Loneliness

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

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

Although loneliness is common to many people, there is no common answer to dealing with it. Loneliness can in fact be the barrier that is preventing someone taking advantage of the help most needed by them.

Loneliness has many different causes, which vary from person to person. We do not always understand what it is about an experience that makes us feel lonely. For some people, certain life events may mean they feel lonely, such as: -

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

Other people find they feel lonely at certain times of the year, such as around Christmas or during this Pandemic.

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

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

There are two kinds of loneliness: -

- External that is caused by a situation such a bereavement, separation, redundancy
    - tends to last for a limited time
    - everyone is prone to it at some time
- Internal which is brought on by thoughts, beliefs and attitudes that can isolate a person

People who suffer the most intense loneliness are those who are, to a great extent, dependent on others for the way they feel. Many people are not happy with their own company and rely upon others to make life more interesting.

True loneliness is created by both internal and external causes. It is nothing to be ashamed of but does require action to overcome it.

Bereavement needs to be processed and talking about it with a good listener enables a form of release. The same applies to other life events as opposed to bottling up those feelings without processing them.

Steps to overcome loneliness

The 'Change Model' is a very good guide to the way forward.

- Take stock – analyse
- Explore options
- Decide
- Take action
- Review
- Change again if necessary

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

The obvious answer is to take the initiative and try to change the situation for the better. There is always something, no matter how insignificant, that can be done to improve even though on some days there might be feelings of extra vulnerability or lack of energy / capability to do anything. Tackling external causes is easier to tackle than internal loneliness. Internal loneliness might require energy and attention to be focused creatively rather than towards feeling miserable or lonely.

Small steps and incremental improvement can lead to overcoming the feelings of loneliness. Very rarely is there a big step change and waiting for such an event can be self-defeating.

A person who is shy or introverted can modify their behaviour through these incremental alterations in their behaviour and activity. The inherent danger with loneliness is the focus on self and being too analytical and self-centred. The focus needs to change. Facing up to situation positively is the first step – start of a different attitude and perspective on life.

Loneliness can be self-defeating as it may put off others through: -

- failure to meet people 'half-way'
- detachment and their own worst enemies
- smothering others with their own troubles
- one-way dialogue

To avoid off-putting to others it requires better listening skills, asking questions and being truly interested in what others have to say.

How do you begin to conquer loneliness?

As there can be various reasons and conditions creating loneliness a person needs to learn to face and understand them so to find the most effective way(s) of conquering them.

- How often do feelings of loneliness arise?
- When do those feelings arise or triggered?
- When are the feelings of loneliness less noticeable?
- When with other people how often do you initiate conversations or ask questions?
- How often do you talk about yourself?
- Do you really ask other people about themselves and afterwards can you remember what they said?
- When was the last time you tried to do something positive to alter or improve the situation and feelings?
- If any attempts did not succeed then did you give up and not try something else?
- Do you put-off other people with the tone and nature of what you say or do not say?

Reflect and prepare.

- Note when you felt lonely and why
- What triggered those feelings
- What you did to make you feel a little better - step towards identification of the small steps to work your way out of it
- Equip yourself with various conversational snippets from the news and media
- Did you shut off when a conversation turned to others' views and worries rather than your own?
- Could what you say be interpreted as a criticism by the other person as opposed to a more welcoming stance?
- Every day think of it as an opportunity to take a step forward and not to wallow in your loneliness

Actions and activities for a better life

Take it easily at first

If you have felt lonely for a long time, even if you already know lots of people, it can be terrifying to think about trying to meet new people or opening up to people for the first time.

But you do not need to rush into anything. Start off by going somewhere like a cafe, the cinema or a sports event where you can be around people, but not be expected to talk to them – you may find that simply being around other people is enough to help with your feelings of loneliness.

If you are going to a group or class, you could ask whoever runs the class or group if you can just go along and watch at first.

Go somewhere it is not expected that you will interact straight away, like a class where everyone is focused on an activity.

Work

When a person uses energy and puts in the effort they can earn money or improve their own surroundings. Work, whether paid or unpaid, provides a purpose and fulfilment. When working depression and loneliness must recede for a time. Having something practical to do before the day starts will help too. Something to look forward to.

What hidden potential there might be a myriad of things that could be done meaning that at the end of the day there can be a 'pat on the back' for whatever has been achieved that day. This then becomes self-reinforcing creating better positive not negative feelings.

Compassion, understanding and caring for other people in any way means that people come to you for advice and help. Having listened to other peoples' troubles your own experience, knowledge and expertise of life comes into real use as you help someone else. Using your talents, skills, and experience for mutual benefit. Rewarding for both parties.

Appearances

Have former standards of self-esteem slipped meaning that others see you as a less attractive person, in terms of looks and personality, to associate with? Has a downward spiral set in? First impressions do count to others if not to yourself.

Body language

The way someone sits, walks, uses their arms and legs tells others a great deal. Think about how you project yourself in the eyes of others.

Controlling shyness

This could be a life-long state of mind or one triggered by a recent event. It might be that simple remarks from others are interpreted as their not wanting to know you. There could be feelings of resentment that others are happy or going about together.

It could be that self-deprecation, putting oneself down, leads to stifling of natural emotions where it is quite reasonable to express them rather than bottling the, up for fear of upsetting others or admitting personal inadequacies. Diplomacy taken too far alienates people from each other as things kept back can create a possible feeling of insincerity or lack of trust. Allowing your own vulnerability to show can draw others in to you and enable a better way to be found going forward.

Lethargy is the greatest enemy and so avoiding a routine and pattern of behaviour that is elf-fulfilling is key. The longer in that state of mind the harder it is to break out of it. Small steps with realistic objectives are the way forward.

Conversational 'ice-breakers' will help.

- Make your conversation as cheerful as you can
- Be aware of any special things that day or that time of year that can be used in conversation
- Ask questions and take on board the response with a follow up question demonstrating genuine interest in what that other person has said
- Be truthful but in a positive way about shyness or loneliness suggesting a possible helpful way out of that state
- Offer help to others
- Pay small but genuine compliments
- Be topical – some recent newsworthy item or something that has happened or might happen in the community
- Encourage others to respond – a smile or just a polite good morning or afternoon. A happier person is a better person for others to be with

Health

Think about how some of the following might be having an impact and whether you can do anything to change them: -

- sleep - getting too little or too much sleep can have a big impact on how you feel
- diet - eating regularly and keeping your blood sugar stable can make a difference to your mood and energy levels
- physical activity - exercise can be really helpful for your mental wellbeing, and some people find it helps improve their self-esteem
- spend time outside - spending time in green space can help your wellbeing and it is also good for the eyes

- spend time with animals - some people find spending time around animals can help with feelings of loneliness, whether through owning a pet or spending time around animals in their natural environment. If you find being around animals helpful, you could try visiting a local community or city farm - the organisation Social Farms and Gardens has a list of outdoor community projects across the UK, many of which have animals available to the public
- avoid drugs and alcohol – they might be used to cope with difficult feelings about yourself but in the long run they can make the situation far worse and prevent tackling the underlying problems

Joining

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

Try to join a class or group based on your hobbies or interests.

If you can, volunteering is a good way of meeting people. Helping others can also really help improve your mental health. It is also a good idea to check that you will receive adequate support from the organisation you are volunteering at. Volunteering can be an escape from loneliness as it has been for many others.

Joining a club, some activity or interest group creates opportunities to meet like-minded people. Previous hobbies or interests could be recultivated. Loneliness saps energy, confidence, and enterprise but any small talent that is developed can be the source of fun, self-respect, and admiration from others.

It might help if contact is made beforehand to enlist the help of someone to act as your introducer to others so that you are not immediately lonely in that setting.

If some form of mental or physical disability is an issue there are many self-help organisations that offer information as local support. Understanding the limitations of the disability leads to discovery of activities and pursuits which are within your capabilities supported by other people who understand the difficulties to be overcome.

Try to open up

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

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

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

Peer support

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

Some different types of peer support which you may find useful: -

- befriender service
    - various charities offer telephone and face-to-face befriender servicers, which put volunteer befrienders in touch with people feeling lonely. Visit https://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/tips-for-everyday-living/loneliness/useful-contacts/
- join an online community like Side by Side
    - these communities can provide a place to listen and share with others who have similar experiences. They are available 24/7, most are free, and you can access them wherever you are
- contact Mind's Infoline or a local Mind to see what other types of peer support there may be in your area.

Talking therapies

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

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

For more detail visit https://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/tips-for-everyday-living/loneliness/tips-to-manage-loneliness/ for more information on Talking Therapies and Cognitive Behavioural Therapy.

Strategy to break out

To break out of loneliness requires an individual strategy mindful of the circumstances.

Life is an adventure and seeking then taking opportunities, using whatever gifts at your disposal, to better enjoy life is the goal. Learning to live life with yourself, to give yourself a break and like yourself are important. To like and love yourself is a big first step. Look to do the things you like to do not and stop doing what you do not want to do which gives displeasure.

Some examples: -

- Contact a local club or organisation that offers an outlet and ability to meet other people in an area of interest
- Offer to do small favours for neighbours or friends
- Developing penfriends, email or SMS friends or joining a WhatsApp group.
    - Have something interesting to share with others and introduce a bit of humour
- Being prepared to say 'Yes' not 'No' more often
- Giving things a try and if they do not work out try something else bot do not give up altogether Never give up looking!
- Going to a gym or joining a walking, trekking, cycling group combining fitness with exposure to other people

Some tricks to cope with dread moments

The pangs of loneliness can be very strong and each person needs to find their own remedy step by step. Anticipation can lead to creation of solutions to minimise or eliminate those dread moments of loneliness.

Some examples: -

- Entering your home and feeling alone
    - A welcoming pet, music turned on or light on so that you enter a warmer welcoming atmosphere
- Signs of isolation in your home
    - Tidy up any evidence of single items that reinforce solitary status
- Laying your table for one especially on special occasions
    - Setting another place is more likely to make the feelings worse
    - Choose another more comfortable setting that does not re-enforce the solo status – on a tray or smaller table and spoil yourself in the setting
- Going to bed on your own
    - Wait for the 'Good night' from the news and say the same to the TV or radio. Listen to music or a programme in your bed before falling asleep
- Having news but nobody to share it with
    - What is the telephone for or texting?
- Alienated on your own street
    - Cultivate a relationship with someone nearby when you see them starting with a 'Hello' and small talk so that bonds are built
- Dreading your own birthday
    - Treat yourself
    - If you have developed your own network then there should be no such problem as several people will send you cards, emails, or text messages

- Onset of Winter and social hibernation at large
    - Join an evening class or go to the Theatre / Cinema
    - Start planning holidays or activities for next year and putting in some research
    - On darker afternoons some cheering lighting and reading a long book that would be too long to read in any other season
- Feeling lost in a crowd
    - Regard all people you meet as potential well-wishers until proven wrong
    - A smile and some small talk as you wait at the restaurant or bar, in a queue
- Going to a club, class, Church, or some other group setting
    - Contact the organisation beforehand, explaining your feeling of loneliness or timidity and seek some 'introducer' so that you can be introduced to other people on arrival and made to feel welcome
- Use of alcohol or substances to overcome isolation
    - This is self-delusion and at best short-lived but the long-term effects are just the opposite creating a fresh layer of other problems. So do not use these crutches

Developing some interesting topics of conversation or to include in your other communications (texting, WhatsApp, emails): -

- Weather - the detail makes exchanges more interesting and is not too intrusive
- Culture - books you have read, music you have heard, shows you have seen or TV / films – some snippets about what you found interesting or enjoyed
- Sport – interesting moments in events you have watched or progress about your own team
- Health – but not dwelling on your own misfortunes or that of others to avoid a litany of aches, pains, anxieties, and failed treatments
- Holidays – the fun, drama, pleasure of the break without making the other person feel inferior
- Food and wine you have enjoyed and new discoveries
- Gardens exchanging ideas and tips, how things look like now or what you have done
- Pets – some funny things they have done, or you have done with them

A warmer home environment

Many lonely people lack a sense of belonging or ever feeling 'at home'. Maybe, the four walls around them speak only of what was or what might have been. Making the home more welcoming might be an avenue to explore.

- Atmosphere
    - does it represent your personality at its most relaxed lessening stress?
    - Radio or music on when you enter
    - A lived-in feel with something reflecting work in progress – half finished crossword
    - Pleasant aroma
    - Colours and lighting that convey the right vibes
    - Focal points to attract attention and add warmth and colour
        - Mask or hide less favourable features
    - Dark or heavy furniture to be avoided to give a lighter feel and more easily moved around
    - Mirrors rationed and used to add light or to make a room look more spacious
- Garden and plants
    - It can be daunting but there will be times when it is enriched with the colours and fragrances as well as any produce
    - Indoor potted shrubs and plants bring nature into your home
    - A hanging basket by the front entrance creating a welcoming vista
- Pet
    - Another creature and demands an attentive routine in meeting their needs
    - Can return affection and reduce stress
    - Ensure you can accommodate them when they are older and cope with the various bills including the VET

Holidays

These can be potentially sources of stress or loneliness. Dining on your own or communal dining when there are other couples. These concerns may be self-defeating.

Special activity holidays or hobby events that encourage everyone to mix can create a more open and inclusive environment for all. More so if there is a guide or courier who would seek to ensure there were the introductions and personal attention thereafter.

Sport, fitness, and relaxation

Taking part in sport as a participant or spectator can lead to acquaintances and even friendships.

Physical activity is good for the body and the mind with the endorphin effect. However, if thinking of physical pursuits think about the joints, muscles, and limbs. Squash and jogging carry with them particular risks. Bowls is a very sociable activity with various degrees of competence to cope for all abilities. Cycling has increased in popularity. Swimming is attractive for those with back problems or suffer with stiffness given the feeling of weightlessness as well as stimulating a good cardio-vascular exercise. There are many forms of walking where you can meet like-minded people such as local Rambling Clubs but also walking the fells in National Parks and coast walks where you can meet fellow walkers in secluded spots where more people are inclined to talk to others they meet if only to ask if they are on the right route to their destination.

Fitness can embrace Keep Fit, Yoga, Pilates, exercises in the Gym and all forms of dancing. Do try one session before committing to longer term expense most specially where Golf is concerned. Ramblers in the countryside have plenty of exercise and it is also good for the eyed with different views not glued to a screen for hours at an end.

Even exercises in your own home are good for both the mind and the body as well as getting rid of lethargy.

Arts, crafts, and pastimes

Maybe it is too much to be trying to meet up with other people at times. That is when having some absorbing hobbies, interests or pastimes can bring some interest, energy, and concentration if not fulfilment. These can be a steppingstone to becoming more socially engaged with others at other time.

Many that are lonely feel that the afternoon or early evening is the most depressing time. Your local library may be a good source of inspiration for arts and crafts you might like to take up. Do remember that some handicrafts need several months of practice before a good standard of work is produced so do not be put off it there is not early or immediate success or satisfaction. In Group activities there will be other people of a similar standard and with plenty of opportunity for fun and conversation as well as encouragement if things are not going so well at the time.

Shared hobbies and interests in an easy-going environment offer a good chance to meet others with similar interests. Added to which it creates a pattern or routine with something to look forward to. Maybe with a little challenge too and a purpose.

The wealth of activities includes such activities as: -

- crosswords, puzzles, card, and board games – though some of these are solo events but they do keep the mind active and stimulate
- drama – as a performer or part of the support team behind the scenes or front of house
- flower arranging - class or part of a team arranging flowers in Church or elsewhere
- scrapbook with old photographs, cuttings from newspapers or cataloguing programmes from sporting events

- music – classes, join a choir (could be Rock Choir not just formal music) or play an instrument in a Jazz Group, local orchestra / band, an accompanist for a dance group or keep-fit class
- painting, drawing and photography – surprisingly, many people who join painting or drawing classes later in life produce work of artistic merit which also expresses their feelings
- reading, like music and the performing arts, can transport the mind from the humdrum of to-day to another world
    - the more passive form is reading
    - the more active form can be an author of something that is read and appreciated by others at a writers' circle or the local branch of the University of the Third Age (U3A). Local history society may need the services of someone to record personal accounts of others