

Loneliness explored: an introduction to loneliness



At the Campaign to End Loneliness, we believe that people of all ages need connections that matter. Our vision is that everyone can live a life free from chronic loneliness.


This introductory course is designed to help you understand the causes and effects of loneliness, and what to do if you or someone you know is feeling lonely.

LONELINESS EXPLORED

- Defining loneliness
- Chronic vs transient loneliness
- Social isolation
- Causes of loneliness
- Effects of loneliness
- Looking out for loneliness


 **Addressing loneliness**


RESOURCES

 **Further reading and resources**

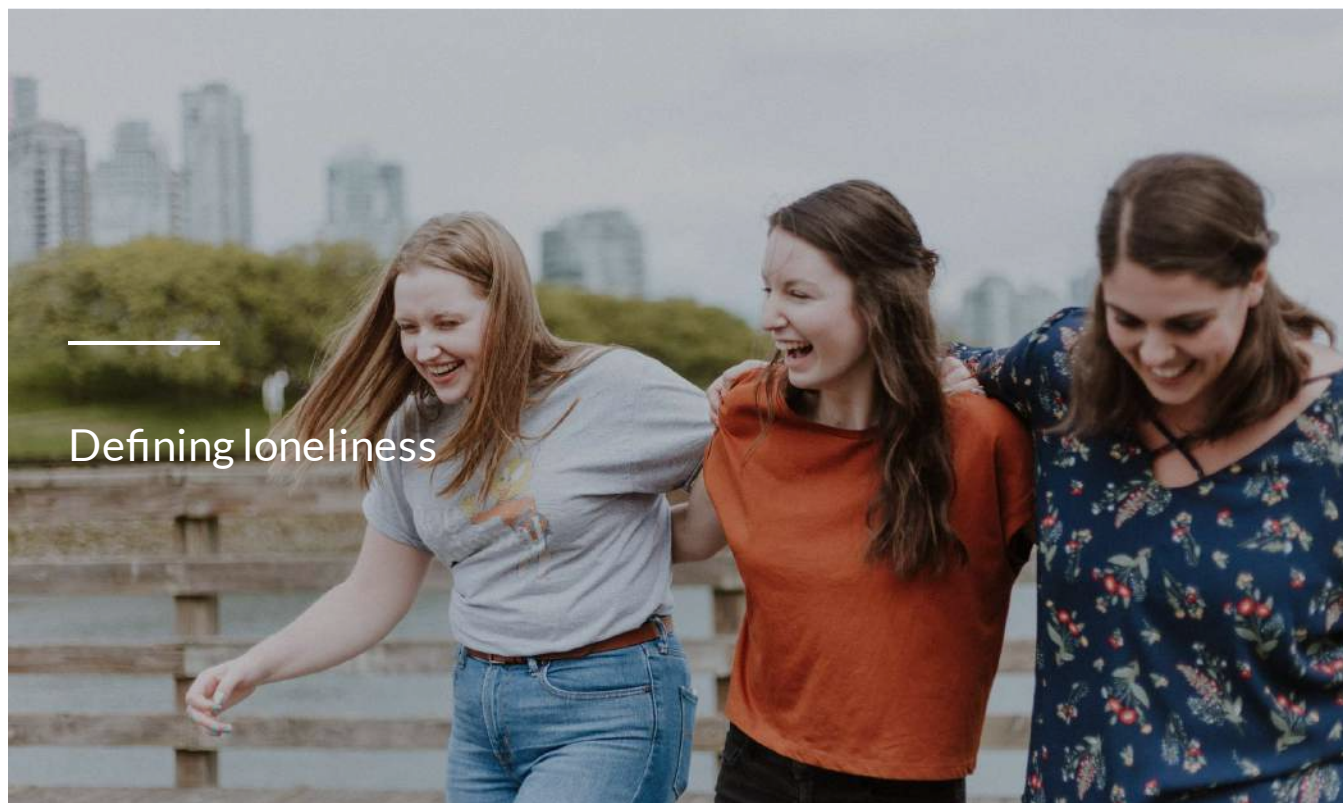
REFLECTIONS

 **Quiz**

 **Certificate of completion**

 **Share your feedback**

Defining loneliness



Defining loneliness

What is loneliness?

Loneliness is a **normal human emotion** and a **personal response to an unwanted situation**.

Loneliness is not something to feel embarrassed about. We can all feel lonely, regardless of our age or background.

Loneliness is an emotion, it does not define who someone is. For this reason, we avoid saying 'lonely people' or 'a lonely person'.

The definition of loneliness

The definition of loneliness that we use is:

"Loneliness is a subjective, unwelcome feeling of lack or loss of companionship, which happens when there is a mismatch between the quantity and quality of the social relationships that we have, and those that we want" - (Perlman and Peplau, 1981)

Loneliness is **not a personal failing**. Everyone will have a different experience of loneliness and different reasons for why they are feeling this way.

Types of loneliness

There are different types of loneliness: social, emotional, and existential.

These types of loneliness can overlap and can be experienced to different extents at different times.

SOCIAL LONELINESS

EMOTIONAL LONELINESS

EXISTENTIAL LONELINESS

When we feel we are missing a satisfactory network of friends, family or community to spend time with.

SOCIAL LONELINESS

EMOTIONAL LONELINESS

EXISTENTIAL LONELINESS

When we feel we don't have a close friend, family member, or meaningful connection to confide in or to help us feel seen, heard, and understood.

SOCIAL LONELINESS

EMOTIONAL LONELINESS

EXISTENTIAL LONELINESS

When we feel entirely separate from other people, often when we experience a traumatic or life changing event, such as bereavement.

Continue

Chronic vs transient loneliness



What is chronic loneliness?

There are differences in *frequency*, *duration*, and *intensity* of loneliness.

Loneliness may be an *occasional*, *passing* feeling that we can manage. In fact, a short-lived feeling of loneliness may helpfully motivate us to reconnect with other people.

When we feel lonely *often* or *always*, this is defined as **chronic loneliness**. This longstanding nature of loneliness can inhibit our social connections and cause harm.

Consider these case studies

Do you think Pedro and David are likely to be experiencing a **passing feeling of loneliness** or **chronic loneliness**?

Check your understanding via the flip cards below.



Pedro (age 28)

Pedro (age 28)

Pedro is a junior doctor from Brighton. He has just moved to Leeds to complete his training. He doesn't know anyone in the city and works very long hours so he doesn't have much capacity to meet new people.

He often spends his time-off alone and he has gradually slipped out of regular communication with many of his friends back home.

He loves cycling and is excited to rejoin his cycling club when he moves back to Brighton next year.



David (age 75)

David (age 75)

David has lived alone for 7 years since the death of his wife.

His daughter lives far away and although they keep in touch over the phone, they only really see each other once a year at Christmas.

David is physically mobile but he has had a few falls in the past few years. This has shaken his confidence and he rarely leaves the house, although he would like to.

Is Pedro experiencing chronic or a passing feeling of loneliness?

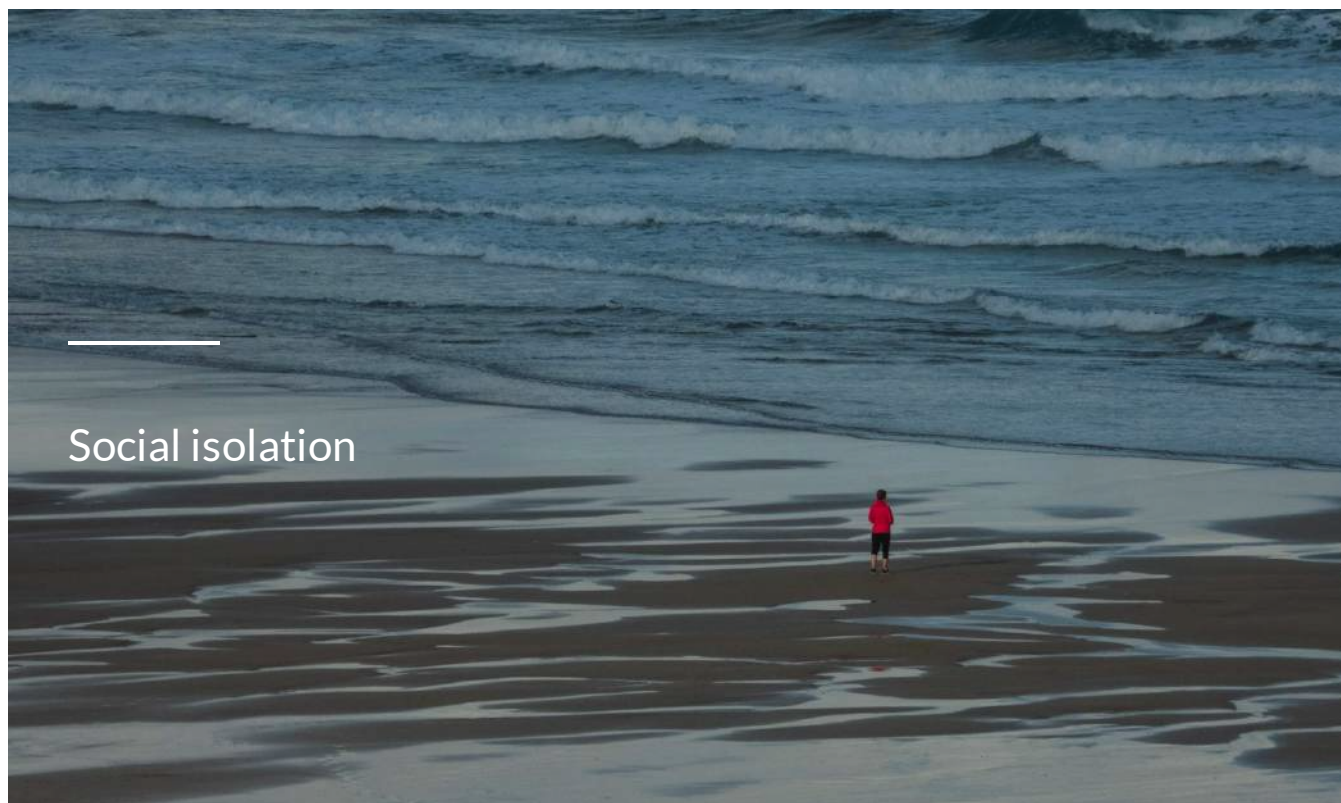
Pedro is experiencing a passing feeling of loneliness

Is David experiencing chronic or a passing feeling of loneliness?

David is experiencing chronic loneliness

CONTINUE

Social isolation



Why is social isolation different from loneliness?

Unlike loneliness, social isolation is a *state of being* – it is not an emotion.

Social isolation is a relatively objective measure of the number of relationships or connections someone has in their life. Somebody who is socially isolated might be cut off from their social networks or have limited contact with society as a whole.

Social isolation is not necessarily a negative experience. Somebody might be perfectly happy to have reduced or limited social contact with others. It is therefore possible to be socially isolated without being lonely.

However, social isolation can make some people feel lonely. Someone who is socially isolated might start to feel lonely if they feel they are missing social or emotional connection in their life.

Consider these case studies

Based on what you have learned in this module so far, do you think Simone and Gloria are likely to be:

- **socially isolated** (reduced or limited social contact with others)
- **socially lonely** (feeling that we lack a satisfactory network of social connections)
- **emotionally lonely** (feeling that we lack someone close to confide in)

Check your understanding via the flashcards below.



Simone (age 25)

Simone (age 25)

Simone is six months into her first pregnancy. She doesn't know anyone else nearby who has a baby.

Although her friends and relatives living close by are kind to her and they do nice activities together, she feels they do not understand what she is going through or that she could ever attempt to explain.



Gloria (age 66)

Gloria (age 66)

Gloria has always been comfortable being alone.

She had a long career which took her around the world and she is now happily retired in her small cottage in the countryside.

She doesn't know her neighbours but they smile and wave to each other and she is content having a bit of distance from them. Her sister is a few hours away, and she can see her at special occasions. Gloria looks forward to their heart-to-hearts but she doesn't need them regularly.

Is Simone socially isolated,
socially lonely or emotionally
lonely?

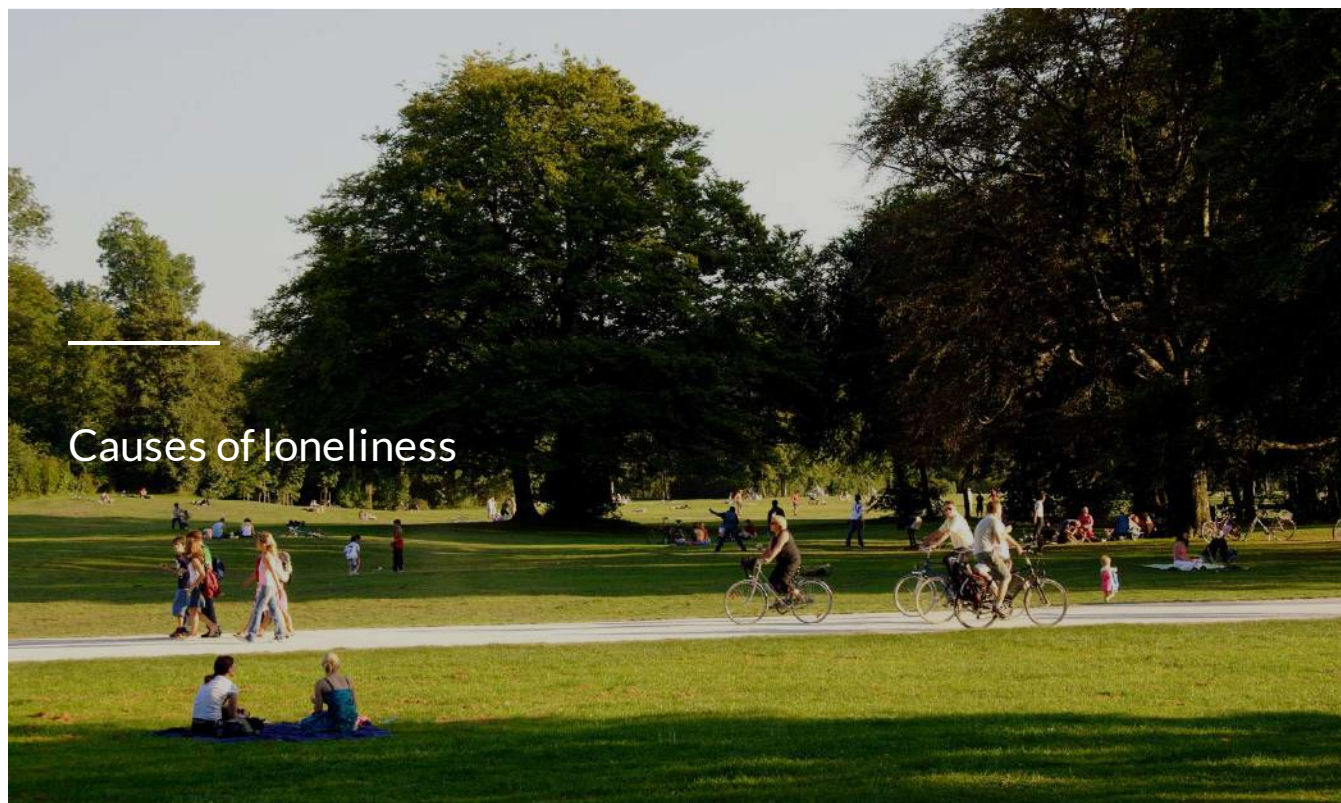
emotionally lonely

Is Gloria socially isolated,
socially lonely or emotionally
lonely?

socially isolated

CONTINUE

Causes of loneliness



What are the risk factors of loneliness

We can all experience loneliness, at any age or stage in our lives.

However, there are a range of factors which can increase our risk of loneliness: personal characteristics and circumstances, structural factors, psychological factors, and life events.

**PERSONAL
CHARACTERISTICS**

**STRUCTURAL
FACTORS**

**PSYCHOLOGICAL
FACTORS**

LIFE EVENTS

The Community Life Survey (ONS, 2018) highlighted that certain individual characteristics are associated with reports of higher loneliness:

- Being aged 16 to 24 years
- Being female
- Being single or widowed
- Having a health condition described as “limiting”
- Renting
- Feeling a lower sense of belonging to the neighbourhood and having little trust of others in the local area

Our June 2023 analysis of the latest loneliness data from the ONS revealed:

- Those aged between 16–29 are over two times as likely to report feeling lonely often or always than those over 70 (9.7% versus 3.7%).
- Those aged between 30–49 close behind with 8.2% of people in this age group feeling lonely often or always.
- People who had a physical or mental health diagnosis are over three times more likely to be lonely compared to people without a diagnosis (11.17% versus 3.25%).

**PERSONAL
CHARACTERISTICS**

**STRUCTURAL
FACTORS**

**PSYCHOLOGICAL
FACTORS**

LIFE EVENTS

The environment in which we live, including economic and social contexts, can increase or intensify feelings of loneliness. This is what we mean by structural risk factors.

Structural risk factors include:

- **Lack of local services and infrastructure**, including public transport, community centres, affordable housing, care support, childcare, and social services.

- **Poor physical or isolating environments**, such as the buildings and streets where we live and work not providing adequate opportunities for safe and informal connection. This can also include spaces being physically inaccessible or unwelcoming, such as buildings without step-free access or gender neutral facilities.
- **Social and cultural norms, attitudes and perceptions** can pre-dispose us against social connection. For example, some people report feeling a decline in community spirit, which is compounded by the rise of digital and online engagement. The stigma of loneliness and our reluctance to open up and talk about how we are feeling can also make it harder for us to reach out and establish the connections we want and need.

PERSONAL CHARACTERISTICS	STRUCTURAL FACTORS	PSYCHOLOGICAL FACTORS	LIFE EVENTS
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Behaviour linked to loneliness can in turn set off a **downward spiral** of more negative thoughts and despair, leading to more intense feelings of loneliness and more prolonged periods of isolation.

There are also a range of [psychological factors](#) which can affect how we respond and address our feelings of loneliness:

- **Social cognition**

Cognitive biases are ways of thinking about the world that may not reflect reality. Loneliness can make us anticipate or interpret social situations differently and more negatively.

A social cognition bias affects the way we perceive and interact with our social network in a way that makes us avoid others and withdraw further.

- **Attributional styles**

This describes how someone understands the reason for their loneliness and how they explain it to themselves. People who are chronically lonely are more likely to believe the cause of their loneliness is internal (to do with themselves) rather than external (to do with the situation they are in).

External, variable attributions leave room for a clearer way out of loneliness.

- **Coping styles**

Our coping style is how we deal with difficult situations. Someone with an emotion-focused coping style might respond to loneliness by lowering expectations about relationships or trying to deny their feelings when they have difficult emotions. This makes a person's

loneliness more likely to become chronic.

Someone with a problem-focused coping style might respond to the early signs of loneliness by improving relationships or seeking external help. This is associated with lower levels of loneliness.

- **Self-esteem**

Self-esteem is how we perceive our own self-worth. Self-efficacy is the belief in your ability to succeed in specific situations or accomplish a task.

Having low self-esteem and poor self efficacy makes someone less likely to go out and make meaningful friendships and so increases their risk of loneliness.

Having a high self-esteem and self-efficacy can help to overcome feelings of loneliness

- **Mental health**

Loneliness and mental health problems such as depression and anxiety (particularly social anxiety) have a two-way relationship. Although loneliness is not a mental health problem, being lonely puts us at greater risk of having a mental health problem and vice versa.

- **Early life experience**

Negative childhood experiences can increase the risk of loneliness, such as conflict between parents, bullying and economic hardship.

PERSONAL CHARACTERISTICS	STRUCTURAL FACTORS	PSYCHOLOGICAL FACTORS	LIFE EVENTS
<p>Life events and transitions can be triggers for loneliness, such as:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Bereavement• Changing or moving jobs• Moving to a new area• Becoming a parent• Separation/ relationship breakdown• Divorce• Retirement			

- Experiencing discrimination

Expectations of what life 'should' look like when going through particular life transitions can also make loneliness worse (by intensifying the mismatch between someone's desired level of social connection and their reality).



Reconceptualising Loneliness in London

[Reconceptualising loneliness in London \(29 March 2022\)](#)

Reconceptualising loneliness in London

The report from the Neighbourly Lab, Campaign to End loneliness and the What Works Centre for Wellbeing was commissioned by the Greater London Authority.

The report reveals that the five associative factors for severe loneliness in London are:

- Going through life changes or being new in London
- Being acutely poor
- Being single; living alone
- Experiencing prejudice or feeling different

- Being disabled or deaf

Independent report

Tackling loneliness evidence review: executive summary

Published 26 January 2022

[Tackling loneliness evidence review \(26 January 2022\)](#)

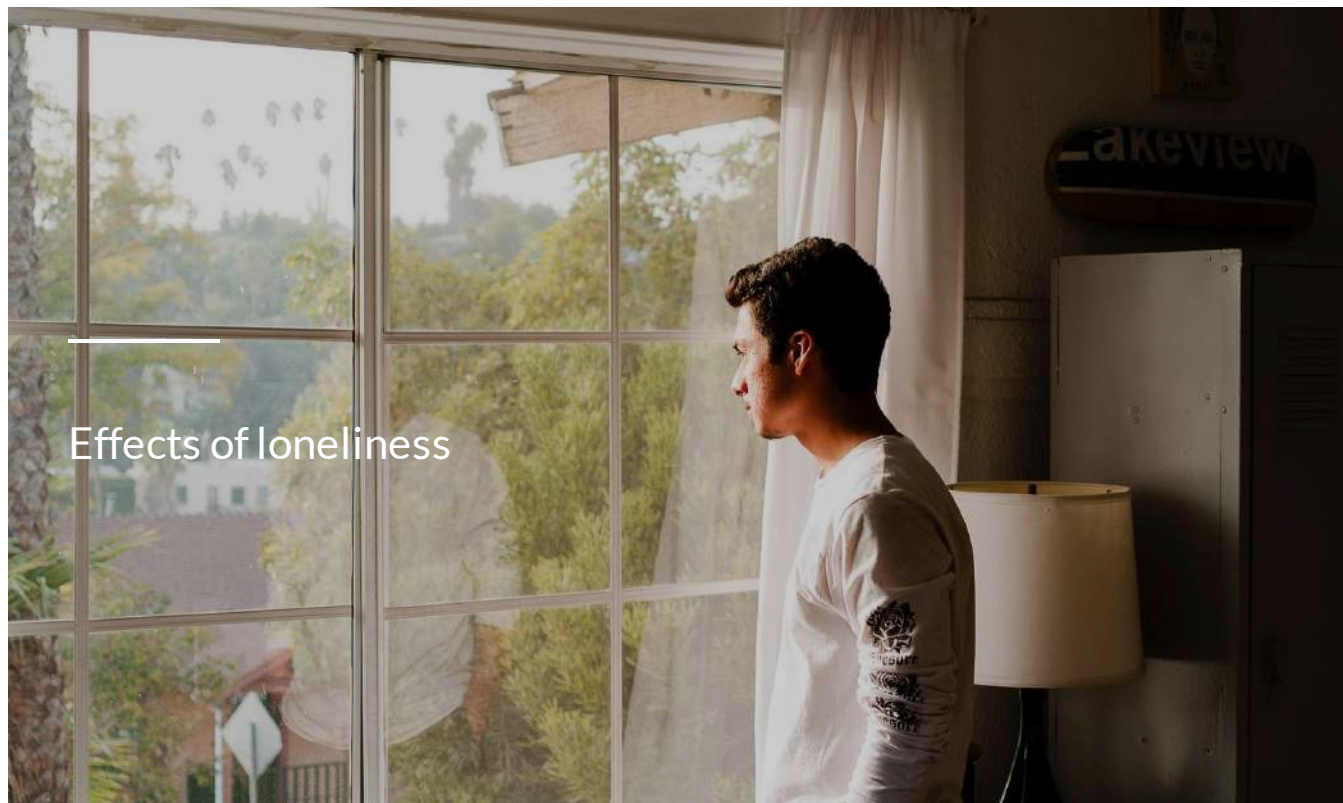
Tackling loneliness evidence review

This report was commissioned by the DCMS and produced by the DCMS Loneliness Evidence Group. It sets out what we know about loneliness and the evidence gaps, including the need to:

- Measure and monitor loneliness for subgroups of population e.g. for different disabilities or illnesses.
- Prioritise research for groups with pre-existing mental health conditions as they are at high risk for loneliness and social isolation.
- Understand how place-based factors affect the risk factors for loneliness.

CONTINUE

Effects of loneliness



How does loneliness affect people?

Loneliness can have negative effects on our: feelings, mental health, physical health, and our social interactions and behaviour.

These effects might not be experienced all at once. They can occur to varying degrees and in varying combinations.

FEELINGS	PSYCHOLOGICAL	BEHAVIOURAL	HEALTH
<p>Loneliness can evoke distressing and negative feelings such as fear, sadness, emptiness, and helplessness.</p> <p>We can also feel abandoned and not understood by others.</p>			

FEELINGS	PSYCHOLOGICAL	BEHAVIOURAL	HEALTH
<p>Loneliness can affect how we think and feel about ourselves and the world around us.</p> <p>The psychological effects of loneliness can include a loss of self confidence and self esteem, increased sensitivity to social rejection, and increased risk of depression and anxiety.</p> <p>Although loneliness is not a mental health problem in itself, feeling lonely can affect our mental health, and having a mental health problem can increase our likelihood of experiencing loneliness.</p>			

FEELINGS	PSYCHOLOGICAL	BEHAVIOURAL	HEALTH
<p>Loneliness can affect the way we interact with other people.</p>			

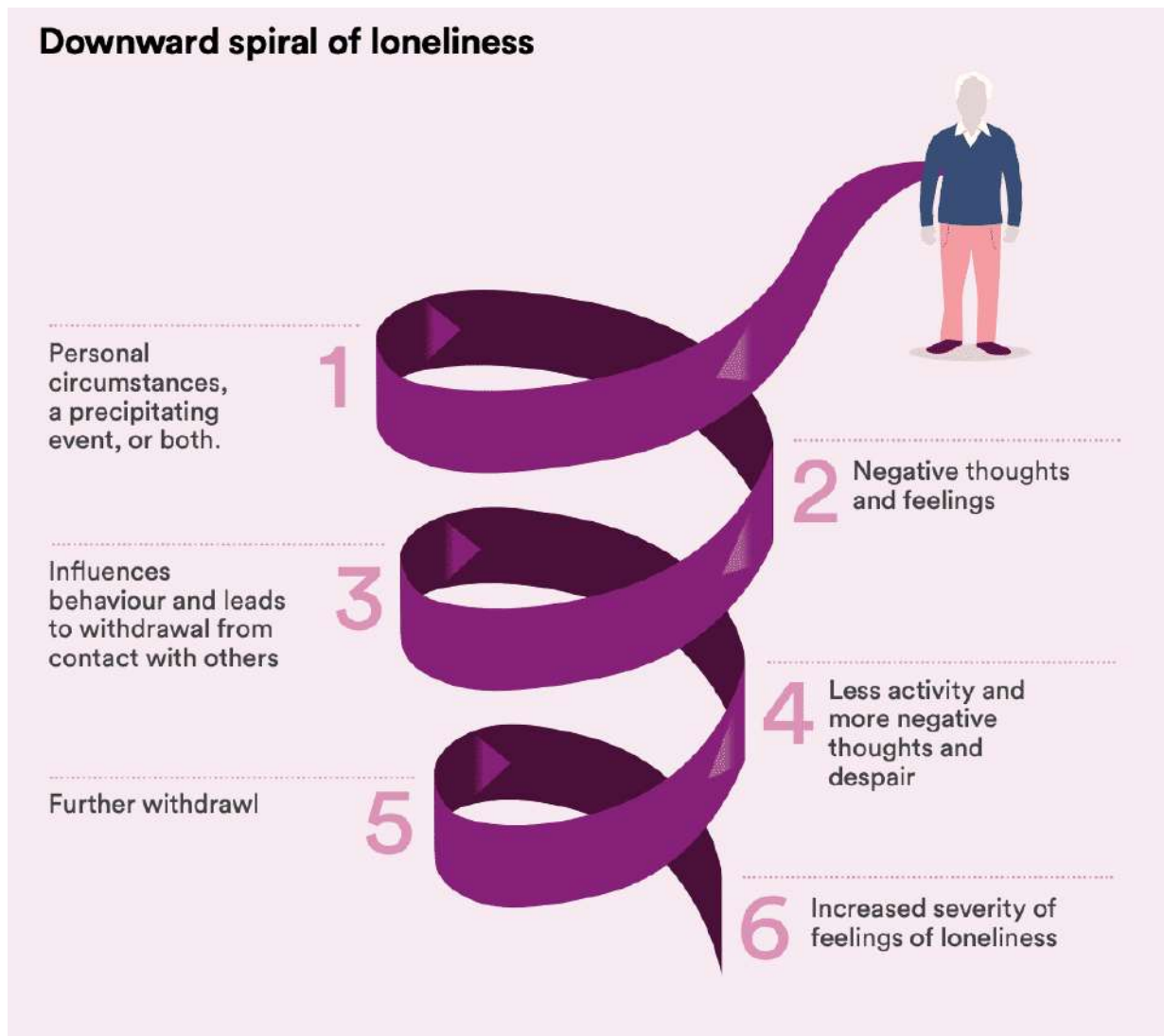
For example, we may withdraw from others and avoid social situations, which can in turn increase our feelings of loneliness.

Daily routines and self-care can also become harder to maintain when we don't have the social support around us.

The psychological and behavioural effects of loneliness are closely linked.

FEELINGS	PSYCHOLOGICAL	BEHAVIOURAL	HEALTH
<p>Chronic loneliness is linked to health risks including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Poor cardiovascular function (e.g. high blood pressure)• Increased risk of coronary heart disease• Impaired immune system• Progression of frailty			

Downward spiral of loneliness



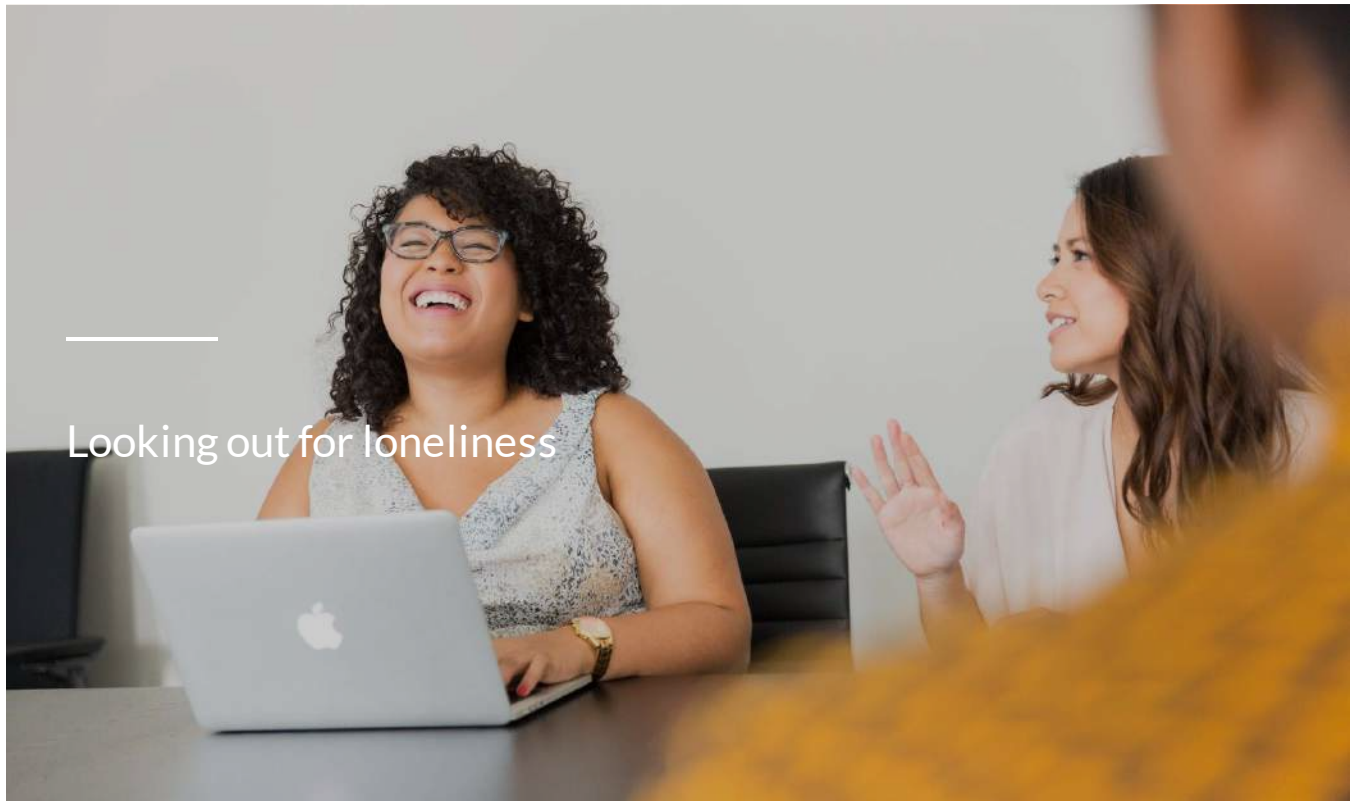
The downward spiral of loneliness. Taken from [The Psychology of Loneliness](#)
(Campaign to End Loneliness, 2020)

The downward spiral of loneliness

People describe thoughts and feelings of loneliness with words like anxiety, fear, shame and helplessness.

These powerful emotions can influence how we act. They can create a downward spiral where loneliness causes us to withdraw further from family and friends and so become lonelier.

Looking out for loneliness



How can you tell if someone is feeling lonely?

Loneliness can be difficult to spot as feelings of loneliness are personal and subjective.

Technology and social media can make it easy to hide emotions, and people who are experiencing loneliness often don't want to say how they are feeling due to the stigma.

We should never assume that people are feeling lonely, but if you are worried that a friend, family member or colleague might be experiencing loneliness, you may find that:

They are spending more time alone

They are frequently unwell or experiencing increased tiredness

They are being less productive (particularly at work)

Talking about loneliness

The small and friendly interactions we have on a daily basis are really important. In any conversation, a person can feel heard, empathised with, and respected. In listening to and recognising another human being, you are helping to alleviate loneliness.

Asking people if they feel lonely can seem difficult and it can be tempting to avoid using the words 'lonely' or 'loneliness'.

However, if the conversation is sensitively approached, and by reassuring people that loneliness is experienced by many people for different reasons, it is fine to ask about loneliness directly. People may even welcome the opportunity to talk about their feelings.

Loneliness is not something to be embarrassed about and we want to normalise the conversation. To talk with someone about their feelings of loneliness, you could ask:

- How are you feeling?
- Do you think you might be feeling lonely?
- Are there moments when you feel lonely?
- Do you think you would benefit from meeting new people?

- Would you like to get to know more people?
- Is there someone you can talk to?

The sense of anxiety we might feel when asking someone about their feelings of loneliness, and not knowing how they might respond, is a very natural response. Some tips to help navigate these feelings include:

- Keep an open mind:** reframing the conversation in our minds as an everyday chat, rather than something more daunting, can help the conversation to flow more easily.
- Breathe:** the calmer you are, the better equipped you'll be able to respond to what the person is telling you in a calm way.
- Slow down and listen:** be comfortable with any silences and allow people the opportunity to share what they're feeling.
- Be empathetic and respond non-judgmentally:** it can be daunting for a person to say they are feeling lonely, so acknowledge their feelings and reassure them that you are listening and hear what they are telling you.
- Signpost:** listening to someone and making them feel heard and seen is very important. If appropriate, you can let people know about support organisations available and, with their consent, you can ask them if they would like you to make a referral to an appropriate organisation or link worker on their behalf.
- Look after your own wellbeing:** if you have had a challenging conversation, make sure there is someone you can talk to. Depending on what was shared with to you, you may also need to follow the safeguarding policy for your workplace or follow support through more official routes.

Addressing loneliness



What works in addressing loneliness?

We all have a role to play in addressing loneliness.

Due to the subjective nature of loneliness, there is not one simple solution for addressing loneliness but multiple approaches can and do help.

Seven ways we can connect with others

Campaign to
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- **Catch up with old friends**

Reach out to your friends to let them know you're thinking of them. We can sometimes think that our friends will be too busy to chat. But you might be surprised when you make the first step to connect.

- **Get to know other people**

Why not join a local group or class based on your interests? Enjoying your hobby or learning something new can be a fun way of making new friends.

- **Volunteer in your local community**

Volunteering is a great way to meet new people. You can also develop your own skills and interests.

- **Spend time outdoors**

Going outside regularly, be it in your garden or a walk to the park, is a great way to boost your mood. It can help us to feel more connected to our neighbourhoods and the world around us.

- **Little steps make a big difference**

Say 'hello' to a neighbour or a person at the bus stop. Small chats can go a long way in helping us to feel more connected with others. You also might brighten someone else's day.

- **Focus on the good things in life**

When we feel lonely, we can sometimes get into a negative frame of mind. Focusing on the good things in life can help us to feel more positively about ourselves and the people around us.

- **Don't keep it to yourself**

Talk to someone about how you feel, whether that's a trusted friend, family member or your GP. Your GP can connect you with activities and further support in your local community. You are not alone.

Further reading and resources

To learn more about loneliness, and access support if you or someone you know is feeling lonely, take a look at the following resources.

Support for loneliness

If you or someone you know is feeling lonely, these organisations can help.

[LEARN MORE](#)

The Psychology of Loneliness

Our report explores the psychological and emotional aspects of loneliness and how this knowledge can inform and improve the support for those experiencing loneliness.

[LEARN MORE](#)

Promising Approaches Revisited

Our guide helps service providers to deliver more effective loneliness projects in order to shape future research on how to address loneliness.

[LEARN MORE](#)