressive symptoms than those who are less lonely. They are also more likely to report negative affect (negative mood states) and use unhelpful emotional coping strategies.
- While evidence for the effectiveness of interventions that address loneliness is sparse, strategies that focus on promoting good social health may protect young people from loneliness.
adults to a greater extent than adolescents. This may suggest that young adults are finding significant life events and transitions (such as leaving school, leaving the family home, and commencing higher education or employment) more problematic than adolescents for whom family, school and other supportive structures remain relatively stable.

Young people around 20 years old have been found to favor the quantity of relationships over the quality of their social interactions which contrasts with their older counterparts at age 30 and 50. This may explain why they are more vulnerable to feeling lonely, especially if loneliness is a consequence of having fewer meaningful relationships.

Although the relationship between social isolation and loneliness is modest, having fewer contacts with friends and family is associated with loneliness. Other factors associated with loneliness include mental health symptoms such as social anxiety and depression.

At present, there is a lack of evidence for the effectiveness of programs designed to target loneliness in young people specifically. However, strategies that focus on promoting good social health may protect young people from loneliness.

Programs that enable young people to better signal an openness to connect with others, enhance their ability to regulate emotions and manage social relationships,
and those that can provide safe social opportunities, hold promise. Community-based approaches that increase social connections amongst young people require further investigation.

The findings of this research inform and support VicHealth’s Mental Wellbeing Strategy (2019-2023). VicHealth’s focus on the mental wellbeing of young people will generate new knowledge about loneliness and empower local governments and community organisations to foster positive social connections among adolescents and young adults.

Strategies that focus on promoting good social health may protect young people from loneliness.

ENDNOTES
1. A problematic level of loneliness was defined by a cut-off score of 52 or more on the 20-item UCLA Loneliness Scale (version 3), which includes questions such as ‘How often do you feel that there is no one you can turn to?’ See also: the Australian Loneliness Report: A survey exploring the loneliness levels of Australians and the impact on their health and wellbeing (2018).

2. Risk of social isolation was measured by the 6-item Lubben Social Network Scale, which includes questions such as ‘How many friends do you feel close to such that you could call on them for help?’.

3. Problematic social anxiety was defined by a cut-off score of 6 or more on the 3-item Mini-Social Phobia Inventory, which prompts responses to statements such as ‘I avoid activities in which I am the centre of attention’.

4. Depressive symptoms were measured by the 20-item Centre for Epidemiological Studies – Depression measure that assesses feelings of depression in the past 7 days (e.g. how often a person ‘felt sad’).


MORE INFORMATION


ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS
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LONELINESS: A NEW PUBLIC HEALTH CHALLENGE EMERGES

Loneliness is proving to be more than just part of the human condition. New research, shared in this article by VicHealth, shows it’s a serious public health problem, for young people as much as the elderly.

The evidence is startling. Feeling lonely can pose a bigger risk for premature death than smoking or obesity, according to research by Julienne Holt-Lunstad, Professor of Psychology and Neuroscience at Brigham Young University in Utah, USA.

Links to depression may not be surprising, but the idea that loneliness can be associated with poorer cardiovascular health and, in old age, a faster rate of cognitive decline and dementia is repositioning loneliness as a public health issue.

“There is robust evidence that social isolation and loneliness significantly increase risk for premature mortality, and the magnitude of the risk exceeds that of many leading health indicators,” Holt-Lunstad told the 125th Annual Convention of the American Psychological Association in August 2017, adding, “Many nations around the world now suggest we are facing a ‘loneliness epidemic’. The challenge we face is what can be done about it.”

Holt-Lunstad drew on data from two meta-analyses for her presentation. The first found greater social connection conferred a 50 per cent reduced risk of early death. The second examined 70 studies and concluded that social isolation, loneliness or living alone posed risks for premature death that were as big as or bigger than obesity, smoking (less than 15 cigarettes a day) and air pollution.

PINPOINTING THE CAUSES

“We know that the impacts of feeling lonely and isolated impede your health, whether that’s your mental health or physical health,” says Irene Verins, Manager, Mental Wellbeing at VicHealth.

“We need to identify the factors that influence loneliness – at the level of the individual, the local community and wider society – to get some idea, or a clue, as to where to look for solutions. New research is required that tells us about levels and experiences of loneliness in Australia.

“We also know that loneliness impacts more on those people who are the most vulnerable. We need to look at how we could approach the issue of loneliness for the most disadvantaged in the community first.”

Loneliness can affect people at any point, but is more common among two key groups: older individuals aged 75 and above and, perhaps surprisingly, young people aged 15-25.

Figures released in April 2018 by the UK’s Office for National Statistics showed individuals aged 16-24 reported feeling lonely more often than people in older age groups. The statistics also identified a particular risk of loneliness among young people who were renting and who did not feel a sense of belonging to the local area.

Although research in Australia is currently limited, a 2015 survey funded by VicHealth found one in eight young people aged 16-25 reported a very high intensity of loneliness.

Loneliness is commonly understood as an emotional response to the perceived mismatch between the amount of personal contact a person wants and the amount they have. In the UK, the Campaign to End Loneliness intensifies the focus to identify two types of loneliness: individual and social.

Individual loneliness occurs when a person is missing someone special such as a partner or close friend with whom they had a close, emotional bond.

Social loneliness refers to the absence of a social network made up of a wide group of friends, neighbours and colleagues.

The quality of those social connections is also important. Relationships need to be reciprocal, with those involved both sharing a sense of happiness, satisfaction and self-worth. (In 2012, a team at the University of California published the results of a study that found...
significant numbers of older people who identified as lonely were either married or lived with others.)

WHAT COULD SOLUTIONS LOOK LIKE?
As loneliness and social isolation can arise from very different factors, interventions to alleviate them will also be varied. They could include projects that support connections, such as online groups, volunteering programs and befriending projects, and other approaches such as local neighbourhood approaches. Interventions can be aimed at the individual, community or societal level.

“The most effective way to reduce loneliness is to make people feel connected to their community,” says Verins.

“Those communities may not be geographic – for example, they may be online for LGBTI youth or rural young people – but what’s important is they share common interests and develop meaningful connections.”

Holt-Lunstad suggests interventions ranging from a bigger focus on social skills training in schools, to making social connectedness checks part of standard medical screenings. Human Resources departments could prepare workers for retirement socially as well as financially, she says.

Planning out suburbs so they are walkable and include social spaces where people can meet up, such as gardens or recreation centres, is also crucial. Media campaigns could raise awareness about loneliness while also removing some of the label’s stigma.

Public Health England, in its 2015 Reducing social isolation across the lifecourse report, highlighted that “access to transport is also vitally important for building and maintaining social connections”.

EVIDENCE-BASED CAMPAIGNS
Experts emphasise that any interventions to reduce loneliness and social isolation should be evidence-based. The Campaign to End Loneliness in the UK, which launched in 2011, began by building a research base and connecting different groups interested in reducing loneliness so they could learn from each other. It then partnered with health and community organisations to scale up successful initiatives.

Its first public campaign about loneliness was in 2017, and during this year it will launch the Be More Us movement to promote social connectedness right across the country and generations.

“British people are famously awkward and a bit stiff upper lip, so our new movement is about breaking down those barriers and finding what we have in common,” says Alice Stride, the Campaign to End Loneliness’s Media Communications Manager.

“Intergenerational friendships and intergenerational connections are going to be a really important part of everybody’s solution to loneliness, not just for older people but for younger people, too.”

Online tools are also showing their worth. Australian initiative Gather My Crew is a free, online rostering tool that helps family, friends and community members to organise themselves in support of someone who needs help. Rostered tasks can include practical help, like lending a hand to someone who is in poor health by picking up their kids from school or doing their supermarket shopping. But they can also include social visits or phone calls to a friend, family member or neighbour at risk of social isolation.

Another Australian online initiative is the Moderated Online Social Therapy program (MOST) from Orygen. MOST is proving useful for vulnerable young people experiencing mood disorders, anxiety and psychosis.

“It’s sort of like Facebook but we also build in online therapy with clinicians and peer workers,” says Dr Simon Rice, a clinical psychologist and Research Fellow at Orygen.

“Young people, who sometimes are quite socially isolated and lonely, get a huge benefit from that online connection with other people in a safe, supported environment. That can be quite restorative to their sense of self and their confidence in their functioning as well.

“We encourage young people to use the skills and confidence they’re learning in the online environment and use them offline. We want those skills to translate.”

TAKING A POSITIVE APPROACH
Dr Michelle Lim leads the Social Connectedness Laboratory at Melbourne’s Swinburne University of Technology. Her six-week Positive Connect study used strengths-based group therapy to assist young people experiencing psychosis and social anxiety build their social interaction skills. The study had just a 10 per cent dropout rate from participants, compared to the usual 50 per cent.

“Often psychologists are overly focused on deficits and risk,” Lim explains. “In our traditional method in health services, we often go, ‘Hey, so what’s wrong with you today? How depressed are you? Are you feeling suicidal?’ And we forget to ask what’s right with you.
“In the Positive Connect study, we never once mentioned the word lonely, and we never once mentioned the word psychosis. It was very much about let’s not focus on deficits and illness, let’s focus on strengths and be about building healthy social connections, to reconnect with people and change acquaintances into friends.”

A well-known community initiative that tackles social isolation is the Australian Men’s Shed Association. Its CEO David Helmers says, with a little humour, “There are currently 130-odd more Men’s Sheds [987 Sheds] in Australia than there are McDonald’s restaurants. Not that it’s a race.”

The Sheds target men who are no longer in paid employment, through retirement, redundancy or other reasons. Men can come to the Shed to build and repair items for the community, but that’s not the place’s main purpose.

“The most important thing is the men getting together, building those relationships, that brotherhood that exists in the Sheds. They’re finding new friendships but, most importantly, finding meaningful purpose,” says Helmers.

COUNTING THE BENEFITS

With the health burdens of loneliness and consequent impact on health services now well identified, it makes sense to put money into interventions that deliver the most benefit. It would be easy to say a smile or peal of laughter are priceless, but government funding demands more rigour.

Last year, researchers from the London School of Economics prepared a brief for the Campaign to End Loneliness and determined that every £1 spent on a successful loneliness intervention in the UK delivered a £2-£3 saving in costs for the community.

They also identified three broad approaches that were being used to measure the value of interventions: conventional cost effectiveness analyses, return on the investment to the public purse, and social return on investment (SROI).

The SROI methodology starts with a discussion with stakeholders on why and how they believe an action will work; they then proceed to estimate the size of the effects and place a monetary value on them. Many of these monetary benefits do not relate to changes in use of public services and resources but are more subjective concepts, such as the value of developing new friendships.

“We need to think about social return on investment in addressing loneliness, and that’s related to how the loneliness of individuals impacts the social cohesion of the community in general,” says Verins.

“If you have a bunch of people who are disconnected and isolated, it’s negative for the community. The cost both in terms of their poor health outcomes and the lost contributions they could have made to their community will be expensive; and higher than if you’d connected them in the first place and diminished their level of loneliness completely. We know that participating in your community is beneficial for individuals and our society.”

PREPARING FOR WHAT’S AHEAD

So is Australia ready to deal with an epidemic of loneliness? Not yet. Compared to the UK, we are only just starting to undertake the sort of research needed to help deliver targeted, successful interventions.

“We really don’t have good Australian studies, and that’s what we’re trying to do right now – build the evidence about what actually drives loneliness in Australia,” says Lim, who advises the Australian Coalition to End Loneliness.

Later this year, VicHealth will release Women, Their Social Connections and Social Cohesion, a report that represents one of the first comprehensive reviews of how women connect in Australia.

Associate Professor Nicola Reavley, and Dr Georgina Sutherland, at the University of Melbourne’s Centre for Mental Health, analysed studies and interviewed young mothers, migrant women and older women.

“It’s interesting that with older women, most of the studies found that there was not really any decline in social networks over time. In fact, both separation and widowhood were associated with increased social network time for women,” Sutherland says.

“The only group of women this finding didn’t hold for was older women who were not born in Australia. They had broad social networks to start with, but that decreased with age, though not necessarily with those life transitions.”

Such insights help fill in a small piece of the loneliness puzzle, but it’s obvious more research is needed. With social isolation being a bigger risk to health than obesity, there really is no time to waste.
**Loneliness is a health issue, and needs targeted solutions**

**With targeted solutions, we could improve feelings of loneliness across all ages, observes Michelle Lim**

The Australian government announced in yesterday’s budget $46 million towards the community visitors scheme which is designed to reduce loneliness in older adults. Earlier this year, Tracey Crouch was appointed the United Kingdom’s first minister for loneliness.

While it may seem unusual to some to have government take a role in improving our social connections, it makes sense when you consider the negative impact of loneliness not only on the individual, but also the wider community. But with increasing investment from government, how do we ensure programs intended to address loneliness are well-targeted and successful?

**What is loneliness?**

Loneliness is a negative feeling that arises when someone’s social needs are unmet by their current social relationships. So people can feel alone, even if they’re surrounded by others, if they’re not getting the right kind of company and support. While many think of loneliness as a social issue, it also affects our health.

A person who perceives themselves as having less access to relationships, also finds physical and mental tasks more difficult. People with less access to others can’t rely on group safety or “share the load” of life’s challenges. This can result in stress.

Researchers found hand-holding with a spouse (as opposed to a stranger) can significantly reduce stress during difficult tasks. And these effects were even larger with couples that reported the highest quality relationship.

These emotional and psychological effects translate into physiological effects. Loneliness negatively impacts brain processes, ability to handle cognitive tasks, control of inflammation in the body, ability to regulate stress, and severity of mental health symptoms, just to name a few.

Loneliness has been found to be a risk factor for all causes of early death and feeling lonely increases our likelihood of earlier death by 26%. This is greater than the risk for obesity.

**How to reduce loneliness**

Reducing loneliness has obvious health benefits. But the solution isn’t as simple as connecting lonely people with other people; rather, it involves the establishment of meaningful connections. Many social initiatives rely heavily on connecting lonely people with strangers and a rotating cast of volunteers. Most of these programs designed to address loneliness are being implemented without testing their effectiveness. The following should be considered when addressing loneliness.

First, loneliness provides a signal for us to seek out others. The aim should be to reduce distressing levels of loneliness, rather than getting rid of loneliness per se. And we should be mindful of risk factors that are less amenable to change, such as genetics, which can make people more predisposed to feeling lonely.

Second, loneliness can be transmitted from person to person. Research shows loneliness can be passed on up to three degrees of separation from the lonely individual. Exactly how this occurs is yet to be fully understood – we have yet to explain whether loneliness is relayed via negative thoughts, behaviours, or feelings within relationships. Not understanding the transmission process may lead some to experience loneliness after interacting with the lonely.

Third, unhelpful thoughts and negative beliefs about others and the social world are thought to underpin loneliness. Researchers have found programs that provide social opportunities as well as helping the lonely person learn how to interact better with others are the most useful.

Last, the predictors of loneliness differ depending on demographics. We know, for instance, there are two risk periods for loneliness: in adolescents and young people under 25, and adults over the age of 65. How we tackle loneliness should vary for both groups. For example, an older adult may need grief counselling from a bereavement, whereas a younger person may need help coping with social anxiety.

A public health campaign in Australia could play a large role in destigmatising loneliness and addressing its health implications. A successful campaign could recast misconceptions of loneliness as a sign of vulnerability, fragility, or weakness, occurring only in people who are physically isolated or old. Similar campaigns have been introduced in Denmark and the UK, with a national initiative gathering momentum here in Australia.

Australian doctors and health professionals would benefit from an assessment tool to identify the risks for loneliness. Australians would also benefit from the introduction of guidelines for good social health, as well as education around positive social relationships, which could start in schools. With targeted solutions, we could improve feelings of loneliness across all ages.

Michelle H Lim is Senior Lecturer and Clinical Psychologist, Swinburne University of Technology.

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Additional reading:

HOW CAN I STOP FEELING LONELY?

FACT SHEET ADVICE FROM REACHOUT AUSTRALIA

If you’re reading this, chances are you know what it’s like to feel lonely. That means you know that loneliness can sometimes feel like it’ll never end, and that you can often be surrounded by friends and family and still feel cut off from the world. But loneliness isn’t something that you have to manage on your own, and though it might be hard, there are things you can do to feel more connected to people around you.

WHY DO PEOPLE FEEL LONELY?

Because loneliness is so common, it makes sense that there are also lots and lots of different reasons why people feel lonely.

Here are a few of the main ones:

• **Technology.** Ever felt like even though all your friends are one tap of a button away, you’re still not really connected to them? Don’t worry: this is a very common feeling. Even though the internet can bring us closer, it can also make us feel like we’re not really talking to our friends, and can leave us feeling lost and alone.

• **Not fitting in.** Maybe you have different interests to the people at your school. Maybe they think the things that you love are strange. Or maybe you just dress differently. In any case, feeling like you don’t fit can make the symptoms of loneliness even worse, and can mean it’s even more difficult to meet friends and feel connected.

• **Looking after a parent or sibling.** Being the primary carer for someone close to you who is sick or has a disability can often make you feel like you have the weight of the world on your shoulders. After all, a lot of your friends won’t know what it’s like to have a brother with Down’s syndrome, or a mother with bipolar, so being a carer can leave you feeling like you can’t really talk to people – let alone have them over for dinner or a sleepover.

HOW NORMAL IS IT TO FEEL LONELY?

ReachOut research from last year showed that one in five young people reported feeling lonely ‘most of the time’ or ‘always’.

So just because you’re feeling lonely, it doesn’t mean that you are different or ‘weird’: in fact, it means that you have more in common with the people around you than you realise.

DISABILITY, ILLNESS AND LONELINESS

Sometimes loneliness can be a symptom of something else going on in our lives, like illness or disability.

Here are some of the main issues that loneliness can often be a symptom of:

• **Mental illness.** A lot of mental illnesses like bipolar, anxiety and depression can all make people feel very lonely. Mental illness can make you anxious about seeing others, so you might spend more time indoors. Or it can lead to insomnia, which in turn can make you tired, irritable and lonely.

• **Physical disability.** A range of physical disabilities, from hearing loss to blindness, can often make people feel as though there is no one around them that cares. These feelings can get even worse if people in public are unkind or rude, and facing daily discrimination can make loneliness even harder to bear.

• **Racism.** People who encounter racism say that being discriminated against can make them feel alone, and can make it harder for them to form real connections. Racism takes a lot of forms, all of them hurtful, so sometimes even a ‘minor’ or ‘casual’ act of racism can have big impacts on someone’s self-esteem.

WHEN DO PEOPLE FEEL LONELY?

Loneliness can hit anyone at any time. Sometimes you might not even feel lonely for an obvious reason, and what you’re experiencing could always be connected to other things like depression or anxiety.

But it’s true that a lot of people tend to feel lonely during big life events. Maybe you’re moving house. Maybe your parents are getting separated. Maybe
you’re going from primary school into high school. Or maybe you just feel like you’ve outgrown your friendship group, or that they’re starting to get into things that don’t really interest you.

All of these things could be making you feel lonely and lost, and you might find it hard to connect with people around you.

HOW DO YOU MANAGE LONELINESS?
There’s no one single way to fight loneliness: if there was, everybody would be using it! But that doesn’t mean that loneliness is impossible to beat, or that if you’re feeling it now you will be forever.

Here are a few quick dot points that cover some of the ways you can start feeling more at peace with the people in your life:
• Talk to people about how you feel
• Think about your interests
• Get a pet
• Get online
• Join a club.

For more information on these steps, head over to ReachOut’s step-by-step guide for fighting loneliness that you can find here: https://au.reachout.com/articles/10-things-to-do-if-you’re-feeling-lonely

WHAT CAN I DO NOW?
• Hop on the ReachOut Forums (https://au.reachout.com/forums) to connect with other people who might be feeling lonely.
• Call a friend and suggest a movie or a walk outdoors.
• Read about making friends: https://au.reachout.com/articles/a-gazillion-ways-to-make-new-friends

Just because you’re feeling lonely, it doesn’t mean that you are different or ‘weird’: in fact, it means that you have more in common with the people around you than you realise.
ARE YOU FEELING LONELY?
HERE ARE STEPS YOU CAN TAKE

Young Australians are lonely. Over-65s are lonely. Single parents, unemployed people, people with disabilities and, well, anyone else can be lonely. And there’s a decent chance you’re feeling lonely too, judging by the statistics. Social isolation is rife in Australia, but loneliness can strike whether you’re connected to social networks or not. So how do you overcome it? Here’s what the experts suggest. An ABC Life report by Grace Jennings-Edquist

1. Understand and acknowledge your loneliness

Like many things, the first step to things improving is to understand and acknowledge the problem,” says Alan Woodward, executive director of research and strategy at Lifeline.

“This is a difficult one because there is a stigma, or some sense of embarrassment, to acknowledge that you’re lonely.”

If you’re feeling embarrassed about your loneliness, it can help to remember that your feelings of loneliness might be based on a social construct of what your social life should look like.

“There is research that shows that in a lot of younger university age groups, loneliness is very socially constructed, and that people feel lonelier on Saturday nights than on other nights of the week,” says Elisabeth Shaw, CEO of Relationships Australia NSW.

In reality, one in four Australians are lonely, according to the Australian Loneliness Report, released in November 2018 by Swinburne University of Technology and the Australian Psychological Society – so there’s no need to feel ashamed of your feelings.

2. Don’t be afraid of small talk

When you’re looking to connect with other humans, start small. Making connections is often down to confidence – and if you’re shy or haven’t been socially engaged for a while, building your confidence is important, says Mr Woodward.

Look at small talk as a way of practising your communication skills and building mini-connections that could potentially grow into something more.

“It’s just the opener – you’re signalling to someone that you’re willing to connect,” says Dr Michelle Lim, scientific chair at the Australian Coalition to End Loneliness, clinical psychologist at Swinburne University of Technology and lead researcher of the Australian Loneliness Report.

“And from small talk you’re building into more meaningful relationships.”

So get out and about in public places, and actively look for opportunities to talk to others. Ms Shaw recommends “going to the local coffee shop and becoming known and saying hello and having a brief chat”.

If you have a dog, chatting to other pet owners in the park and learning their names can help you feel more connected in your neighbourhood.

“Even if you’re quite shy, even at the bus stop saying good morning when you catch eye contact. Those sorts of things,” Ms Shaw says. “In a very tiny way it’s like, ‘Somebody knows that I lived today’.”

3. Don’t be afraid of showing the authentic you

Confidence can be strengthened through training, just like a muscle, explains Eyal Halamish, a faculty member at The School of Life who teaches classes in developing confidence and charm.

Mr Halamish recommends readers start building their confidence by letting go of perfectionism and, instead, growing at peace with the inevitability of making mistakes. He calls this process “befriending the inner idiot”.

HOW MANY OF US ARE LONELY?

- One in four Australians reported feeling lonely each week, the 2018 Australian Loneliness Report revealed.
- One in two sometimes or always feel alone and 30 per cent of people say they don’t belong to a friendship group, the report found.
- One in 10 Australians currently lack social support, a recent Relationships Australia study found.
- Earlier studies found that somewhere between 17 and 60 per cent of Australians say they are lonely.
- Exact figures on loneliness and isolation can be hard to obtain, because respondents are sometimes reticent to name their loneliness due to stigma, says Dr Michelle Lim of Swinburne University, lead Australian Loneliness Report researcher and chair of the Australian Coalition to End Loneliness’s scientific advisory committee.

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Halamish says. “People find that very endearing.”

4. Seek treatment for underlying mental health issues

Mental health issues can contribute to social isolation and loneliness. Mental illness is also associated with lower involvement in the labour force and greater discrimination, data from the ABS shows.

If your anxiety, depression or other mental health condition is holding you back from engaging socially, it’s important to seek treatment. Start with your GP, and consider seeing a counsellor or a psychologist, advises Mr Woodward.

“Or even access to an online [psychological services] program such as MindSpot, which has very good results in terms of people finding ways to moderate their anxiety and reconnect with their community,” he says.

5. Build relationships through listening

Connecting with others often comes down to being a good listener, says Mr Halamish.

“A lot of times [we] think of charming people as coming up with the perfect thing or saying the right word. But a lot of what moves people is really being heard,” he says.

“It’s about listening to what people say, and also how they say it.”

It might sound silly, but if you want to build relationships with others, it’s a good idea to practise listening. Ask questions and really hear the answers, rather than just waiting for a turn to talk, recommends Ros Knight, president of the Australian Psychological Society.

“When we feel socially anxious we actually become very self-absorbed,” says Ms Knight.

“It becomes all about, ‘Am I saying the right thing? Are they responding positively? Do they look like they hate me?’ Rather than stopping and going, ‘Well actually there’s two of us in that conversation and I should be actually listening to what’s happening with them.’

It may be easier for you to form bonds with a person if you remind yourself that what the other person says is important to them, and actively focus on what they’re saying.

6. Harness the power of technology for good

Social media is often criticised for replacing human interactions with shallow digital interactions. But the reality isn’t that simple, says Dr Lim.

“Is social media to blame? It really is very nuanced. It depends on how you use it, not the fact that you use it,” she says.

Rather than using social media to compare yourselves to other people’s glossy, heavily-filtered lives (which can make you feel worse about yourself), it’s possible to use those platforms to meet like-minded people by tapping into online communities.

The Good Karma Network on Facebook for your suburb, for example, might facilitate carpooling, borrowing of tools, book swapping, finding other people to exercise with, and other community-minded activities.

“I think more and more we’re seeing things that respond to trust – you know, ‘I’ve got something that’s sitting in my driveway. People can come and take it,’” says Ms Shaw.

Special interest groups on Facebook – for example, for FIFO (fly-in fly-out) families, new mums or expats – can also connect you with like-minded Australians online.

Online directories can also connect you with multicultural community groups and events in your area; community services for people with disabilities; or social support groups for LGBTI+ youth. Ms Shaw also suggests using online platforms such as Meetup to find interest groups you could join, or looking into the non-profit organisation Joiningthedots, which brings people together over community dinners to welcome new migrants.

“We grow and connect ourselves by being connected to others,” she says. “It can make us feel better about ourselves, and also we can learn more than we anticipate.”

7. Deal with the stress of putting yourself out there

Putting yourself in new social situations can be scary. If you’re feeling anxious about a social event you’re preparing to go to, it’s worth taking the time to practise some slow breathing, recommends Ms Knight.

That will “keep you physically present in the moment and not jumping too far ahead in your head”, she says. She adds that there are a number of apps you can try to assist with grounding and breathing techniques. It can also help to spend a few moments picturing yourself at the event, Ms Knight suggests.

“Try to have realistic pictures in your head,” she says.

“Instead of picturing yourself standing there alone, spilling a drink on yourself and running screaming an hour later, try to picture yourself standing there with a smile on your face, joining in with a group and having a good time.”

“Because once you get going you will have a good time.”

Keep in mind that feeling awkward doesn’t mean you’re doing anything wrong. Try to accept it’s all part of the process of getting out of your comfort zone to connect with others.
“If you’re joining a community group and you’re reaching out to your neighbours, or you’re taking on a class that you never thought you would, keep in mind that people around you aren’t really sure how to do it either,” says Mr Halamish.

“So it’s just acknowledging that you’re having that leap of faith.”

8. Join a special interest group

Participation in clubs and sporting groups is a buffer against loneliness, research from The Australia Institute, based on Household, Income and Labour Dynamics Australia survey data, shows.

“Some people can find their people, find their tribe or find their group and that makes it easier [to make new connections],” says Dr Lim.

Consider finding a hobby or learning something new. You could enrol in a course at your local TAFE or Community College, or look for groups at your local library or community centre that might interest you. What about a book club or a life drawing class? Volunteering is another way to help yourself feel more connected, Lifeline recommends. But keep in mind that joining a new group isn’t a silver bullet for loneliness. As with any new social situation, forming connections in a new group requires effort.

“Really, when we want to meaningfully connect, it takes effort. And people hate me saying that [but] friendships and relationships and connections take a lot of work,” says Dr Lim.

It takes roughly 50 hours of time together to move from mere acquaintance to casual friend, according to a University of Kansas study published this year.

It takes 90 hours to go from casual friend to simple “friend” status – and more than 200 hours before you can consider someone your close friend.

So don’t be put off if you’re not feeling a close connection straight away. Keep at it.

9. Look out for the people in your community

Maintaining regular contact with your neighbours can make you feel less lonely, says Ms Shaw.

She recommends “saying hello to your neighbours as you drive into the driveway” and maybe “lingering for a minute” to have a chat.

Buying lemonade or whatever local kids are selling at their street stalls; organising street parties; stopping to let people pat your dog; or sharing cuttings from your garden are also practical ways to get the ball rolling with your neighbours.

These are not just kind things to do for your neighbours who may be lonely – it can also make you feel better.

“I think we underestimate the effect on ourselves, feeling very connected,” says Ms Shaw.

“Having half a dozen people you wave to in the morning is in a way quite heartwarming.

“It means that we live in a more compassionate and connected way, and it also means that people are more attracted to us – if you do it, people are likely to do it back.”

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WHAT IS LONELINESS AND HOW CAN WE OVERCOME IT?

**BLACK DOG INSTITUTE** **EXPLAINS HOW TO DEAL WITH BEING LONELY**

Loneliness is that negative feeling that arises when our social needs are unmet by the quantity and quality of our current social relationships. As social beings, we rely on safe, secure social surroundings to survive and thrive. When we begin to feel lonely we experience heightened feelings of vulnerability, which can take a toll on both our bodies and our minds.

Loneliness is common, affecting around 1 in 4 Australians. For some it may be temporary, and for others it may be more long term. The subjective nature of loneliness means that people can live relatively solitary lives and not feel lonely while others may lead a seemingly rich social life and feel quite the opposite. Loneliness is not a sign of vulnerability, fragility, or weakness, nor does it occur only in people who are physically isolated or old. We can have many people around us and still feel lonely.

**WHO’S AT RISK OF EXPERIENCING LONELINESS?**

Anyone can experience loneliness at different times in their lives, but some people are more at risk. In old age it’s common for people to experience social isolation and loneliness, either as a result of living alone, a lack of close family ties, reduced connections with their culture of origin, or an inability (often through lack of transport) to actively participate in the local community.

What may be surprising though is that in the UK, figures released in April 2018 highlighted young people aged 15-25 as a group in which loneliness was most common. In Australia (where research into loneliness is more limited), a 2015 survey found one in eight young people aged 16-25 reported a very high intensity of loneliness.

Rachel Cohen, a psychologist from the Black Dog Institute, says, “With social media we are more connected, but what is the quality of that connection? It’s the quality of our relationships that count. It’s not to say social networking is bad at all – there is plenty of positive in it – but you need to use it concurrently with face-to-face interaction. If it’s your sole mechanism for connecting with people, it’s going to feel somewhat hollow and not fulfil that basic need we have.”

“As well, a lot of people are comparing themselves to others, who are only posting their ‘highlight reel’. Even if you have just come away from a face-to-face social interaction, social media can very quickly make you feel dissatisfied with your own life and your own social engagements.”

Interestingly, research has also found loneliness to be a modestly heritable trait which affects how
Loneliness and Social Isolation

Distressed social disconnection makes you feel – but environment tends to play a larger role. Social isolation, living alone, the recent death of a loved one and health issues are all situations that may result in a person experiencing loneliness.

**Physiological Effects of Loneliness**

Loneliness is not just a social issue, it also affects our health – so much so that the Australian government recently announced $46.1 million to be invested into combating the issue. So how bad can it be? Increased blood pressure, cholesterol and risk of developing cardiovascular disease, plus reduced brain function, are all side-effects of loneliness. In fact, overall, loneliness can increase our likelihood of earlier death by 26%.

Research indicates that loneliness takes a toll on our mental health too. What’s tricky is that if you already have a mental health issue, the chance you will feel lonely is increased, while feeling lonely can also negatively impact the severity of various mental health symptoms.

“There’s definitely a bi-directional relationship, especially if you are feeling more depressed or anxious you may have thoughts that make it harder for you to reach out or interact with other people – then you start to behave in a way that isolates yourself more. So, it’s this vicious cycle. If you’re not feeling well, you isolate more, then you feel more lonely,” says Rachel. Loneliness increases depressive symptoms as well as perceived stress, the ability to regulate stress, fear of negative evaluation, anxiety, and anger, while diminishing optimism and self-esteem.

**How to Reduce Loneliness**

It’s clear that reducing loneliness has obvious health benefits, but this can be difficult to tackle when we are not at our best. In Australia we are only just starting to undertake the research required to develop evidence-based solutions. In the meantime, it’s not as simple as surrounding yourself with as many people as possible – we need meaningful connections.

The subjective nature of loneliness means that people can live relatively solitary lives and not feel lonely while others may lead a seemingly rich social life and feel quite the opposite.

“Some people need deep conversations, and for some that’s not it at all – it’s about bonding around something they share a common interest in,” Rachel says. “Others just need someone to sit next to on the couch in silence and it’s comfortable. It’s about knowing what fulfils that social need for you – when do you feel your need is met?”

Below are some practical ways to start tackling those feelings of loneliness.

1. **Make contact with others**

When you are feeling your most lonely, you doubt yourself, feel anxious socially, or are just unmotivated and want to be on your own. It’s almost counter-intuitive to interact with others, but that’s exactly what you need to do. There’s a chance you have been turning down opportunities to socialise without even realising it.

“Look into your existing social networks first,” says Rachel. “It may be that the way you are interacting with them, the nature of the conversations you are having or the type of people you are with aren’t fulfilling that need for you. There might be some problem-solving you need to do.”

Put yourself out there, no matter how uncomfortable you may feel – chatting to the cashier at the supermarket or organising to meet up with a friend you haven’t seen in a while can have positive effects. The
The prevalence of loneliness means those people are likely to have experienced it too.

The fast-paced nature of today’s world means we often miss opportunities – however insignificant they seem – to engage with people, Rachel notes.

“Those little daily interactions may seem insignificant but what they are doing is adding to your fuel tank – and that’s what keeps you more resilient and robust against isolation and loneliness.”

2. Get involved with the community
Both rural and urban areas have programs which help people stay connected, whether through sport, walking, music, cooking or art. A great place to start is by seeing what is available around you and connect with like-minded people who share similar interests. You never know, you may unlock a hidden talent in the process!

3. Volunteering
Volunteering allows us to make meaningful connections with people while establishing a sense of purpose. Research has shown the benefits of regular volunteering in reducing feelings of loneliness so why not give it a go?

“You’re doing something beyond yourself which is even more satisfying,” says Rachel. Volunteering Australia is the national peak body and allows you to search for available positions based on your skills and location.

4. Online groups
The internet offers a plethora of people from all over Australia that we can connect with instantly from the comfort of our own space. Facebook’s discover section allows you to browse groups by topic and covers everything from ‘sport and fitness’ to ‘science, technology and math’, so you are bound to find something that interests you. If you are living in a rural area you can even try creating your own.

Meetup is another site that offers similar groups – the goal, though, is to organise offline meetings, participating in activities that align to everyone’s interests.

“If you’re not in an environment that supports meeting people, it can be very difficult. Meetup gives opportunity to expand your social groups and meet with like-minded people that you might not be able to access in your day to day.”

Loneliness is not a sign of vulnerability, fragility, or weakness, nor does it occur only in people who are physically isolated or old. We can have many people around us and still feel lonely.

“It doesn’t need to be a best friend to meet that need, you just need to start striking up those interactions and see where it goes.”

For young people, Reach Out Forums provide a supportive, safe and anonymous space where you can chat to people who are experiencing similar feelings as you.

Remember that if you do arrange to meet up with anyone you’ve met online, make sure you’ve taken safety precautions such as finding out as much as possible about them and choosing several safe and well-lit public places to meet.

5. Animals
Pets, especially dogs, provide constant companionship and unconditional love – plus their need to be kept active gets you out of the house when you’re feeling down, Rachel points out.

“They get you active and non-avoiding, while giving you a sense of purpose because you need to care for something beyond yourself.”

While tips like these can be a great start, don’t be afraid to seek help if you are really struggling with the negative feelings of loneliness. Speak to your GP, who may give you a referral to see a mental health professional.

If you or someone you know is in crisis please call one of the following national helplines:
- Lifeline Counselling Service – 13 11 14
- Suicide Call Back Service 1300 659 467 (cost of a local call).

LONELINESS AND ISOLATION

At some time in your life you may feel lonely or isolated from other people and the world around you. These feelings are normal but there are many things you can do to overcome them, advises healthdirect

WHY DO I FEEL LONELY OR ISOLATED?

You can feel lonely or isolated for many reasons even when other people are around you. Some reasons you might feel lonely or isolated include:

- Living alone
- Lacking close family around you
- Losing your friends, a spouse, or your partner
- Going through a divorce or breakup
- Retiring from work or changing schools or jobs
- Living away from home for the first time
- Being unemployed
- Feeling shy
- Feeling worried or stressed
- Finding it difficult to meet new people
- Having a language or cultural barrier
- Being away from your culture of origin
- Being bullied
- Feeling unsure about your sexuality
- Having a mental health problem, such as depression, anxiety or a physical disability.

HOW CAN LONELINESS AND ISOLATION AFFECT MY HEALTH?

Feeling alone or socially isolated for a long time can be harmful. You might experience physical or mental problems or do things that are bad for you.

- Physical symptoms – such as headaches, feeling ill, having pains, feeling tired, having sleep problems or lacking motivation
- Mental health conditions – such as depression, feeling anxious, having panic attacks or feeling paranoid
- Low energy – feeling tired or not having motivation
- Sleep problems – not being able to get to sleep, stay asleep or waking up a lot
- Diet problems – such as putting on weight, losing weight or losing your appetite
- Negative feelings – such as feeling worthless or hopeless or thinking about suicide
- Substance abuse – such as drinking a lot of alcohol, misusing medicines or taking drugs.

WHAT CAN HELP?

You can overcome loneliness and isolation and improve your life by:

- Connecting with family and friends – visit, phone, email or use video technology
- Connecting with communities online – join a game where you can chat to people
- Getting out of the house – go shopping, exercise, join a club or enrol to study

- Volunteering – meet new people to feel connected and valued
- Getting a pet – pets are great conversation starters. They can improve your physical and mental health.

WHERE TO GET MORE HELP

Feeling lonely or isolated for a long time or for no obvious reason could be a sign of depression. Talk to your doctor, a counsellor, good friends and family, or one of these organisations might be able to help you.

- Kids Helpline (ages 5-25) – call 1800 55 1800
- Beyondblue – call 1300 22 4636
- Headspace (ages 12-25) – call 1800 650 890
- ReachOut.com (youth mental health service)
- MensLine Australia (men only) – call 1300 78 99 78
- SANE Australia – call 1800 18 7263
- Lifeline – call 13 11 14
- Suicide Call Back Service – call 1300 659 467.

SOURCES

Lifeline (Loneliness and isolation), ReachOut.com (Isolation and loneliness), RSPCA (What are the health benefits of pet ownership?), Beyond Blue (Connections matter), Black Dog Institute (What is loneliness and how can we overcome it?).

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The benefits of social connections and good mental health are numerous, according to this guide from the Better Health Channel.

**SUMMARY**
- Having friends and other social connections is good for your health and wellbeing.
- Being lonely or isolated can affect your mental and physical health.
- Older people who remain connected with others and have strong relationships are likely to have a better quality of life.

Throughout your life, the number and strength of your relationships affect your mental and physical wellbeing. The benefits of social connections and good mental health are numerous. Proven links include lower rates of anxiety and depression, higher self-esteem, greater empathy, and more trusting and cooperative relationships. Strong, healthy relationships can also help to strengthen your immune system, help you recover from disease, and may even lengthen your life.

The good news is that while many of these benefits can make you happier and more contented, there’s also a flow-on effect, whereby people around you will want to spend time with you. In this way, social connectedness generates a positive feedback loop of social, emotional and physical wellbeing.

In contrast, loneliness can have dramatic consequences for your health. Loneliness can lead to disrupted sleep patterns, elevated blood pressure, and increased cortisol (a stress hormone). It can affect your immune system and decrease your overall sense of contentment. Loneliness is also a risk factor for antisocial behaviour, depression and suicide.

Older people are particularly vulnerable. If your mobility decreases, it can be harder to get together with other people. However, older people who remain connected with others and have strong relationships are likely to:
- Have a better quality of life
- Be more satisfied with their life
- Have a lower risk of dementia and mental decline
- Need less domestic support.

Younger people (teenagers and people in their 20s) are also at risk when they are isolated. A lack of social relationships can have a direct impact on a young person’s physical wellbeing by increasing the risk of obesity, inflammation and high blood pressure.

These three health issues can lead to long-term health problems, including heart disease, stroke and cancer, but a varied social network can help protect against physical decline.

What’s more, the benefits of social ties are significant, even if your other mortality risk factors (such as socio-economic status, smoking, drinking, obesity and lack of physical activity) are low. In other words, even if you live a healthy life, you still need to be socially active to stay well and happy.

It’s important to recognise that loneliness is different from solitude. Feeling lonely is a problem, but being alone may not be a problem at all. Many people live alone and have happy, fulfilling lives.
HOW TO IMPROVE YOUR SOCIAL CONNECTIONS

Feeling lonely is hard to cope with. Luckily, there are things you can do to tackle loneliness. For instance, you can nurture healthy relationships with people who make you feel good by spending time with them, and by trying to talk to someone every day.

There are three kinds of connections that you can have with people:

1. **Intimate connections** – with people who love and care for you, such as family and friends
2. **Relational connections** – with people who you see regularly and share an interest with, such as workmates or those who serve your morning coffee
3. **Collective connections** – with people who share a group membership or an affiliation with you, such as people who vote like you do, or people who have the same faith.

Ask yourself: do you have meaningful, long-term relationships in all these three areas?

Perhaps you tend to stick with old friends and don’t feel able to meet new people. Or maybe you avoid people from your past, preferring to mix with people who don’t know much about you. Be honest with yourself about your social habits.

Think about the sorts of relationships you have with people, and the sorts of relationships you would like to have. You might find you want to make new friendships, or perhaps you want to try to make your existing relationships stronger.

One way to strengthen your social connections is to reach out to the people you already know, such as co-workers, family, school friends or neighbours. Give someone a call, or write or email them and let them know you would like to be in touch more often. Arrange to have a coffee or a meal, or to listen to music, have a round of golf or play chess. Think about the interests you share. Facebook and other social media are also great ways to stay in touch.

There are lots of ways to meet new people. Start a conversation with some of the people you see every day, such as the people on your bus each morning, people at the gym or the park, or the regular checkout operators at your supermarket. (Just remember to make sure that you are safe when meeting new people. Having other people around – for example, meeting in a public place – can be a good strategy.)

Other ideas include joining a sports team or a walking or hobby group, or volunteering. Call your local council to find out about local groups or programs, or visit your local community centre or library – there’s always something happening in your community.

Not all strategies will work for everyone, so try some different approaches to see what works for you. If the first thing you try doesn’t work out, try something different. beyondblue’s **Connections matter** booklet has some useful ideas for older people.

The idea of social connection is to share your time, experiences and stories with people, and to also listen to them. Gradually, you will build a group of people in your life who care about you, and who you also care about. Both your mind and body will reap the rewards.

**RELATIONSHIPS HELP SOCIETY TOO**

Social ties affect not only your personal health, but also extend to broader society. People who spend more time with each other for happiness, productive communities.

**WHERE TO GET HELP**

- **Better Health Channel**, for information on: making friends, tips for making friends and staying involved as an older person
- **Beyondblue**, for information on staying active as an older person
- **Relationships Australia** provides counselling, mediation, dispute resolution, relationship and parenting skills education, community support, employee assistance programs and professional training. Services and programs are available nationally. Phone: 1300 364 277
- **Neighbour Day** is Australia’s celebration of community that encourages people to connect with those who live in their neighbourhood.

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DEALING WITH LONELINESS

While loneliness is a common feeling, it’s often hard to cope with. If you are feeling lonely, Kids Helpline has got tips to help you through it.

It’s OK to feel lonely sometimes. Loneliness is something everybody experiences. Like any feeling, loneliness will usually pass in time.

Our brains are wired for connection with others and the pain of loneliness is a part of our survival instinct. You can be surrounded by lots of people and feel lonely. At other times, you might be perfectly happy spending time alone.

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN YOU FEEL LONELY?
Even though loneliness is a common experience, it can be a complex feeling that is painful and scary. Feeling lonely (and the fear of feeling lonely) can bring up other thoughts and feelings including:

- Confusion about what’s triggered it
- Feeling isolated from others
- Feeling that nobody cares
- Wanting to suppress or escape it
- Distress and worry that it’s not going to go away
- Painful memories of feeling abandoned in the past.

LEARNING TO DEAL WITH LONELINESS
While there’s no quick fix for loneliness, you can get better at identifying, accepting and coping with loneliness.

- Identify how you’re feeling – allow yourself to accept where you’re at
- Be kind to yourself – give yourself time to heal
- Get support if you need it – reach out and talk to somebody about it
- Take your mind off it for a while – do something you enjoy
- Spend time with family and friends – avoid withdrawing from others
- Take it day by day – focus on what’s happening in the present
- Try to focus on what is good in your life – avoid worrying about the negative.

IF FEELINGS OF LONELINESS DON’T GO AWAY THEN SEEK HELP
If the loneliness doesn’t pass on its own then it might be a sign that something else is happening.

- Sometimes loneliness can be linked with memories from the past that haven’t been resolved.
- Loneliness can stem from loss and grief when you lose somebody or something you care about.
- You might have gone through a relationship breakdown and need to process your thoughts and feelings about it.
- There could be an underlying mental health issue that’s linked with feelings of loneliness such as depression.

Our brains are wired for connection with others and the pain of loneliness is a part of our survival instinct. You can be surrounded by lots of people and feel lonely. At other times, you might be perfectly happy spending time alone.

If you can’t shake the feeling of loneliness then contact us and talk about it with a Kids Helpline counsellor today.

THERE’S ALWAYS SOMEBODY YOU CAN TALK TO
- If you want support to cope with feelings of loneliness talk to a Kids Helpline counsellor.
- Call us, start a WebChat, or email us today.
- You can also check out Head to Health (www.headtohealth.gov.au) for other digital services and resources.

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Loneliness is contributing to depression among elderly Australians, but connection can be a lifesaver

Good company can be a real lifesaver for older people experiencing loneliness, according to this ABC News report by Lucy Barbour.

The kettle steams to a boil as she spreads butter and Vegemite on dry biscuits. The kitchen clock’s monotonous tick reminds her how slowly the hours pass. She shuffles to the dining table and reaches for the remote. Her eyes become fixed on a reality TV show she doesn’t particularly like. Morning tea is different nowadays. More time-killer than treat.

Eighty-two-year-old Georgina Fitz-Gibbon became a widow when her husband, Jeff, died from dementia. She recalls in her still-thick Scottish accent how they met in Melbourne, where she’d moved as a wide-eyed young woman in her twenties. During their 57-year marriage they raised two adoring daughters. But the couple didn’t have a wide circle of friends because they were content with each other’s company.

“We didn’t have hobbies as such. We were just good mates and we were just enough, just the two of us,” she smiles.

Two years on from her husband’s death, she’s only just got used to making morning tea for one. “You’d go to make the cup of tea and quite often, I’d take out two cups. Everything was done for two, and that continued for a few months.”

Georgina was always a strong and capable woman – devoted to her husband yet happy in her own company. She was used to managing alone because of the weeks he spent on the road as a long-haul truck driver. But as he aged and his health failed, she provided constant care. Eventually the load became too burdensome, and he was moved into a nursing home.

Those years were emotionally draining, but she was distracted by a long list of responsibilities: washing, cooking, caring, visiting, chatting, reading, cleaning. Coping was also possible because he was still by her side. Then all of a sudden he was gone and her routine was shattered, her days empty. She felt helpless and for the first time in her life. Georgina was lonely.

“I was waiting for God,” she weeps.

‘Every day you think about killing yourself’

Loneliness doesn’t discriminate when it comes to gender. Ron Etchells’ wife also died two years ago and he’s been lonely ever since.

“Every day you think about killing yourself, just to get away from the nothing. Because that’s what it is: nothing,” he says flatly.

His relationship with the rest of his family had previously broken down, and he says he hasn’t heard from them in years.

“Every day you say, ‘Well you might as well wait until you die’. And the next day you want to kill yourself again.”

It’s a staggering fact, but data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics shows that men over the age of 85 have the highest suicide rate in Australia. Loneliness is contributing to that, but feelings of despair can often start much earlier. They can be triggered by the loss of a loved one or a divorce.

But it could be as simple, yet frustrating, as losing a driver’s licence or being unable to exercise.

Today’s over-65s lived through decades of productivity, potential and promise. As prosperity reigned, they built and bought big homes with quintessential backyards kitted with sprinklers for the summer months.

But the generational clock has ticked over with consequences: a bulging population which governments are still struggling to manage, and no clear plan to combat the social problems older people now face.

Do we need a Minister for Loneliness?

Federal Aged Care Minister Ken Wyatt has seen the effects of loneliness, particularly on men, first-hand.

“I used to work for a funeral parlour in Perth. I lived in the flat above and when we buried a wife, I invariably saw the husband buried about eight weeks later,” he says.
In the United Kingdom, policy-makers became so concerned about the health ramifications of social isolation, they appointed a Minister for Loneliness earlier this year. But Mr Wyatt believes a better solution lies in our own backyard.

“What I’m hoping is that we start a movement across this nation where we take note of people who don’t have company and we just drop in and say, ‘Hey, would you like a cup of tea?’”

Some older Australians are listening to that advice, and they’re finding ways to prevent loneliness before it’s too late.

Barbara and Leo Collins celebrated their diamond wedding anniversary last year and love nothing more than poring over the letters of acknowledgement they received from high places – the palace, the premier and the former prime minister. They know they’re lucky to still have each other, but they recognise that things could change any day. Barbara is virtually a full-time carer for Leo, who suffers from cancer and dementia.

“By six o’clock, I’ve had it!” she laughs affectionately. They’ve made sure to keep in touch with a wide circle of friends, and they’ve kept their family close. But Barbara was worried that Leo needed more male company, and she, in turn, needed a break.

“Unfortunately his friends have passed away, and that hasn’t been easy,” she explains.

Leo was eligible for one of the Federal Government’s Home Care packages, and an organisation called The Care List got in touch to help. He now has frequent visits from a care worker named Darrell Avery, who takes him out to do odd jobs such as banking, getting a haircut or going to medical appointments.

Sometimes the pair just head down to the local cafe to have a flat white and a chat.

“Leo just seems to brighten up. He enjoys other company,” Barbara says.

“We cry together and we laugh together’

But the hardest step for many elderly people is acknowledging they need help in the first place. Despite her loving, supportive family, it was months after Georgina’s husband died before she recognised she was fast slipping into a state of depression.

She was gently encouraged by her daughters to seek out new activities, but the realisation had to come from within, and when she felt ready.

“I found myself one Tuesday, sitting here and crying my eyes out,” she recalls.

“And I said to myself, ‘Yeah, this is the time. I’ve got to do something’.”

She remembered seeing an advertisement at the nearby shopping complex, for a seniors program run through Communities At Work. Eventually, she plucked up the courage and knocked on the door.

Joining the program felt daunting but once she did, she was overwhelmed by support and fun. She now spends two days a week with her new-found friends, doing everything from exercises and massage to cooking, craft and card-playing.

“We cry together sometimes and we laugh together a lot,” she smiles fondly.

“And for me personally, my health has improved beyond my wildest dreams.”

In the lead-up to Jeff’s death, and in the aftermath, Georgina had allowed her health to deteriorate. She hadn’t had the time to look after herself properly, and while grieving, she didn’t have the will or the energy.

But nowadays, she says, she’s “mentally, physically and emotionally on top of the world”.

She’s learnt a valuable and important lesson, which she hopes others who are struggling will wake up to: “Loneliness can be very, very dangerous.”

But she’s living proof that good company can be a lifesaver.

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HOW TO CONNECT WHEN YOU FEEL ALONE

The likelihood of feeling lonely is higher for people living with complex mental illness, according to this guide from SANE Australia

Despite the world’s population growing rapidly, many of us feel lonelier than ever. The drive to connect with others and forge meaningful social relationships is an essential part of what makes us human. From a neurobiological perspective, we are wired for connection.

However, as a 2016 survey by Lifeline Australia revealed, more than 80 per cent of us think the world is becoming a lonelier place. If you’re familiar with the experience of feeling alone even while surrounded by people, you probably won’t be surprised to learn that of the 60 per cent of respondents who said they ‘often feel lonely’, a large cohort lived with a partner and/or children. Loneliness doesn’t discriminate – and even though technology has arguably made us more connected than ever, we also feel more alone and hungrier for meaningful connection.

It’s important to note that loneliness means different things to different people. Some think of it as sadness because one has no friends or company; others believe it’s a subjective indicator of feeling alone. Either way, it suggests a discrepancy between one’s desired level of connection and one’s actual level of connection.

The likelihood of feeling lonely is sadly higher for those living with complex mental illness. This is due in no small part to the stigma associated with mental ill health and an all-too-common lack of access to adequate care and support. For those who live with a mental illness, it can be hard to leave home regularly let alone foster caring, real-world relationships. Physical ill health and disability can also feed loneliness.

SO WHAT CAN YOU DO?

Our social lives aren’t the only place we experience loneliness so if you feel lonely at work or at home, here are some ideas of things you can do to overcome loneliness and combat social isolation.

It’s important to note that loneliness means different things to different people. Some think of it as sadness because one has no friends or company; others believe it’s a subjective indicator of feeling alone.

1. Get outside most days. Go for a walk, do your grocery shopping, or sit in a park where people go to walk their dogs. If you work full-time, make sure you’re getting a spot of fresh air in your lunch break – even if it simply involves walking around the block. While you may not feel like you’re connecting with anyone, just being in a public place can help alleviate feelings of isolation.

2. Be proactive in relationships. When we’re feeling alone or depressed, it’s easy to believe that no one cares and feel nothing but self-pity and self-loathing. It can be demoralising thinking that you’re invisible or act differently to other people. But try to make a conscious effort to check in with family and friends instead of waiting for them to take the lead. Start simply: send a text to a friend out of nowhere. Arrange a time and place to have coffee or dinner without a reason. Show that you are ready to care and connect. If they don’t call you, call them.
3. **Volunteer for a charity or cause.** Volunteering can be heaps of fun as well as a valuable way to give back to and get involved with your local community. If you find the idea too intimidating, check out what your local library, community centre or TAFE has to offer in terms of free activities and community events. Being part of a group of people all focused on the same task or activity (with no pressure to perform in a professional capacity) can help you find a sense of purpose and belonging. Entering a new social situation can be tricky at the best of times so go easy on yourself when it comes to striking up conversations. Remember, you’re unlikely to be the only person in the group who feels a bit like a fish out of water.

4. **Join an online community.** The internet gets a bad rap for making people more isolated and disconnected – but for those of us who aren’t born extroverts, it can be a lot less intimidating to connect to others online than in the real world. Make sure the online community you pick caters to your emotional needs and doesn’t involve scrolling through spam messages, marketing hype and unrealistic images. Focus on finding an open space that speaks to your values, interests and experiences. Consider how you can harness it for the good of your emotional world. Then go forth and engage. If you value privacy, the SANE Forums are safe, anonymous and moderated 24/7 by mental health professionals.

5. **Read a book.** Reading begins as a solo activity but becomes a shared one if you join a book club or attend a literary festival or event. It can also be a source of great comfort and solace in lonely times – books require readers to make an imaginative leap of feeling in order to empathise with the characters contained within. Reading also has the power to deepen and enrich your understanding of the world. Studies have shown that it can even alleviate loneliness by mimicking the effects of socialising with a group. Think of it as a true act of self-care.

6. **Be yourself.** It’s a cliché, but it’s one that exists for a reason. Many people hide parts of themselves that they think aren’t socially acceptable or don’t tell friends how they’re really feeling because they fear being rejected, undermined or judged. The problem is that when we connect with people in a way that isn’t fully authentic, it can exacerbate loneliness instead of easing it. Know that it’s okay to make your needs known in friendships and that it’s okay not to ‘suit’ or ‘fit’ every group and situation. Forget about the idea that who you ‘really’ are isn’t good enough or likeable.

7. **Call a 24/7 helpline.** If you are going through a personal crisis or feeling unbearably lonely, help is available. No one should have to shoulder their problems alone. A recent Harvard university study found that loneliness and social isolation has the same health risk as smoking 15 cigarettes a day and leads to an increased risk of stroke, mental health, risk of dementia and suicide. Take your mental and physical welfare seriously and call a national telephone crisis support services to talk to someone if you need to. Remember, what you’re feeling is real, and most people experience loneliness at some stage. It doesn’t mean there is anything wrong with you.

**USEFUL LINKS AND SERVICES**

- **Lifeline Australia:** 13 11 14 (24 hours/7 days a week)
- **BeyondBlue:** 1300 22 4636 (24 hours/7 days a week)
- **Suicide Call Back Service:** 1300 659 467 (24 hours/7 days a week)
- **Kids Helpline:** 1800 55 1800 (24 hours/7 days a week)
- **MensLine Australia:** 1300 78 99 78 (24 hours/7 days a week)
- **SANE Australia Helpline:** 1800 187 263 (10am-10pm AEST/Monday to Friday)

For more information about loneliness, depression and social isolation, visit SANE’s Facts + Guides for concise information on the symptoms, diagnosis and treatments available.


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When Cathryn’s company wanted to save money and close its small office in Adelaide she was given a choice: redundancy or work from home. With bills to pay and a life to live, Cathryn chose the latter. Now the health advice professional sits with her cat and stares at the “same four walls” every day, logging in but checking out.

“There is the option to chat on instant messaging but it doesn’t replace face-to-face [interactions], the laughter and bonding that the office brought,” she said.

“Consequently my efforts at work and my desire to be useful has somewhat declined.”

Cathryn’s story mirrors thousands of others as Australians wrestle with an issue experts say is reaching epidemic levels: loneliness.

A new study has found 37 per cent of all workers feel lonely at work, and that a key driver for this is tech advances that were supposed to make jobs easier or more flexible. The survey of just over 1,000 employees – conducted by HR think tank Reventure – also found 38 per cent of lonely workers reported making more mistakes and 40 per cent felt less productive.

“There’s no doubt that the current way that we work is essentially driven by our demands around being transactional,” Reventure managing director Lindsay McMillan said.

“Transactional means looking at screens a great deal of our time, more time now than ever before and continuing to rise.

“So our focus into the screen means we’re not focussing to people beside us, on the floor above us or below us.

“It’s a very demanding, changing world of work that we have discovered.”

Dr McMillan said the findings of the study, released this week, complemented earlier work by Reventure that found the gig economy was contributing to a sense of loneliness.

“And the interesting part of it is they will be seeking to go to another job, trying desperately to seek that sense of who they are and their connection,” he said.

“Workplaces can and must take charge to design and implement support systems and structures to reduce – and end – workplace loneliness once and for all.”

’BEFRIEND AN ALIEN’

Loneliness has become a modern obsession of researchers and health professionals. Experts in the field use words like “epidemic” and “public health crisis”. One team in the US is even trying to develop a pill to combat it.

The 2018 Australian Loneliness Report found one in four Australians reported feeling lonely each week, while world leaders at the World Economic Forum in Switzerland in January were told 40 per cent of those under 25 globally are lonely.

Social entrepreneur Tania de Jong runs programs in the workplace to help employees bond, and said technology was an obvious cause for increased loneliness at work.

“Technology and VPN connections and all those things that enable people to work at home definitely means people are more disconnected from their colleagues,” she told Radio National.

“People are able to stay more in their bubbles. Before you would go and do tasks together, and now it’s very easy to stay in front of your box, your screen.”

She said for those still working in offices it was important to reach out to those you think might feel lonely. “I always say to people: befriend an alien,” she said.

“If there’s someone looking lonely in a space or in the kitchen or who’s just sitting on their own all the time in the cafe then go and say ‘hello’.”

’I’M NOT HERE TO MAKE FRIENDS’

Still, not everyone wants to be the life of the office party. Some people are content to be the alien. ABC audiences shared their own stories about loneliness in the office and they paint a picture of a divided workforce.

Some people just want to clock in and out:

- I am happy going through an entire shift without anyone chatting to me about trivial crap I don’t really care about. – Ralph
Loneliness is when you feel disconnected from others and see one’s relationships as negative. So, one can feel lonely in a crowd, and surrounded by others.

- Women and men experience loneliness equally.
- 15% of people experiencing loneliness are more likely to be depressed.
- Young adults have more social anxiety than older people.
- 48% of people in Australia are lonely.

**Workers Experience Loneliness at an Alarming Rate**

Loneliness can be detrimental to health and wellbeing.

- 40% of lonely workers feel less productive.
- 38% of lonely workers report making more mistakes.
- 36% of lonely workers report getting sick more often.
- 90,000 hours are spent at work each year by workers.
- 37% of Australians feel lonely at work ... and it’s growing.

**Modern Ways of Working Contribute to Loneliness**

The way we work today is causing loneliness and now the workplace needs to be part of the solution.

- 49% of those that are lonely are more likely to withdraw from their colleagues.
- 47% of those that are lonely are more likely to suffer poor wellbeing.
- 46% of lonely workers believe they do not align with their company’s vision and values.
- Loneliness can have the same effect on someone’s health as smoking 15 cigarettes a day.
- Lonely workers are twice as likely to look for a new job in the next 12 months.
- More than a quarter of workers notice people in their workplace experiencing loneliness.

**Workplaces Must Be a Part of the Solution**

- Half of Australia’s workers believe that a leader is responsible for whether team members feel lonely.
- Half of lonely workers feel it is HR’s responsibility to foster social connections in the workplace.

Yet ...

- Only 9% of workers feel comfortable talking to HR about relationship concerns in the workplace.
- 1/3 of workers believe workplaces should facilitate a culture of engagement and social interaction.
- “People are crying out for an end to loneliness. We must all strive to be better neighbours, friends and colleagues. Everyone has a role to play.” Dr Lindsay McMillan, *A future that works*.


I don’t want to socialise with the people I work with. I have nothing in common with any of them and don’t particularly like most of them. I’m happy being left to myself there. – Libbi

I am not at work to build my friendship group or socialise. It isn’t about coffee and chat, I go there to work. – Kevin

Work is work. Show up. Do the job you are employed and paid to do. Go home. This would be ideal. – Ro

Others crave a connection:

- I just recently moved to a new job in a new state. It has been incredibly lonely trying to fit into the team. My mental health has suffered despite doing all the things I’m supposed to. – Kristin
- I always had a “bestie”, someone upon whom I could rely on for laughs, honest feedback and genuine friendship. It made the world of difference to my working life. – Bronwyn
- I started a new job in a very big organisation. There were no set desks – everyone sat somewhere different every day. As a new person, I found this incredibly isolating. It was really hard to build connections. Now

I work for a smaller, friendly organisation where I sit with the same people every day and am much happier. – Robyn

Some call for a culture change:

- The politics of the workplace sometimes isolates workers. If they don’t fit in with their colleagues they can feel lonely. – Rosi
- The modern workplace is more like a factory. People are just disposable components. – Ken
- I think not separating people in cubicles like they have a disease would help. – Lisa

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GOING IT ALONE

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY FROM AN ANGLICARE STUDY OF LONE PERSON HOUSEHOLDS, SOCIAL ISOLATION AND DISADVANTAGE

Anglicare Sydney is a not-for-profit provider of aged and community services across Greater Sydney and the Illawarra. Low income, lone person households frequently access our services, particularly in the Food and Financial Assistance (FFA) program. It has become evident to practitioners that, living on your own while at the same time experiencing significant financial hardship, presents a range of problems for the individual which may seem insurmountable. It is the nature of this dynamic between living alone and disadvantage which has led to this report.

Social isolation refers to a lack of social contacts, social interactions and social supports. It is important to maintain a distinction between loneliness – a subjective feeling of being apart and alone – and social isolation – an objective, measurable state of disconnection from important social networks.

RESEARCH FINDS AUSTRALIANS LIVING ALONE ARE DOING IT TOUGHER

Of the two million Australians living alone, 39% live on or below the poverty line (defined as 60% of median income). This group is more likely to be older (over the age of 55); female; have a disability; and those renting privately are in rental stress. Anglicare’s latest research ‘Going it Alone’, confirms that people living alone are doing it tougher than most other types of household. The majority of people accessing Anglicare’s Food and Financial Assistance program are on Government income support, and over a third (37%) of them live alone.

We compared single person households to other types of household, across nine different community service programs. The study shows that lone person households are not only financially disadvantaged but are also more likely to be socially disconnected,” said Grant Millard, Anglicare CEO.

“Being socially isolated is not simply a subjective feeling of loneliness. Social isolation is objective, and measures disconnection from important social networks. Our research shows that people living alone have fewer social connections; a lower sense of wellbeing; and a lower sense of control in decision making. A sense of control in decision making is important for people when dealing with the issues confronting them,” Mr Millard said.

To assess the level of social disconnection Anglicare used the Personal Wellbeing Index (PWI). The PWI is commonly used in Australian surveys to measure wellbeing, with scores out of 100.

Anglicare surveyed people accessing their Food and Financial Assistance (FFA) program and found that single person households are far less satisfied with their personal relationships (PWI:44) compared to other FFA clients (56), and the Australian population (79).

People living alone, accessing FFA are also less likely to feel part of their community (PWI:49) compared to other FFA clients (56) and the Australian population (71).

Anglicare research highlights that poverty and social isolation are often found together. Social isolation has been linked to adverse health outcomes such as heart disease, and to mental illness. Social isolation also impacts communities with increased pressure on health and social services.

Combating social isolation requires a multifaceted approach with strategic programs and interventions from service providers, and targeted policies from government. It is a community issue requiring agencies, community groups, faith-based communities, business, government and other non-government organisations working together to address the need.

“Anglicare is determined to strengthen community and build social networks where we can to reduce the impact of poverty and social isolation. Apart from our Food and Financial Assistance program Anglicare provides Counselling and Mental Health Services; Community Aged Care and Social Support; and a Housing Assistance Program for older people,” Mr Millard said.

Rates of social isolation have been estimated at 20% of the Australian population (Beer et al., 2016).

This study utilises data for people living on their own (lone person households), since the literature indicates that for people living on their own there is a higher risk of loneliness and poorer social networks (Klinenberg, 2016; Nicholson, 2010) as well as poverty (ACOSS, 2016).

Research findings in this report are based on:
- Quantitative data including the National Census, Anglicare FFA service data and Anglicare's Annual Client Survey;
- Qualitative data from interviews of people accessing Anglicare's services; and
- An extensive literature search.

PREVALENCE
Census data indicates that while the percentage of lone person households has remained largely unchanged since 2006, the number of people in such households has risen in line with population growth to just over two million people.

Almost 40% of such households are on a low income, living below the poverty line (defined as 60% of median income). Anglicare’s FFA data shows that, for the period April 2015 to November 2017, more than one in three households (37%) presenting to our FFA program were lone person households; such households are over-represented among Anglicare FFA service users when compared with the national average of 24.4% (ABS, 2016).

DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS
Particular groups of people are over-represented among low income, lone person households – both nationally and in the Anglicare sample.

a. Women – Women tend to be over-represented in the Census with a 60:40 female to male ratio. Within the Anglicare FFA sample there is a more even gender balance of female to male at 48:52.

b. Older people – There is greater prevalence of older people in the low income, lone person category nationally with 76% over the age of 55 years. Moreover, women as they age are more at risk of being on their own and experiencing disadvantage; 82% of women in low income, lone person households are aged 55 years or over, compared with 67% of men. This trend is also observed in the Anglicare FFA data.

c. People with a disability – According to the Census, 16% of people in low income, lone person households have a disability compared with 5% of all households. This characteristic is also observed in the Anglicare FFA sample where 44% of low income, lone person households experience a disability compared with 31% of all households accessing Anglicare’s FFA service.

d. People who are privately renting – There is clear evidence of rental stress for low income, lone person households in the private rental market. Four out of five (84%) are experiencing some level of rental stress nationally compared with 21% of public renters, and 53% of private renters are in extreme rental stress – spending more than 45% of their income on rent – compared with just 5% of public renters.

IMPACTS OF SOCIAL ISOLATION AND DISADVANTAGE
In 2017, Anglicare conducted an outcomes-based client survey across most of its major community service streams. Key outcomes for people living on their own were compared with all other households across all service streams.

Living on your own while at the same time experiencing significant financial hardship, presents a range of problems for the individual which may seem insurmountable.

The findings indicated that:

a. Social connectedness – When comparing lone person households with all households across all service streams, it is evident that respondents/clients from lone person households had lower social connection scores compared with other household types, with a mean score of 5.3 compared with 6.4 for all other household types. Even within the most financially disadvantaged group accessing FFA, lone person households still have a lower social connectedness score (5.2) when compared with all other households (5.7). These results indicate that, among Anglicare’s clients, living alone is associated with lower levels of social connectedness, but that this is particularly the case when households experience significant disadvantage.

b. Self-efficacy – All households across all Anglicare service streams achieved a mean self-efficacy score
of 6.9 but for lone person households this score was 6.2, indicating lower levels of self-efficacy than other household types. Within those groups accessing FFA, the mean self-efficacy score (6.4) was also lower than the all service stream average of 6.9. Living on your own, coupled with financial disadvantage, is associated with a lower sense of control in decision-making in their lives.

c. Personal wellbeing – Scores derived through the Personal Wellbeing Index (PWI)\(^2\) of all households across all service streams indicate that the wellbeing of lone person households (50) is significantly lower when compared with all household groups (65). Additionally, all households accessing Anglicare services in turn have lower PWIs across almost every domain when compared with the Australian norm. Wellbeing scores of lone person households among FFA clients (47) were lower on every domain when compared with people living on their own across all service streams (50). Further they are also lower than other household types within FFA (56) – indicating that being alone in disadvantage has a greater adverse impact on wellbeing than living with others.

THE DYNAMIC OF DISADVANTAGE AND SOCIAL ISOLATION

Financial hardship and deprivation brings with it significant disadvantages. For adults, it can lead to poorer physical and mental health outcomes, higher levels of food insecurity with poorer nutrition, and greater levels of social isolation. For children the experience of entrenched poverty leads to poorer educational and employment trajectories, behavioural issues, poorer physical and mental health outcomes.

Social isolation has also been associated with poorer mental and physical health outcomes, especially with the onset of ageing, and adversely impacts the individual as well as communities.

The dynamic between disadvantage and social isolation is one which has been explored in the broader research literature. Studies indicate that people experiencing poverty are at greater risk of social isolation than other groups and that this is particularly true if such people live in poor neighbourhoods.

People who are socially isolated may not have access to thriving social networks that create opportunity and participation, being constrained by fewer economic resources and poorer levels of infrastructure.

The dynamic between isolation and disadvantage appears to be multidimensional, cyclical and recursive.

Positive social networks, with sufficient depth and diversity can act as a protective factor against the extremes of disadvantage. It is in understanding this nexus between isolation and disadvantage which can generate positive policy and community responses to provide some buffers to the ‘wicked’ problem of social isolation and disadvantage.\(^3\)

WHAT CAN BE DONE?

It is evident that social isolation and disadvantage have significant adverse impacts on individuals and communities but there is much that can be done to address the situation. Underpinning strategy is an approach which is based on community development principles, working with community strengths, in partnership and collaboration across the sector – and at all levels – government, community, service provider and key institutions such as churches and sporting associations which assist in the development of building and bonding social capital.

People experiencing poverty are at greater risk of social isolation than other groups and that this is particularly true if such people live in poor neighbourhoods.

Key strategies can range from:

- Specific service provider responses and programs, using strengths-based community development approaches with a focus on co-design and outcomes;
- Government policy initiatives which address some of the structural barriers which can exacerbate social isolations such as housing, transport and aged care and further supported by the building of a research and evidence base; and
- Community-led initiatives with a focus on collaboration, awareness raising and advocacy.

ENDNOTES

1. For a lone person, the poverty line quoted here is 60% of median income, before housing costs but after tax, or $511.55 per week in 2013-14 (ACOSS, 2016).
2. The PWI was developed through Deakin University, Melbourne, as a validated multidimensional measure of subjective wellbeing in general populations.
3. A ‘wicked’ problem is one which is multi-causal, multi-dimensional, changes over time and is complex and difficult to resolve.

© Anglicare Diocese of Sydney, 2018.
Loneliness is a state of mind that feels good. It’s a place where you feel complete in yourself and no number of friends, family or well-wishers is really going to add to that.

Loneliness is almost the opposite. It’s a state of mind where you feel anything but complete and where a yawning lack of everything, including people and human companionship, opens up like a huge black hole inside you.

When I first pitched the need for a Ministry for Loneliness on radio 3AW a couple of weeks ago, most of the initial callers scoffed at the idea. “They just need to snap out of it” and “they should get a job” were typical of the comments. But after I’d left the station the calls changed and the switchboard lit up with people who’d thought about it for a while and were either suffering from loneliness or knew someone who was.

The United Kingdom recently created a Minister for Loneliness after a commission of inquiry found that social isolation was linked to increasingly detrimental effects on people’s health. The London School of Economics valued the cost of loneliness at over £1,700 ($3,125) per person rising to £6,000 ($11,031) for older persons.

At the moment we pass all sorts of laws with one eye on how they affect the budget but without any regard for how they impact people’s sense of social isolation. Appointing a Minister for Loneliness would mean that every new piece of social and economic legislation would address their impact on people’s ability to connect with each other.

For many people, loneliness is a ludicrous notion supported by lefties and bleeding hearts – until they experience it themselves or meet someone who suffers from it. They don’t have to go far either. In 2016, 82.5 per cent of Australians responding to a Lifeline survey admitted to feeling lonely and a recent OmniPoll survey found that a person’s average number of close friends has almost halved in 13 years.

While the number of close friends that older people have tends to naturally drop off a bit as people die, this figure is alarming for younger and middle-aged people who should be expanding their spheres of influence and making more friends every year.

Between the 1980s and the 1990s, long before the internet and social media, the US futurist John Naisbitt published a number of books relating to technology and wellbeing. He predicted then that as technology started to take over our lives in the decades ahead (the Technologically Intoxicated Zone, he called it), mental illness and isolation would escalate alarmingly. Much of this he said would come from our increasing inability to tell what is real from what is fake. Sound familiar? Apart from fake news, we now have genetically engineered (fake) animals and what many people think of as fake (crypto) currencies. And are our “friends” on social media really real?

Technology has to bear a lot of the blame for this as kids increasingly eschew a ball game in the park for a one-way involvement with a computer game or social media. And yet social media may also play a role in connecting kids if used the right way. There is no longer someone to speak to at the bank or the supermarket. Our sprawling suburbs lack connecting places and in many places, a car is the only way to get around.

Loneliness doesn’t just affect those who feel it personally. It affects all of us. The impacts on our health system are huge. A recent Harvard university study showed that social isolation and loneliness was worse than obesity and had the same impact on mortality as smoking 15 cigarettes a day. It also leads to an increased risk of stroke, mental health, risk of dementia and suicide.

In my mind, social isolation is a bit like climate change. It started off with a few academics and social scientists who made dire warnings long before things started to be obvious. But right now, unprecedented drought, bushfires and tropical cyclones seem to go hand in hand with unprecedented levels of mental health issues and loneliness.

We need to act now or risk our streets being full of mentally unstable and socially isolated people in the decades ahead.

Fiona Patten is a Victorian MP for the Reason Party, which will propose a loneliness ministry as part of its platform.

Does social media make us more or less lonely? Depends on how you use it

We need to understand more about loneliness, its harmful impacts, and what this has to do with social media, writes Roger Patulny

Humans are more connected to each other than ever, thanks to smartphones, the web and social media. At the same time, loneliness is a huge and growing social problem.

Why is this so? Research shows social media use alone can’t cure loneliness – but it can be a tool to build and strengthen our genuine connections with others, which are important for a happy life. To understand why this is the case, we need to understand more about loneliness, its harmful impact, and what this has to do with social media.

THE SCALE OF LONELINESS

There is great concern about a loneliness epidemic in Australia. In the 2018 Australian Loneliness Report, more than one-quarter of survey participants reported feeling lonely three or more days a week.

Studies have linked loneliness to early mortality, increased cardiovascular disease, poor mental health and depression, suicide, and increased social and health care costs. But how does this relate to social media?

More and more Australians are becoming physically isolated. My previous research demonstrated that face-to-face contact in Australia is declining, and this is accompanied by a rise in technology-enabled communication. Enter social media, which for many is serving as a replacement for physical connection. Social media influences nearly all relationships now.

NAVIGATING THE PHYSICAL/DIGITAL INTERFACE

While there is evidence of more loneliness among heavy social media users, there is also evidence suggesting social media use decreases loneliness among highly social people.

How do we explain such apparent contradictions, wherein both the most and least lonely people are heavy social media users?

Research reveals social media is most effective in tackling loneliness when it is used to enhance existing relationships, or forge new meaningful connections. On the other hand, it is counterproductive if used as a substitute for real-life social interaction.

While there is evidence of more loneliness among heavy social media users, there is also evidence suggesting social media use decreases loneliness among highly social people.

Thus, it is not social media itself, but the way we integrate it into our existing lives which impacts loneliness.

I WANDERED LONELY IN THE CLOUD

While social media’s implications for loneliness can be positive, they can also be contradictory. Tech-industry enthusiasts highlight social media’s benefits, such as how it offers easy, algorithmically-enhanced connection to anyone, anywhere in the world, at any time. But this argument often ignores the quality of these connections.

Psychologist Robert Weiss makes a distinction between “social loneliness” – a lack of contact with others – and “emotional loneliness”, which can persist regardless of how many “connections” you have, especially if they do not provide support, affirm identity and create feelings of belonging. Without close, physical connections, shallow virtual friendships can do little to alleviate emotional loneliness. And there is reason to think many online connections are just that.
Evidence from past literature has associated heavy social media use with increased loneliness. This may be because online spaces are often oriented to performance, status, exaggerating favourable qualities (such as by posting only “happy” content and likes), and frowning on expressions of loneliness.

On the other hand, social media plays a vital role in helping us stay connected with friends over long distances, and organise catch-ups. Video conferencing can facilitate “meetings” when physically meeting is impractical.

How do we explain such apparent contradictions, wherein both the most and least lonely people are heavy social media users?

Platforms like Facebook and Instagram can be used to engage with new people who may turn into real friends later on. Similarly, sites like Meetup can help us find local groups of people whose interests and activities align with our own.

And while face-to-face contact remains the best way to help reduce loneliness, help can sometimes be found through online support groups.

WHY SO LONELY?

There are several likely reasons for our great physical disconnection and loneliness. We’ve replaced the 20th century idea of stable, permanent careers spanning decades with flexible employment and gig work. This prompts regular relocation for work, which results in disconnection from family and friends.

The way we build McMansions (large, multi-room houses) and sprawl our suburbs is often antisocial, with little thought given to developing vibrant, walkable social centres. Single-person households are expected to increase from about 2.1 million in 2011 to almost 3.4 million in 2036.

All of the above means the way we manage loneliness is changing. In our book*, my co-authors and I argue people manage their feelings differently than in the past. Living far from friends and family, isolated individuals often deal with negative emotions alone, through therapy, or through connecting online with whoever may be available.

Social media use is pervasive, so the least we can do is bend it in a way that facilitates our real-life need to belong. It is a tool that should work for us, not the other way around. Perhaps, once we achieve this, we can expect to live in a world that is a bit less lonely.

* The writer is one of six authors of Emotions in Late Modernity, published in February 2019 by Routledge.

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

Roger Patulny does not work for, consult, own shares in or receive funding from any company or organisation that would benefit from this article, and has disclosed no relevant affiliations beyond his academic appointment.

Roger Patulny is Associate Professor of Sociology, University of Wollongong.
Social distancing can make you lonely. Here’s how to stay connected when you’re in lockdown

While it’s crucial to slowing the spread of a pandemic like COVID-19, practising social distancing results in fewer face-to-face social interactions, increasing the risk of loneliness. Michelle Lim and Johanna Badcock offer advice on how to stay connected when you’re required to live in lockdown.

COVID-19, the disease caused by the novel coronavirus, is a challenge for everyone. We know positive social support can improve our capacity to cope with stress. But right now, we’re being asked to keep our distance from others to minimise the spread of the virus.

Many people are facing periods of enforced isolation if they are believed to have COVID-19 or have been in contact with someone who has. Even those of us who appear to be healthy are being directed to practise social distancing, a range of strategies designed to slow the spread of a disease and protect vulnerable groups from becoming infected.

Among other things, this means when we’re around others, we shouldn’t get too close, and should avoid things like kissing and shaking hands.

This advice has seen the cancellation of large events of more than 500 people, while smaller groups and organisations have also moved to cancel events and regular activities. Many workplaces with the capacity to do so have asked their staff to work from home.

HUMANS ARE SOCIAL BEINGS

Social distancing and self-isolation will be a challenge for many people. This is because humans are innately social. From history to the modern day we’ve lived in groups – in villages, communities and family units.

While we know social isolation has a negative impact on health, we don’t really know much about what the effects of compulsory (and possibly prolonged) social isolation could be. But we expect it could increase the risk of loneliness in the community. Loneliness is the feeling of being socially isolated.

Recent reports have indicated loneliness is already a significant issue for Australians, including young people. Loneliness and social isolation are associated with a similar increased risk of earlier death: 26% and...
29% respectively compared to someone who is not lonely or socially isolated.

People who are socially vulnerable, such as older people, are likely to struggle more through this uncertain period. If older adults are forced to self-isolate, we don’t have contingency plans to help those who are lonely and/or have complex health problems.

While we can’t replace the value of face-to-face interactions, we need to be flexible and think creatively in these circumstances.

Can we equip older people with technology if they don’t already have access, or teach them how to use their devices if they are unsure? For those still living at home, can we engage a neighbour to check in on them? Can we show our support by finding the time to write letters, notes, or make phone calls?

**SUPPORTING EACH OTHER**

Research shows a period of uncertainty and a lack of control in our daily lives can lead to increased anxiety.

In times like this, it’s essential we support one another and show compassion to those who need it. This is a shared experience that’s stressful for everyone – and we don’t know how long it’s going to go on for.

Fortunately, positive social support can improve our resilience for coping with stress. So use the phone if you can, and gather a group of people to stay in touch with.

Further, positive social interactions – even remotely – can help reduce loneliness. Showing genuine interest in others, sharing positive news, and bringing up old memories can enhance our relationships.

**STAYING CONNECTED**

Here are some tips to remain connected when you’re practising social distancing or in quarantine:

1. Think about how you can interact with others without putting your health (or theirs) at risk. Can you speak to your neighbours from over a fence or across balconies? We’ve seen this in Italy.

2. If you have access to it, use technology to stay in touch. If you have a smartphone, use the video capabilities (seeing someone’s facial expressions can help increase connection).

3. Check in with your friends, family, and neighbours regularly. Wherever you can, assist people in your life who may be more vulnerable (for example, those with no access to the internet or who cannot easily use the internet to shop online).

4. Spend the time connecting with the people you are living with. If you are in a lockdown situation, use this time to improve your existing relationships.

5. Manage your stress levels. Exercise, meditate, and keep to a daily routine as much as you can.

6. It’s not just family and friends who require support, but others in your community. Showing kindness to others not only helps them but can also increase your sense of purpose and value, improving your own wellbeing.

So get thinking, take considered action, and be creative to see how you can help to minimise not only the spread of COVID-19, but its social and psychological effects too.

**DISCLOSURE STATEMENT**

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Loneliness is a hidden but serious problem in cities worldwide. Urban loneliness is connected to population mobility, declining community participation and a growth in single-occupant households. This threatens the viability of our cities because it damages the social networks they rely on.

One response to these trends involves “third places”. These are public or commercial spaces that provide informal opportunities for local people to mix socially on neutral ground.

The concept of third place, developed by Ray Oldenburg, is distinct from first and second places. A first place is the private space of home. Second places are where people spend significant time, often formally. These include schools, universities and workplaces.

Common examples of third places in cities include community gardens, libraries, public swimming pools, cafes, men’s sheds, farmers’ markets and dog parks.

Researchers at the Cities Research Institute are investigating whether these “third places” can reduce urban loneliness. Here, we report and discuss some insights from that work.

How can third places reduce loneliness?

There is growing understanding of the negative outcomes and costs associated with loneliness. These include fractured communities, declining trust, stress, depression and disease. Clearly this is neither desirable nor sustainable.

More than a century ago the sociologist George Simmel observed how mobility disrupts social connection and creates isolation. The urban migrant leaves behind their own social ties and often struggles to connect to their new community. This challenges both the migrant and their new neighbours.

Third places can help by creating or enhancing a sense of community on a smaller, more human scale – a relief from the overwhelming sensory experience of a large and unfamiliar city. The village-like feeling of third places can reduce people’s anxieties and make them more comfortable with trying a new social experience.

Third-place interactions encourage conversation in a homely atmosphere. Regulars who are local to the area often help with this.

In third places, people are free to come and go without obligation. The status and backgrounds of users are largely irrelevant. These places are generally designed to be accessible, accommodating and inviting for all ages, low-profile, comfortable and conversational.

Third places bring people together based on shared spaces, which become more important than individual histories. This can reduce wariness of strangers and create social connections. Third places can lead to more resilient and better-connected communities, building up social capital, while reducing loneliness.

Providing quality third places

There are steps that can be taken to design and safeguard third places. Local councils and urban planners have important roles, given their central place in directing land uses.

Perhaps the most important thing is to understand the valuable social capital that successful third places offer. Once planners understand the value of third places, they can actively work to support them.

Walkability is an important factor. Third places encourage familiarity through repeated incidental interactions between locals, both regulars and newcomers. Ideally, people connect within their local neighbourhoods. Being able to visit without needing a car can encourage more people to use a place.

Space for third places can be designed into neighbourhoods and urban areas. Sections of parkland...
Many city dwellers see these spaces but don’t use them ... perhaps the biggest barrier is our willingness to make the time to seek out and participate in third places. For those people who do, banishing loneliness could be one of the greatest benefits.

Yet many city dwellers see these spaces but don’t use them. In this sense, perhaps the biggest barrier is our willingness to make the time to seek out and participate in third places. For those people who do, banishing loneliness could be one of the greatest benefits.

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT
Tony Matthews receives external funding from the Australian Research Council, as well as internal funding from Griffith University. He is affiliated with the Royal Town Planning Institute and the Planning Institute of Australia. Joanne Dolley receives funding from Griffith University in the form of research support for her PhD studies. Joanne is also co-editing an Edward Elgar book provisionally titled, ‘Rethinking Third Places: Informal Public Spaces and Community Building’ (with A/Prof Caryl Bosman).

Tony Matthews is Lecturer in Urban and Environmental Planning, Griffith University. Joanne Dolley is a PhD Candidate, Griffith University.
WORKSHEETS AND ACTIVITIES

The Exploring Issues section comprises a range of ready-to-use worksheets featuring activities which relate to facts and views raised in this book.

The exercises presented in these worksheets are suitable for use by students at middle secondary school level and beyond. Some of the activities may be explored either individually or as a group.

As the information in this book is compiled from a number of different sources, readers are prompted to consider the origin of the text and to critically evaluate the questions presented.

Is the information cited from a primary or secondary source? Are you being presented with facts or opinions?

Is there any evidence of a particular bias or agenda? What are your own views after having explored the issues?

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Brainstorm, individually or as a group, to find out what you know about loneliness and social isolation.

1. What is loneliness, and who can it affect?

2. Explain the term ‘social isolation’. How does it differ from loneliness?

3. What are social connections, and why are they important?

4. What is social anxiety, and how does it relate to loneliness and social isolation? (Include examples)
Complete the following activities on separate sheets of paper if more space is required.

“Everyone feels lonely from time to time, but long periods of loneliness or social isolation can have a negative impact on your physical, mental and social health.”

Lifeline, Isolation and Loneliness.

Consider the above statement. In the spaces below write one to two paragraphs addressing each of the following questions relating to loneliness and social isolation. Provide examples in your answers.

1. Explain what you think loneliness and social isolation look like? Include your ideas of who could be affected, their causes, and any signs that someone may be experiencing loneliness or social isolation.

2. Describe the potential physical and mental effects loneliness and social isolation could have on someone’s life. Include the impacts at both a personal and an interpersonal level.

3. Explain your ideas on how to combat loneliness. Include your thoughts on what a person experiencing loneliness could do to beat it, and also explain the ways in which you could help someone else who is struggling with loneliness or social isolation.
Complete the following activities on separate sheets of paper if more space is required.

“Online socialising can increase levels of loneliness as these relationships are generally fragile and shallow. The number of online friends appears less important than the quality and strength of the relationships.”

Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, *Social isolation and loneliness*.

Consider the above statement. Form into groups of two or more people to discuss arguments for and against online socialising via social media and their positive or negative impacts loneliness. Present your findings in a debate format to other groups in the class.

“While it’s crucial to slowing the spread of a pandemic like COVID-19, practising social distancing results in fewer face-to-face social interactions, increasing the risk of loneliness.”

Lim, M and Badcock, J, *Social distancing can make you lonely. Here’s how to stay connected when you’re in lockdown.*

Social distancing and self-isolation can be a challenge and lead to loneliness. In groups of two or more people, brainstorm ways in which you could remain connected if required to practise social distancing or be in extended self-isolation. Discuss your ideas with other groups in the class.
Complete the following multiple choice questionnaire by circling or matching your preferred responses. The answers are at the end of the next page.

1. According to the *Australian Loneliness Report*, what ratio of Australians are experiencing loneliness?
   a. 1 in 2
   b. 1 in 4
   c. 1 in 5
   d. 1 in 25
   e. 1 in 33
   f. 1 in 50

2. Which of the following are examples of the concept of a ‘third place’? (Select any that apply)
   a. Home
   b. Cafe
   c. Library
   d. University
   e. Public swimming pool
   f. Work
   g. Dog park
   h. School
   i. Farmers’ market

3. According to a recent study, it can take approximately how many hours of time together before you can consider someone a ‘casual friend’ rather than just an acquaintance?
   a. 5 hours
   b. 10 hours
   c. 20 hours
   d. 30 hours
   e. 40 hours
   f. 50 hours

4. Loneliness is most common among which two (2) key age groups?
   a. 14 years and under
   b. 15-25 years
   c. 26-34 years
   d. 35-44 years
   e. 45-54 years
   f. 55-64 years
   g. 65-74 years
   h. 75 years and over

5. According to the 2016 Census of Population and Housing, approximately what ratio of households in Australia are lone person households?
   a. 1 in 2
   b. 1 in 4
   c. 1 in 5
   d. 1 in 12
   e. 1 in 25
   f. 1 in 50
6. Feeling lonely for long periods of time can be harmful. Which of the following physical or mental issues could be experienced during this time? (Select any that may apply)
   a. Lack of sleep
   b. Depression
   c. Joy
   d. Anxiety
   e. Substance abuse
   f. Suicidal thoughts
   g. Productivity
   h. Panic attacks

7. Which of the following could potentially be the cause of feelings of loneliness or isolation? (Select any that may apply)
   a. Job loss
   b. Home relocation
   c. Living alone
   d. Visiting your best friend
   e. Losing a loved one
   f. Divorce
   g. Cultural barriers
   h. Lack of purpose

8. Respond to the following statements by circling either ‘True’ or ‘False’:
   a. A recent study showed that social isolation and loneliness can have the same impact on death rates as smoking 15 cigarettes a day. True / False
   b. It’s impossible to experience loneliness if you are around other people. True / False
   c. Pet ownership has been found to help counter the experience of social isolation. True / False
   d. The experience of aloneness and loneliness are identical in nature. True / False
   e. A study has found that 37% of Australians feel lonely at work. True / False
   f. Studies have shown that reading a book can even alleviate loneliness by imitating the effects of socialising with a group. True / False

MULTIPLE CHOICE ANSWERS

MULTIPLE CHOICE

1. a
2. b, c, e, g, i
3. f
4. b, h
5. b
6. a, b, d, e, f, h
7. a, b, c, e, f, g, h
8 – a = T, b = F (People can experience loneliness even if surrounded by others, especially if they don’t feel they are experiencing the right kind of connection or support), c = T, d = F (Aloneness is a state of being where you feel good in your own self, loneliness on the other hand is a complex feeling that is often painful and scary), e = T, f = T.
Most Australians will experience loneliness at some point in their lives. 1 in 3 Australians reported an episode of loneliness between 2001 and 2009, with 40% of these people experiencing more than 1 episode (AIHW, Social isolation and loneliness). (p.1)

Single parents experience higher levels of social isolation (38% for men, 18% for women) than single adults without children, or couples with or without children (ibid). (p.2)

Unemployment, receiving income support and lack of satisfaction with financial situation are also substantial factors in the development of loneliness across age groups and gender (ibid). (p.2)

Social isolation has also been linked to mental illness, emotional distress, suicide, the development of dementia, premature death, poor health behaviours, smoking, physical inactivity, poor sleep, and biological effects, including high blood pressure and poorer immune function (ibid). (p.3)

Pet ownership has been linked to increased social contact, for example, through facilitating contact with neighbours and acting as a trigger for conversations, which may help counter social isolation (ibid). (pp. 4-5)

A quarter of all Australian households were now made up of people living alone, up from one-fifth in the mid-eighties, and for some people it was a lonely existence (AIFS, Living alone: only lonely for some). (p.6)

26% of people living alone reported feeling lonely often, compared to 16% of people living with others. People living alone were also slightly less satisfied with their lot in life (ibid). (p.6)

Over the last couple of decades, the proportion of the population aged 15 years and over living alone has increased from 8% to 12% (Jennings-Edquist, G, Feeling isolated? You're not alone. Here’s why 1 in 4 of us is lonely). (p.8)

Age is a key factor. International research suggests loneliness tends to be highest in young people (ages 16-25). Young Australians also report higher levels of loneliness, more depression symptoms and more social interaction anxiety (ibid). (p.8)

The highest rates of loneliness were reported by younger men who were widowed, followed by divorced and separated men (ibid). (p.9)

Data from 2001 to 2017 has found that a staggering 1.5 million people have been lonely for a decade or more (Bouf, J, Loneliness hurts more than our feelings – and it could be our next public health crisis). (p.10)

Although women reported higher subjective feelings of loneliness, a report showed a higher average experience of a lack of social support for men at all times. And some of the most troubling spikes of super loneliness were seen amongst men, particularly between the ages of 45 and 64 (ibid). (p.11)

Almost half of Australians (47%) reported not having neighbours to call on for help, which suggests many of us feel disengaged in our neighbourhoods (Lim, M, One in four Australians are lonely, which affects their physical and mental health). (p.12)

Loneliness is bad for our physical and mental health. Over a 6-month period, people who are lonely are more likely to experience higher rates of depression, social anxiety and paranoia. Being socially anxious can also lead to more loneliness at a later time (Lim, M, 1 in 3 young adults is lonely – and it affects their mental health). (p.15)

Young people around 20 years old have been found to favour the quantity of relationships over the quality of their social interactions which contrasts with their older counterparts at age 30 and 50 (VicHealth, The Young Australian Loneliness Survey: understanding loneliness in adolescence and young adulthood). (p.17)

Loneliness can affect people at any point, but is more common among two key groups: older individuals aged 75 and above and, perhaps surprisingly, young people aged 15-25 (VicHealth, Loneliness: a new public health challenge emerges). (p.19)

Loneliness has been found to be a risk factor for all causes of early death and feeling lonely increases our likelihood of earlier death by 26%. This is greater than the risk for obesity (Lim, M, Loneliness is a health issue, and needs targeted solutions). (p.22)

It takes roughly 50 hours of time together to move from mere acquaintance to casual friend. It takes 90 hours to go from casual friend to simple ‘friend’ status – and more than 200 hours before you can consider someone your close friend (Jennings-Edquist, G, Are you feeling lonely? Here are steps you can take). (p.27)

Data shows that men over the age of 85 have the highest suicide rate in Australia. Loneliness is contributing to that, but feelings of despair can often start much earlier (Barbour, L, Loneliness is contributing to depression among elderly Australians, but connection can be a lifesaver). (p.35)

A recent study found that loneliness and social isolation has the same health risk as smoking 15 cigarettes a day and leads to an increased risk of stroke, mental health, risk of dementia and suicide (Simmons, H, How to connect when you feel alone). (p.38)

Rates of social isolation have been estimated at 20% of the Australian population ( Anglicare, Going It Alone – A Study of Lone Person Households, Social Isolation and Disadvantage in Sydney). (p.41)

People experiencing poverty are at greater risk of social isolation than other groups and that this is particularly true if they live in poor neighbourhoods (ibid). (p.43)

The UK recently created a Minister for Loneliness after a commission of inquiry found that social isolation was linked to increasingly detrimental effects on people’s health (Patten, F, Why loneliness needs its own portfolio). (p.44)

Showing kindness to others not only helps them but can also increase your sense of purpose and value, improving your own wellbeing (Lim, M and Badcock, J, Social distancing can make you lonely. Here’s how to stay connected when you’re in lockdown). (p.48)
Aloneness
A positive state of being where you feel good in your own self. There are no associated negative feelings.

Anxiety
A normal feeling people experience when faced with a threat or danger, or when stressed.

Companionship
Feeling of fellowship or friendship; the enjoyment of spending time with other people.

Depression
Mood disorder with prolonged feelings of being sad, hopeless, low and inadequate, with a loss of interest or pleasure in activities, and often with suicidal thoughts or self-blame.

Emotional loneliness
A type of loneliness you experience when you are missing close, nurturing social connections such as a partner or friend with whom you share a strong emotional bond.

Loneliness
The negative feelings that arise when your social needs are unmet by the quantity and quality of your current social relationships. Loneliness may be experienced for short periods but can also be felt more over longer periods of time. You can be surrounded by people and still experience loneliness. See also ‘emotional loneliness’ and ‘social loneliness’.

Mental health
Mental health is about how people feel, think, behave and act. It includes: how you feel about yourself and your life, how you respond to stress, how you cope with things that come up in your life, your self-esteem and confidence, and how you see yourself in the future.

Panic attack
When you experience an episode of intense fear or discomfort that can occur suddenly and unpredictably.

Social anxiety
Anxiety that arises from social situations. It can include feelings such as an irrational fear of being judged by people, or feelings of behaving in a way that will result in embarrassment or humiliation.

Social connections
The connections you experience with other people. Social connections can be divided into three groups: intimate (people who love and care for you, e.g. family and friends); relational (people who you see regularly and share interests with, e.g. workmates); or collective (people with whom you share a group membership or affiliation, e.g. people who follow the same sporting team).

Social distancing
Social distancing includes ways to stop or slow the spread of infectious diseases. Also known as ‘physical distancing’. It is when you keep space between yourself and other people outside your home. It includes avoiding crowded places whenever you can.

Social exclusion
Exclusion from society and its rights and privileges, typically as a result of poverty or the fact of belonging to a minority social group.

Social inclusion
Social inclusion requires that all individuals be able to secure a job; access services; connect with family, friends, work, personal interests and local community; deal with personal crisis; and have their voices heard.

Social isolation
A state of complete or near-complete lack of contact between an individual and society. It differs from loneliness, which reflects temporary and involuntary lack of contact with other humans in the world. Social isolation can be an issue for individuals of any age, though symptoms may differ by age group.

Social loneliness
A lack of contact with other people in your wider social network such as friends, neighbours and colleagues.

Social media
Websites and applications that enable users to create and share content or to participate in social networking.

Social relationships
Healthy relationships support good mental health, while social isolation and poor relationships can be risk factors for mental health conditions like depression and anxiety. Part of building strong relationships is having good, open, regular communication. This can be done by sharing your thoughts and feelings with family, friends and trusted work colleagues.

Stress
When a person is under significant psychological or physical pressure – real or perceived, acute or chronic. Examples include illness, injury, bereavement, family issues, work demands or job loss.

Third places
Derived from a concept developed by Ray Oldenburg, ‘third places’ are public or commercial spaces that provide informal opportunities for local people to mix socially on neutral ground. Some examples of third places are public swimming pools, cafes, dog parks, community gardens, and farmers’ markets. ‘First places’ are private spaces, e.g. your home, while ‘second places’ are those where significant amounts of time are spent, e.g. school, work, university, etc.

Workplace loneliness
A significant number of workers have reported feeling lonely at work. This experience is mostly driven by screen-based technology and greater job flexibility in relation to home-based employment – both of which reduce direct social connection with fellow workers and clients. Lonely workers have also reported making more mistakes and feeling less productive.
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Websites with further information on the topic

Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC)  www.abc.net.au
Anglicare Australia  www.anglicare.asn.au
Australian Institute of Family Studies  www.aifs.gov.au
Australian Institute of Health and Welfare  www.aihw.gov.au
Australian Psychological Society  www.psychology.org.au
Beyond Blue  www.beyondblue.org.au
Black Dog Institute  www.blackdoginstitute.org.au
headspace  https://headspace.org.au
Kids Helpline  www.kidshelpline.com.au
Lifeline  www.lifeline.org.au
ReachOut Australia  https://au.reachout.com
Relationships Australia  www.relationships.org.au
SANE Australia  www.sane.org
The Conversation  https://theconversation.com/au
VicHealth  www.vichealth.vic.gov.au
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Loneliness and Social Isolation

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