

Loneliness and isolation

Loneliness is a feeling of sadness or distress about being by yourself or feeling disconnected from the world around you. It may be felt more over a long period of time. It is possible to feel lonely, even when surrounded by people. 50% of calls to Lifeline's 13 11 14 crisis support line come from people who live alone and a recent Lifeline survey indicated that more than 80 per cent of respondents believed loneliness is increasing in society.

Isolation is being separated from other people and your environment. Sometimes this occurs through decisions we make ourselves, feeling like isolation is a solution to problems or because of external circumstance e.g. doing a job that requires travel or relocation.

Both loneliness and isolation are harmful to your mental health and wellbeing and contribute to a variety of other issues such as depression, anxiety and substance abuse.

Some reasons you might feel lonely or isolated;

- Losing a loved one or friend through death or relocation (resulting in feelings of loss and grief)
- Lack of close family ties
- Living alone
- Difficulties in meeting new people due to access issues, an introverted personality, or feeling like you don't belong
- Feelings of loss or grief
- Poor physical health, frailty, mobility issues
- A mental health condition such as depression or anxiety
- Fear of rejection from others or feelings of being "different" or stigmatised by society
- Inability to participate in activities due to access issues, mobility, illness, transport
- Retirement from work, home relocation, starting out in a new role or community
- Lack of purpose or meaning in life
- Language or cultural barriers, or reduced connection with your culture of origin
- Geographic isolation

How does loneliness and isolation affect your mental health?

Everyone feels lonely from time to time, but long periods of loneliness or social isolation can have a harmful impact on your physical, mental and social health. Some signs to look out for include:

- **Physical symptoms** – aches and pains, headaches, illness or worsening of medical conditions
- **Mental health conditions** – increased risk of depression, anxiety, paranoia or panic attacks
- **Low energy** – tiredness or lack of motivation

- **Sleep problems** – difficulty getting to sleep, waking frequently or sleeping too much
- **Diet problems** – loss of appetite, sudden weight gain or loss
- **Substance use** – Increased consumption of alcohol, smoking, medications, drugs
- **Negative feelings** – feelings of worthlessness, hopelessness or thoughts about suicide

What helps?

Loneliness can be overcome.

- **Connect or reconnect with friends and family** – staying in contact with loved ones can prevent loneliness and isolation. If your family don't live nearby, technology (such as video calling) can help you stay in touch
- **Get out and about** – regular outings for social functions, exercise, visiting friends, shopping, or simply going to public places can help. It may be beneficial to incorporate everyday needs such as doing your weekly shop into a walk with friends, to motivate yourself to get out and about
- **Get involved in your community** – Try a new (or old) hobby, join a club (e.g. sporting), enrol in study, or learn a new skill. Try looking online, at your local TAFE/Community College, library or community centre for projects in your area or things that might be interesting to you
- **Volunteer** – helping others is a great way to help yourself feel more connected
- **Consider getting a pet** –pets are wonderful companions and can provide comfort and support during times of stress, ill-health or isolation. Additionally, they may help motivate you to get outside and incorporate exercise into your life as well as help you develop friendships through community involvements such as dog walking circles.
- **Get support** – If loneliness and social isolation are causing you distress, you should discuss your concerns with a GP, counsellor or a trusted person
- **Accept imperfection** – Allow yourself the chance to make mistakes while socialising, the important thing is that you have taken action towards improving.