

how to



cope with loneliness

How to cope with loneliness

This booklet is for anyone who experiences loneliness. It is particularly relevant for people who feel that loneliness has contributed to a mental health problem or for people who have a mental health problem that has left them feeling lonely. It explains the causes of loneliness and offers suggestions on how to overcome it.

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What is loneliness?

As social beings, most of us feel the need for rewarding social contact and relationships. One common definition of loneliness is that it is the feeling we get when our need for this type of contact is not met.

However, loneliness is not the same as being alone. You might choose to be alone and live happily without much contact with other people. Or you may have lots of social contact, or be in a relationship or part of a family and still feel lonely.

👉👉 *Loneliness is not feeling part of the world. You might be surrounded by loads of people but... you are [still] lonely.* 👉👉

Loneliness can have a significant impact on your mental health. It can contribute to mental health problems, such as anxiety and depression.

Having a mental health problem can also make you feel lonely. For example, your condition may mean that you find social contact difficult or that you find it hard to maintain friendships, or you may feel isolated because of stigma and discrimination.

What makes people lonely?

Loneliness has many different causes and affects people differently. Often people feel lonely because of their personal circumstances. But sometimes loneliness is a deeper, more constant feeling that comes from within.

Personal circumstances

Certain lifestyles and the stresses of daily life can make some people socially isolated and vulnerable to loneliness. There are many situations that might make you feel isolated or lonely.

For example, if you:

- lose a partner or someone close to you
- go through a relationship break-up
- are a single parent or caring for someone else – you may find it hard to maintain a social life
- retire and lose the social contact you had at work
- are older and find it difficult to go out alone
- move to a new area without family, friends or community networks
- belong to a minority ethnic group and live in an area without others from a similar background
- are excluded from social activities – for example, because of mobility problems or a shortage of money
- experience discrimination and stigma – for example, because of a disability or long-term health condition, or your gender, race or sexuality
- have experienced sexual or physical abuse – you may find it hard to form close relationships with other people.

Internal feelings of loneliness

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

There are many reasons people experience this kind of loneliness. You might feel unable to like yourself or to be liked by others, or you may lack self-confidence. This may come from having been unloved as a child so that, as an adult, you continue to feel unlovable in all relationships. Or sometimes, consciously or unconsciously, people isolate themselves within their relationships because they are afraid of being hurt.

●● *Loneliness, for me, is a side effect of the barriers I've put up over the years to protect myself from the world, and the world from me.* ●●

If you experience this deeper type of loneliness, you may try to avoid being on your own and spend a lot of time socialising. Or you may react in the opposite way, hiding away on your own so you don't have to face a world of people you feel unconnected to. You may also develop unhelpful habits, such as using alcohol or drugs, to escape your feelings of loneliness or to face social situations that you can't avoid.

How can being lonely affect your mental health?

Loneliness and social isolation can have a significant impact on your mental health. Studies have shown that people who are socially isolated experience more stress, have lower self-esteem and are more likely to have sleep problems than people who have strong social support. All of these things can have a negative effect on your general wellbeing.

Being lonely can also contribute to mental health problems, such as anxiety and depression. Social isolation has also been linked to rarer mental health conditions like schizophrenia. If you are concerned that your feelings of loneliness are developing into a mental health problem, you may find it helpful to talk to your GP.

Sometimes feeling lonely can feel so overwhelming that you have suicidal thoughts. If this happens, remember that you can pick up the phone at any time of night or day and talk to the Samaritans. (See 'Useful contacts' on p.16 and Mind's booklet *How to cope with suicidal feelings*.)

How can a mental health problem lead to loneliness?

There are many different reasons that having a mental health problem can make you feel lonely. Your mental health problem may affect the way you see yourself or you may feel lonely because of how other people see you.

How you see yourself

Mental health problems can often lead to low self-esteem and a poor self-image. This may be part of your mental health problem, or it may result from stigma or discrimination you have experienced because of your mental health. You may not feel confident that people want to have social contact with you, or you may feel that people don't understand you or see you as different or strange. This could lead you to avoid social contact and isolate yourself, making you increasingly lonely. (See Mind's booklet *How to increase your self-esteem.*)

If you have a condition such as anxiety or a phobia, you may find social contact or leaving the house difficult. As a result, you may become socially isolated, leading to feelings of loneliness. (See Anxiety UK in 'Useful contacts' on p.16 and Mind's booklets *Understanding anxiety and panic attacks* and *Understanding phobias.*)

Medication that you take for your condition can affect the way you see yourself. It may have changed your appearance or the way you communicate. You may have lost or put on weight, or your medication may make you feel drowsy. Some medication can cause shaking or slurred speech and you may worry that other people will make incorrect judgements about you. Or you may have to avoid drinking alcohol and find it difficult to admit this to your friends. All of this can have an impact on how confident you feel about meeting people socially, and cause you to withdraw from social contact.

How other people see you

If you have a mental health problem, you may find that some people are reluctant to engage with you because of the prejudice they feel towards people they see as different. You may have found that your friends stopped keeping in contact with you when they found out about your

mental health problems or that the way they reacted made you question your friendships. This may mean you become less willing to trust other people, and you may start to avoid social contact with others.

👉👉 *Once I was told people don't want to be around me as I depress them, so I became somewhat [of] a recluse.* 👉👉

You may also find that people don't know how to react to you or what to say when you are unwell, perhaps because they don't understand your condition or because they are worried that they might make you feel worse. For example, if you were feeling suicidal, your friends may have been afraid that anything they said might have encouraged you to attempt suicide. This can make you feel that nobody understands you, and make you feel isolated and lonely.

Sometimes your mental health problems can affect the way you interact with people or cause you to behave in a way that other people find difficult. For example, your condition may mean that at times you lack inhibitions or you may find it hard to care for your appearance. You may have behaved angrily or aggressively during a period of mental ill-health, or falsely accused a friend of something, causing them distress. This could mean that it is sometimes difficult to make friends or maintain existing relationships.

In these situations, it may be worth trying to have an open conversation with your friends so that they understand more about your condition and the way it can affect you.

How can I overcome feelings of loneliness?

For many people, overcoming loneliness is about increasing the level of social contact that they have with other people and there are different ways to do this. However, if you experience feelings of loneliness that are unrelated to social contact, you may need to develop different strategies to help you overcome this. We discuss both types of strategy here.

Connecting with the world around you

●● *The way I deal with loneliness is to go out and spend time outside, have a small conversation with the cashier as I pay for my things, phone my mum or see a close friend.* ●●

For some people, feeling lonely is not about how many friends they have, but about feeling disconnected from the rest of the world. In this case, it can help to take small steps to feel more connected with the world around you.

Making contact with people you know can be a useful first step in helping you feel less alone. If you have friends or family, phoning someone, or sending a text or email, can help make you feel more grounded and remind you that there are people in your life. Sometimes just going outside for a walk and seeing other people in the street, perhaps saying hello to someone you know, can make you feel a bit better.

If you are with other people or in a group situation, it can be easy to stay quiet or hide behind your phone. However, this can make you feel lonelier in the long run. Although it may feel difficult, joining in the conversation, even a bit, can often help you feel less isolated.

Making the most of social contact

If you are lonely, it can help to make the most of opportunities for social contact, however small.

If you work, pick your children up from school, or have a friendly neighbour or shopkeeper, starting a conversation – or even just saying hello – can make you feel less alone.

If you are out of practice talking to people, starting a conversation may seem daunting at first. If you find it hard knowing what to say, try asking people about themselves and what they are interested in.

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If you don't get an enthusiastic reply, the main thing is not to take it personally. The other person may be having a bad day that is nothing to do with you or may feel shy too. You might get a more positive response from someone else.

Meeting people and making friends

For many people, meeting new people and making friends can help them overcome their feelings of loneliness.

Many people meet their friends through their daily lives – for example, through work, their children's schools or through people they already know. But for people who do not work, or live away from friends and family, it can be difficult to meet new people.

One way is through making links with people with shared experiences, values or interests. Think about something that interests you. This could be anything from walking or watching films to making model cars. If you join a social group to do with something that genuinely interests you, you should find that you meet people who share your interests and get to do something you enjoy. You can find information about local groups, clubs or classes at your local library, in local newspapers or magazines, or online.

  *I have joined groups and made new friends, very good friends, and met likeminded souls. I am creating connections and starting to engage with the world around me.*  

Here are a few ideas:

- exercise classes or walking groups
- social groups for lesbian, gay or bisexual people
- art, music or poetry groups
- church, religious and spiritual meetings and services
- dance classes
- gardening groups

- IT classes
- parent and baby clubs
- meditation groups
- political groups
- slimming clubs
- sports clubs
- voluntary organisations (See 'Useful contacts' on p.16.)

Meeting people online

For many people, the internet is a good way to connect with people and make friends. There are a huge number of forums, social networks and dating sites that can put you in touch with people you share interests with. Many strong and long-lasting relationships start on the internet, including many where people only ever meet online.

However, it's important to use common sense when you're online. You don't always know who you're talking to so you should think carefully about what information you want to share. It is a good idea to use well-known websites and never share bank details or personal information with people you don't know.

Peer support

If you feel lonely because of a mental health problem, you may find that going to a peer support group could help. In a peer support group, people with mental health problems can share their feelings and experiences with people who have gone through similar things. In the UK, there are many local support groups for people with mental health problems, including at some local Minds. (See Mind in 'Useful contacts' on p.16.)

The internet can also be a useful resource for peer support. There are many websites and blogs about mental health, and some organisations, such as Mind, also have online communities where people with mental health problems can discuss their experiences and offer each other support.

Reading about, and talking to, people who have shared experiences of mental health problems online may help you feel less alone. (See The Elephant in the Room in 'Useful contacts' on p.16.)

Learning to spend time alone

👤👤 *I never feel a sense of loneliness when I'm at home. I have made my home into a warm, tranquil place where I feel safe and secure.* 👤👤

It may be that, despite your best efforts, you do not succeed in achieving the social contact that you feel you need. Or you may be someone who constantly seeks others out to avoid inner loneliness, and panics when left alone. In either case, it may be worth learning how to make the best of being alone and how to feel comfortable in your own company.

Periods of time spent alone can be rewarding. Being on your own gives you a chance to do something that you enjoy or really interests you. This could be anything, from visiting a tourist attraction to cooking something from a more complicated recipe than you would usually use. Focus on the pleasure it gives you and the fact that being alone can be a positive thing.

If you usually avoid being on your own, learning to be alone can be hard and may involve facing difficult feelings. However, having time to think and reflect on things when you're on your own can be positive. Techniques like yoga, meditation, or keeping a journal, can help you to relax and replace frantic activity with a calmer sense of yourself.

If you spend a lot of time alone, you may also find that having a pet, such as a dog or a cat, can also help reduce your feelings of loneliness.

What other help is available?

●● After living a life full of loneliness, I thought nothing could change. But after I started therapy, I realised things can actually get better, despite the neglect, abuse and mental health difficulties I suffered with. ●●

You may find that, despite your best efforts, you are unable to get the social contact that you need or that you experience feelings of constant loneliness that you can't resolve by yourself. In these cases, a talking treatment, such as counselling or psychotherapy, may help. Talking to a therapist allows you to explore and understand your feelings of loneliness and can help you develop positive ways of dealing with them. (See Mind's booklet *Making sense of talking treatments*.)

If anxiety about social situations has made you isolated, cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT) may help. CBT is a form of therapy that focuses on how you think about the things going on in your life – your thoughts, images, beliefs and attitudes – and how this impacts on the way you behave and deal with emotional problems. It then looks at how you can change any negative patterns of thinking or behaviour that may be causing you difficulties. It has been found to be particularly effective for anxiety-based conditions, including agoraphobia and social phobia. (See Mind's booklet *Making sense of cognitive behaviour therapy*.)

If you want to try a talking treatment, your GP can provide information and refer you to a local service. (See 'Useful contacts' on p.16.)

What can family and friends do to help?

This section is for friends and family who want to support someone they know who is lonely.

You may be worried that a friend or relative is lonely, perhaps because they are socially isolated or because someone has told you they are lonely. You may not be able to resolve this for them but there are things you can do to help.

Keep in touch

If you think, or know, that someone is lonely – for example, after a bereavement or relationship break-up – a small gesture, such as inviting them for lunch, or even just saying hello, can make them feel less alone.

If someone lives far away or you are too busy to visit, make whatever contact you can. Phone, email, text or Skype to let them know you are thinking of them.

Show your support

Be aware of how your behaviour might impact on someone who is lonely, and think about how you can be more supportive and encouraging. For example, if you cancel a date that your friend or relative was looking forward to, it may have more of an impact on them than you realise. Or you may want your friend or family member to meet new people in their area but, if you are negative about the activities available, they may not want to go.

You can also support someone in building a social network. Be encouraging about opportunities for social contact and find out what activities or groups there are in their area. Go with them to a class or group for the first time if they feel nervous. If transport is an issue, you could help your friend or family member get a bus pass or work out their local transport network.

Listen

If someone tells you that they feel lonely, despite seeming to have lots of friends and social contact, talk to them about why they feel like this and listen to their feelings and concerns. Help them feel that someone cares and wants to understand.

If you are worried that someone's loneliness is because of a mental health problem, or might become one, talk to them about what might help. This might be going to see their GP, getting a talking treatment or joining a support group. (See Mind's booklet *Understanding mental health problems*.)

Useful contacts

Mind

Mind Infoline: 0300 123 3393
(Monday to Friday 9am to 6pm)

email: info@mind.org.uk

web: mind.org.uk

Details of local Minds and other local services, including peer support groups and volunteering opportunities in Mind shops, and Mind's Legal Advice Line. Language Line is available for talking in a language other than English.

British Association for Behavioural and Cognitive Psychotherapies (BABCP)

tel: 0161 705 4304

web: babcp.com

Details of accredited therapists.

British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP)

tel: 01455 883 300

web: itsgoodtotalk.org.uk

Details of practitioners in your area.

Age UK

advice line: 0800 169 65 65

web: ageuk.org.uk

Advice and information for older people.

Carers UK

advice line: 0808 808 7777

web: carersuk.org.uk

Independent information and support for carers.

Anxiety UK

helpline: 08444 775 774

web: anxietyuk.org.uk

Support and information for people suffering from anxiety disorders.

Contact the Elderly

tel: 0800 716 543

web: contact-the-elderly.org

Social activities for people over 75 with little or no social support.

Elephant in the Room

web: facebook.com/mindelephant
Mind's online peer support
Facebook page.

Gingerbread

helpline: 0808 802 0925
web: gingerbread.org.uk
Advice and practical support for
single parents.

Help for Adult Victims of Child Abuse (HAVOCA)

web: havoca.org
Support and advice for adults
suffering from past childhood
abuse.

London Lesbian and Gay Switchboard

helpline: 0300 330 0630
web: lgs.org.uk
Support and information for lesbian,
gay, bisexual and transgendered
people in the UK.

Relate

tel: 0300 100 1234
web: relate.org.uk
Counselling for adults with
relationship difficulties.

Samaritans

Freepost RSRB-KKBY-CYJK
Chris, PO Box 90 90
Stirling FK8 2SA
helpline: 08457 90 90 90
email: jo@samaritans.org
web: samaritans.org.uk
24-hour support for anyone in
distress or despair.

Volunteering England

web: volunteering.org.uk
Information about volunteering
opportunities.

Volunteering Wales

web: volunteering-wales.net
Information about volunteering
opportunities.

Further information

Mind offers a range of mental health information on:

- diagnoses
- treatments
- practical help for wellbeing
- mental health legislation
- where to get help

To read or print Mind's information booklets for free, visit mind.org.uk or contact Mind infoline on 0300 123 3393 or at info@mind.org.uk

To buy copies of Mind's information booklets, visit mind.org.uk/shop or phone 0844 448 4448 or email publications@mind.org.uk

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Mind

We're Mind, the mental health charity for England and Wales. We believe no one should have to face a mental health problem alone. We're here for you. Today. Now. We're on your doorstep, on the end of a phone or online. Whether you're stressed, depressed or in crisis. We'll listen, give you advice, support and fight your corner. And we'll push for a better deal and respect for everyone experiencing a mental health problem.

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