

Loneliness

Loneliness is a painful feeling of lacking meaningful connections with others. Feeling lonely is a natural part of life that usually comes and goes. When loneliness becomes severe it can be harmful to your health and wellbeing. Talk to your pharmacist for information and support that best suits your needs.

Introduction

Loneliness can affect anyone, regardless of age, gender or background. Loneliness is different from being alone: you don't have to be on your own to feel lonely. You can feel lonely with a partner, friends or family. You can feel lonely at home or at work, when you are online or out and about in the community. These feelings have an important purpose. Just as hunger reminds you to eat to stay healthy, loneliness reminds you that your social relationships need improving to stay socially healthy.

Signs and symptoms

Loneliness is how you feel about your social relationships, not simply the number of connections you have. The experience of loneliness also varies from person to person. As a result, you can't easily tell who is, and who is not, feeling lonely.

The following signs are not always a reliable way of detecting loneliness but being aware of some signs can help you to take steps to address loneliness, whether for yourself or someone you care about:

Loneliness can **feel** like:

- There's no one you are really close to.
- You don't 'fit in' with groups you want to be part of at work or university.
- You don't belong to your local community.
- You often feel alone, left out, isolated.
- There's no one really interested in you.
- You don't matter, lack purpose in life, as if you are invisible.

What you might **hear**:

- No one understands me.
- I don't have anyone to turn to or talk to.
- I don't fit in/ feel accepted/ belong.

- I feel lost/ empty.
- No one has my back.
- Why don't people like me?
- What's wrong with me?

What you might **see**:

- Avoiding or withdrawing from others to prevent rejection.
- 'Soft' requests to connect, so as to not to burden others. For example, 'I would love to catch up but no pressure at all, I don't want to put you out'.
- Poor eye contact and/ or withdrawn body language.
- Less engaged in conversations.
- Telephoning less often.

Risk factors

People feel lonely for many different reasons. These include a wide variety of social and environmental factors (e.g., being bullied or marginalised, being an unpaid carer, lack of access to affordable, reliable and appropriate transport, and financial insecurity) as well as a range of personal factors (e.g., living with reduced mobility or a long term health condition) that can increase the risk of experiencing loneliness.

A wide range of major life events can also increase the likelihood of feeling lonely. Some examples include: a relationship break up, moving away from home, starting a new job, facing bereavement, becoming a new parent, retirement, and experiencing a disaster.

Types of Loneliness:

There are different types of loneliness. Some people experience one main type of loneliness, whilst others have a combination of these feelings. For example, someone may be married but still feel lonely because they are not part of a wider social network like a sports club or church.

- **Emotional loneliness** – involves feeling a lack of close friendships or intimate personal relationships. For example, being unable to find a life partner, trusted companion or best friend.
- **Social loneliness** – involves a sense of not being embedded in a social network, for example at work, school, church, sports club, or other community group.
- **Existential loneliness** – is a broader feeling of not connecting with others or the world outside, alienation and emptiness, and a lack of meaning in life. This is often described in association with serious illness, dying, traumatic events, and concern for the future.

Recognising which type/s of loneliness you are experiencing can help in addressing loneliness more effectively by finding appropriate support.

Impact of loneliness on health

It is important to know that loneliness isn't a mental health disorder. Loneliness isn't the same as depression either. If left unchecked however, research shows that frequent, intense, or persistent loneliness is harmful to our physical and mental health.

Loneliness has been linked to an increased risk of:

- heart disease & stroke
- diabetes
- immune problems
- poor mental health
- cognitive decline & dementia.

Importantly, people who are lonely are less physically active, sleep well less, and take more medication, which further contributes to poor health and wellbeing.

Self-Care

People with better social connections experience many benefits including less stress, feeling valued and having longer, happier lives. Improving your social connections is good for you, and for your health.

However, it is not always easy to respond to feelings of loneliness. Three main steps can help you feel more in control.

1. Acknowledge

A good first step is to recognise and acknowledge the feelings of loneliness, knowing that it is a normal and common human experience. There is no need to be embarrassed, remember social connection is a basic human need for people of all ages.

Loneliness can be invisible to others; they may not realise how you are feeling. Talking openly about it can lead to deeper more meaningful connections with others.

2. Assess:

Next, think about how many and what type of social connection you need. We all have different needs for social connection. Assess your current connections and think about which relationships are fulfilling and which are not. Knowing the kind and amount of social contact that works best for you, means you can begin to fill the gaps.

3. Act:

Think of ways to get enough social connections to suit your needs. Improving social connections can be difficult. It's okay to feel uneasy or a bit anxious but change is possible.

Here are some suggestions for addressing loneliness for adults and older adults:

- Prioritise quality connections - it's important to prioritise high quality social relationships but also be open to new connections through casual interactions, even with strangers.
- People need regular and frequent social interaction - make sure you spend enough time nurturing your day-to-day community.
- Use technology wisely - it's important to balance online interactions with face-to-face, in-person social connections.
- Start small - meeting your need for social connection requires time and effort, but has big benefits – start with something small like checking in with a friend.
- Reach out for help and support if you need it.

Important

Get medical advice:

1. If loneliness is interfering with your life, or you have been feeling lonely for a long time, it's important to see your doctor or another health professional such as a psychologist or a psychiatrist.
2. If you have thoughts about suicide, seek immediate help. You can call Lifeline on 13 11 14, or the Suicide Call Back Service on 1300 659 467

For More Information

PALS Pharmacy Addressing Loneliness and Social-isolation

www.palsglobalnetwork.com/loneliness

Ending Loneliness Together

www.endingloneliness.com.au/resources

Ending Loneliness Together directory

www.endingloneliness.com.au/search

R U OK?

www.ruok.org.au/ending-loneliness-together

Loneliness NZ

www.loneliness.org.nz/lonely

Marmalade Trust

www.marmaladetrust.org/about-loneliness

Campaign to End Loneliness

www.campaigntoendloneliness.org/research-policy-and-practice

WHO Commission on Social Connection

www.who.int/groups/commission-on-social-connection

CDC Social Connectedness

www.cdc.gov/social-connectedness/improving/index.html

Healthdirect Australia

1800 022 222
www.healthdirect.org.au

Beyond Blue

www.beyondblue.org.au

Black Dog Institute

www.blackdoginstitute.org.au

Headspace

www.headspace.org.au

Lifeline

www.lifeline.org.au

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