

LONELINESS

Have you heard about Australia's epidemic of loneliness? The UK believes this issue is so important they have created a Minister of Loneliness. With technology offering more and more ways to connect with each other and our lives seeming busier than ever, how can anyone be lonely?

Relationships Australia research reveals one in six Australians is experiencing emotional loneliness, one in 10 lacks social support and just under 1.5 million people are reporting that they've been lonely for a decade or more.

Helping give people the skills to build and sustain the meaningful relationships they need is at the heart of what we do at Relationships Australia, and we believe this work is part of the answer to tackling Australia's loneliness crisis.

As an active partner in the Australian Coalition to End Loneliness, Relationships Australia has been engaged in a growing community discussion on loneliness over the past few years. Through our Neighbour Day campaign we have been working to provide pathways for neighbours to connect, particularly community members experiencing vulnerability, including older Australians.

What is loneliness?

Loneliness is a negative feeling that arises when someone's social needs are unmet by their current social relationships. People can feel alone, even if they're surrounded by others, if they're not getting the right kind of company and support. While many think of loneliness as a social issue, it also affects our health.

Loneliness has serious health consequences. In terms of the effect on your body, loneliness is like smoking 15 cigarettes a day and associated with an increased risk of developing coronary heart disease and stroke, high blood pressure and the onset of disability. A Stanford University study found that older people who are socially isolated experience poorer health, and have a risk of early death that is 31% higher than those who are not isolated.

Why are we feeling lonelier?

Australians are increasingly time-poor as many households have all adults in employment, less time for community engagement and less time for neighbourhood connection. Fewer people know and interact with their neighbours and fewer are becoming part of community groups. The circle of people we feel we can turn to when the chips are down is shrinking for all age groups.

We are working longer hours. People who work in occupations where they are accessible via information technology say they are never away from work. There are always emails and text messages and other things to be attended to. When we are busier we have less time and much less energy available for the business of nurturing the local neighbourhoods. Our busyness also tends to isolate us from each other.

Our almost addictive attachment to our IT devices can also isolate us. Here's the great paradox of the IT revolution: while the new technology connects us digitally, it also makes it easier than ever for us to stay apart from each other. And there's a huge qualitative difference between face-to-face communication and communication that happens via information technology.



Happily, there is something we can do about this

Feelings of loneliness don't have to be constant to call for action, but you will need to give yourself a push to get back into the thick of life and re-engage with others to start feeling better.

- Switch off from work when you get home. Turn off your mobile and emails and spend quality time connecting to the people around you. Talk to people about how you feel. Get some feedback and ideas as well as a sympathetic ear from a family member or friend with whom you trust.
- Think about your interests
- Pets, especially dogs, are protective against loneliness. They get you out and about and provide you a living creature to care about. If you're not in a position to own a dog, find ways to help care for other people's dogs or volunteer to help dogs at a shelter.
- Join a club - volunteering and exploring your hobbies are great ways to meet kindred spirits.
- Have realistic standards. Accept that you can have fun and light conversation with a variety of people, and that it's okay if they don't become lifelong confidantes. Also remember not to expect too much from a new friendship too quickly or rely on another person too much.
- Reach out to a lonely person. Whether you're feeling lonely now or just know how it feels, you may get an emotional boost from befriending someone else who's lonely. Examples include volunteering for an organization that helps elderly people or visiting a neighbour who's lost a spouse.
- Call, don't post. Social networks are fun and can provide an essential social outlet for some people, but research suggests that relationships are stronger when they experience face-to-face or over the phone contact.
- Make time for relationships. Everyone is busy, but relationships won't wait until you've gotten your new promotion. Build them now.
- Meditate. "Developing mindfulness practice can help you identify and release some of the thoughts that could be keeping you feeling lonely and undermining your efforts to meet new people.
- Get support. If you just can't shake profound feelings of loneliness, isolation, and other symptoms of depression, you might want to talk to a mental health professional. You can call Lifeline on 13 13 30 for 24 hour crisis support.

Loneliness is a focus of Relationships Australia nationally. At Relationships Australia's 70th Anniversary celebrations on 19 September 2018 we invited social researcher and author Hugh Mackay, loneliness researcher Dr Tegan Cruwys, the founder of the Welcome Dinner Project Penny Elsley and CEO of Relationships Australia NSW Elisabeth Shaw to discuss the issue of loneliness with help from panel convenor journalist and author Caroline Baum.

The panel discussion was a thought-provoking look at the very many aspects of loneliness and possible solutions to a problem facing Australians across the age and social spectrum.

Below is a link to the podcast so you can all enjoy the insights provided by our panel members.

<http://www.relationships.org.au/media/blog/relationships-australia-loneliness-podcast>