

Tackling Loneliness in the time of Covid-19

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The Covid-19 pandemic has brought the issue of loneliness and isolation to the fore. Many more people are facing the pain of being cut off from the relationships on which they depend. At the same time, we've seen an upsurge of activity to try to keep people connected.

We brought together experts in tackling loneliness – the organisations that have been working on this for years – to think about the key things people need to know as they seek to support people experiencing loneliness in the time of Covid-19.

All the lonely people?



- **Reach out** - The most lonely individuals are often those who are hardest to find, not in touch with other services and lacking the knowledge and confidence they need to find their way to help. If you want

to help the most lonely individuals you need to **seek people out, and offer help.**



- **Lonely but not alone, alone but not lonely** – Loneliness is not the same as isolation. Loneliness is a feeling we have when there is a gap between the relationships we want and those we have. We can be lonely

even when we are not alone - because we might not have enough connection, or the quality of relationships that we need. Equally some people enjoy solitude. **Avoid making assumptions about who is lonely and who is not. It's best to ask people how they are feeling**



- **Consider the risks** – While we can never assume someone is lonely, we know that some people are more at risk of loneliness, including people who are carers, people with dementia, people with disabilities and long-term conditions, especially

those with sensory impairments, and people who feel marginalised from their wider communities – including, for example, refugees and asylum seekers, and some LGBT+ people. There are also links between loneliness and poverty. **Use information about the risk factors for loneliness to work out where to focus your efforts.**

Further reading

Loneliness: Conceptual review: <https://whatworkswellbeing.org/resources/loneliness-conceptual-review/>

A brief guide to measuring loneliness: <https://whatworkswellbeing.org/resources/brief-guide-to-measuring-loneliness/>

How can we help?



- **Mind the gap** – Many organisations have worked hard to move services online and keep up contact with people using social media and online platforms. But we need to think about the people who this won't work for.

The digital divide is not just about a lack of familiarity with online communication. It can also be about lack of kit and connectivity, or the cost of data. Sometimes using the telephone or even writing a letter can be a more effective way of staying connected. **Think about providing offline alternatives – including the telephone and the post – so that people can stay connected.**



- **Mentioning the "L" word** – some people struggle to say that they are lonely, feeling a stigma around admitting that this is something they experience. To some extent, since lockdown began and more of us

have been isolated, this stigma has been reduced, but the fact remains that loneliness is a personal issue, and people need to feel comfortable to open up. Asking "Are you lonely?" won't always elicit an honest response. **Try asking open questions and giving people time to open up about the things that matter to them.**

Further reading

The Missing Million: A practical guide to identifying and talking about loneliness - https://www.campaigntoendloneliness.org/wp-content/uploads/CEL-Missing-Millions-Guide_final.pdf

What will make a difference?



- **Checking in isn't the same as connecting** – It's relationships, not contacts, that make the difference to whether we're lonely or not. And the quality of relationships matters just as much as the quantity. Most of us feel most satisfied when we're in a

relationship in which we feel needed and valued, and when we feel we have a purpose. "Checking in" is kind, but it won't keep loneliness at bay for long. **Try to link people up with people who share their interests, and offer people options to get involved, to make things, do things or learn things together.**



- **Horses for courses** – Most of us get on better with people we've got something in common with, and we are more likely to find a sense of connection with people when we're doing something that's meaningful to all of us. While some people will

find real meaning in joining a choir, or other kinds of groups, others feel most connected to the people they work or volunteer with. That means the solutions to loneliness are as diverse as people are, and a "one size-fits-all" solution won't work. **Try to give people a range of options for connecting to one another and make sure people have a choice.**



- **It's complicated** – Often when we're experiencing loneliness it's not just because we haven't met the right people yet, but because our social connection is being hindered by a range of other factors which are making our lives difficult – practical

challenges such as lack of income, poor public transport or other difficulties getting around, a lack of digital skills, or other challenges such as anxiety or lack of confidence and social skills, or mental or physical health issues. We can rarely address loneliness if we can't also address these underlying factors. If we're serious about loneliness, it's important to address what matters to people in the round. **Build links with the other organisations – such as local authorities and charities – that can help people with the wider practical, social, emotional and health issues that can get in the way of connection.**

Further reading

Promising approaches to reducing loneliness and social isolation in later life: <https://www.campaigntoendloneliness.org/wp-content/uploads/Promising-approaches-to-reducing-loneliness-and-isolation-in-later-life.pdf>

Fulfilling the promise: How social prescribing can best treat loneliness <https://www.redcross.org.uk/-/media/documents/about-us/research-publications/health-social-care-and-support/fulfilling-the-promise-social-prescribing-and-loneliness.pdf?>