

Seeking Help for Loneliness is Vital for Brain Health

Being alone is a normal part of life. It allows us time to de-stress, gather our thoughts, gain a sense of perspective, or enjoy solo activities. Many people spend much of their lives alone, but they may not feel lonely.

Conversely, others report feeling lonely while leading busy lives, living in stable relationships, being surrounded by family, or seeing friends or colleagues on a regular basis.

But being alone and experiencing loneliness are very different states.

Loneliness is a negative feeling that accompanies a sense of lacking social connections. We might experience loneliness for many reasons. For example, life changes like a new school or job, moving to a new location, living alone or away from our social circle for the first time.

Neuroscientists have given one [definition of loneliness](#) as “a unique condition in which individuals perceive themselves to be socially isolated even when among other people”. In other words, loneliness is less a reflection of our proximity to other people or the number of connections we have, and more a reflection of the quality of those connections.

This might help to explain why, despite the super connectivity of our digital age, more people around the world are feeling lonely than ever before.

The scale of the loneliness problem

A [2018 survey](#) of 20,000 adults conducted in the United States gave an insight into the scale of loneliness. Almost half of the respondents reported feeling sometimes or always alone or left out. Adults aged 18-22 years appeared to be the loneliest group. This demographic – often referred to as Generation Z – happen to be heavy users of social media. However, the researchers indicated that social media use was not a *predictor* of loneliness.

With the arrival of the COVID pandemic and the reality of forced isolation, the incidence of loneliness may increase dramatically. Experts are predicting a significant impact on mental health due to isolation, loss of jobs and financial stability. These could increase the number of people who are experiencing a sense of social disconnection.

Why do we experience loneliness?

Human beings are social animals. We have an innate need to feel a sense of connection or belonging with others. This likely originated in our distant past when humans sought protection from threats by living and hunting in “packs”.

More recently, [researchers have suggested](#) that the experience of loneliness may be a psychological warning system, similar to the physical experience of pain, that tells us something is wrong. John Cacioppo, a professor at the University of Chicago and the co-founder of the field of social neuroscience, specialised in the study of loneliness from the 1970s until his death in 2018. He suggested this warning system creates the motivation for people “[to repair or replace their deficient social relationships](#)”. Cacioppo pointed out this can be a very effective mechanism for taking corrective action in the short-term by motivating us to improve our social connections.

However, if loneliness is left to develop into a chronic state, it can impact our health in many ways, including the health of our brains.

What does chronic loneliness do to our brains?

Many scientific studies have concluded that [loneliness can impact our mental health](#) by increasing the risk of depression, anxiety and suicidal thoughts. However, the problem may be more profound if it is left untreated.

People who have long-term Major Depressive Disorder appear to have continuously elevated levels of the stress hormone cortisol because they are in a constant state of stress. While our brains release cortisol to create the “fright/flight/fight” response we experience in stressful situations, levels of the hormone naturally rise and fall throughout the day. When cortisol remains elevated, it can slow the production of new brain cells in the hippocampus (the area of the brain for learning and memory). It may also impact the amygdala, where the brain regulates sleep, activity and hormone production. It can also affect the pre-frontal cortex, where our emotional responses and decisions are processed.

Loneliness may also affect cognition – the brain function for acquiring knowledge and understanding through thought, experience and the senses. A [study of older adults carried out in the US in 2017](#) concluded that loneliness and depressive symptoms might predict a decline in cognition over the long term.

As well as impacting our knowledge and understanding of the world, loneliness may also reconfigure how our brains perceive our social relationships. The pre-frontal medial cortex is the part of the brain that creates a “map” of our relationships with others, based on how similar they appear to be to ourselves. We perceive people most similar as socially closer. Earlier in 2020, the [Journal of Neuroscience](#) published a study in which researchers reported that loneliness could reduce that perception of similarity. The research indicated that even close social connections have the *appearance* of being more distant in the brains of lonely people.

Our need for a connection with others may be as critical as our need for food. In [another study reported in March 2020](#), researchers used scanning techniques to measure the brain’s response in participants shown familiar social cues while in a state of forced isolation. The researchers observed a ‘craving’ response in participants similar to the pleasure-driven craving we have for food when we’re hungry. These findings may have extra resonance in the era of COVID lockdowns.

Steps you can take now to combat loneliness

As the research suggests, there are ample reasons for lonely people to address their situation to avoid longer-term problems arising.

It’s important to acknowledge there may be a problem that needs addressing, rather than accepting loneliness as merely “a fact of life”.

Everybody’s situation is different, but the first step could be to reach out to others. Although this might feel terrifying to a long-term sufferer of loneliness, the mental health support organisation [Mind](#) suggests getting amongst other people in comfortable social situations. For example, a café, a sports event, or similar setting offers the opportunity to be with other people, without initially feeling the need to interact with anyone.

Reaching out might also be as simple as calling family or friends, by phone, or a video call application such as Zoom or Skype. The next step might be to arrange to meet someone in person.

A next step for participating more actively could be joining a class, or starting a course or new group hobby. These activities can provide a safe environment for interacting with others, as well as offer the opportunity for making new social connections.

[Mind](#) also suggests peer support as a good option, such as using a befriender service that provides volunteers available to talk to lonely people. There are also online communities where people can listen or share their experiences.

If these options aren't suitable, it might be appropriate to seek professional help. Local or online mental health charities and support services can usually provide contacts for both free and paid professional services, such as counselling and talking therapies.

The critical thing to understand is that loneliness should be a temporary problem, and seeking help will prevent it from becoming a longer-term, potentially damaging condition.

Where to find help

There are many support organisations you can find online, offering a range of different services to suit your needs.

Resources in the UK

<https://www.countryliving.com/uk/wellbeing/a30526876/loneliness-support/>

<https://www.campaigntoendloneliness.org/feeling-lonely/>

Resources in the US

<https://connect2affect.org/find-help/>

Resources in Australia

<https://www.lifeline.org.au/get-help/information-and-support/loneliness-and-isolation/>

Elsewhere

Run a Google search for "support services for loneliness in [country]"