

Loneliness and social isolation in the time of COVID-19



Loneliness is a feeling of distress people experience when their social relations are not the way they would like. It is a personal feeling of social isolation. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, one in four Australians were lonely (bit.ly/2yjf6vA). It is not yet known if Australians are lonelier due to social-distancing requirements and self-isolation, but it is important to take note, as lonely Australians have significantly worse physical and mental health than connected Australians (bit.ly/3aRvT6j).

This information sheet outlines some useful strategies you can use to cope with feelings of loneliness, isolation and anxiety that you may be having at this time.

Think positively

We experience loneliness because it is a trigger for us to reach out and connect with others. This can remind us of all the people we would like to get in touch with. Loneliness is usually temporary, although there is uncertainty about how long social-distancing rules will be in place. Some people will not experience loneliness at all, even among those who live alone. For some of us the extra time at home has been a chance to re-engage with hobbies, or home or garden projects.

Now more than ever there is less reason to feel any shame about feelings of loneliness; it may feel easier to share with others if you are finding it tough, and you are more likely to feel supported and understood by others.

Community spirit

The greater understanding in the community about what it is like to feel lonely may encourage greater community spirit. Even with social distancing and stay-at-home rules, there are ways to support others in your community, such as talking to a neighbour over the fence, and saying hello to people you pass in the street while exercising or while at the supermarket. You could also use phone and social media to talk with neighbours or put a letter or child's drawing in their letterboxes. Neighbourhoods have also been connecting via displaying teddy bears and rainbow drawings in their windows, and standing in their driveway with a candle to acknowledge Anzac Day.

Recognise differences

Everyone is different in how they will respond to restrictions on social outings and in-person contact. The experience of loneliness and ways of coping with it are very individual. Some people enjoy being alone and those that have extra household members at home may even find this difficult. Other people may be struggling with reduced or no in-person social contact. For those who live with others, it can be helpful to talk about your different needs so these can be understood.

Stay connected

For all of us, social relationships help maintain good mental health, so it is important to maintain some level of contact with our social networks. This can be as simple as phoning or writing to a friend to share your experience, using videoconferencing technology to check in with a family member, or spending quality time with people you live with.

Some tips for staying connected during this time include:

- Focus on your current social network rather than trying to make new friends, as that can be daunting for some people.
- Make small efforts over time to interact with others, such as greeting people you see while out exercising or at the supermarket
- Enhance the quality of your interactions, for example, by putting away distractions like phones and giving others your full attention.
- Invite a colleague, friend or neighbour to have a coffee over a video chat.
- Exercise with a friend or neighbour.
- Look for online groups related to a hobby you may have re-engaged with.
- Be open to the possibility of social interaction and be flexible about how you might be able to have it.
- Think about ways you have managed feelings of loneliness in the past (e.g., looking at photographs of loved ones, phoning or writing to others, seeking professional help).
- If you are missing the closeness of physical touch with others, it can be helpful to wear a jumper or blanket that reminds you of them and to seek comfort from each other through kind words and listening to each other.
- If you have pets, they may provide extra companionship at this time.

Limit social media and media exposure

While social media can be great for maintaining contact with others, be mindful of not overusing it, as you may be drawn into discussions of all the challenges, and be exposed to lots of negative news. When using it, try to also share positive news (bit.ly/3d5yUla). Take a break from listening to the news as it can make us feel preoccupied about how bad things feel.

Supporting older Australians

Older Australians have been strongly encouraged to stay at home at this time and many are having reduced or no contact from family and friends. But it is important to not make too many assumptions about their feelings and needs. It can be helpful to ask them what they think would be helpful and if there is anything you can do. Some strategies to help them include:

- Talk to them about how they are feeling and how they are managing changes to their level of social contact.
- Offer help to set up phone or video chats with family or friends or to write and send letters.
- Offer to help them get involved with hobbies and perhaps an online group for a particular hobby.
- Show or send them videos or photographs, letters or drawings.

Supporting children

With all the changes to children's routines at the moment establishing a clear routine for them can be helpful. You can encourage your children to think of creative ways that they can connect with others, for example by sending a friend a picture, writing a letter to a grandparent or having a video chat with a friend. Remind children that the extra time at home and away from friends is temporary. While for many families use of technology by all is normal, it is helpful to set limits and to make time for some other activities (e.g., board games, jigsaw puzzles, bike riding, backyard cricket).

Seek help if you need it

If you are struggling to manage feelings of loneliness or if you are experiencing other challenges (e.g., physical or mental health difficulties, trauma, domestic violence) we recommend you seek help, such as from a psychologist or your GP.

Psychologists are highly trained and qualified professionals skilled in providing effective interventions for a range of mental health concerns, including loneliness, anxiety and stress. A psychologist can help you manage your loneliness and/or other difficulties using techniques based on the best available research.

If you are referred to a psychologist by your GP, you might be eligible for a Medicare rebate (bit.ly/35lsjQD). You may also be eligible to receive psychology services via telehealth so that you do not need to travel to see a psychologist. Ask your psychologist or GP for details.

There are number of ways to access a psychologist. You can:

- use the Australia-wide Find a Psychologist™ service. Go to findapsychologist.org.au or call 1800 333 497
- ask your GP or another health professional to refer you.

Readjusting when social life goes back to normal

Most people will probably adjust quickly to increased in-person social interactions when social distancing requirements are all removed. For others, it may be helpful to gradually increase social outings. If you experience social anxiety it may take a while to adjust and you may like to seek extra help at that time.

More information

Australian Government Department of Health

The Department of Health has developed a collection of resources for the general public, health professionals and industry about coronavirus (COVID-19), including translated resources. bit.ly/38OOwHe

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention provides reliable information about the coronavirus such as its symptoms, steps you can take to protect yourself, and what to do if you are affected. bit.ly/39MEmI8

World Health Organization

The World Health Organization provides information and guidance regarding the current outbreak of coronavirus disease. bit.ly/3cQUwCw

Ending Loneliness Together

Ending Loneliness Together is a collaboration of Australian organisations and community groups who are raising awareness of and addressing loneliness and social isolation through evidence-based interventions, research and advocacy. bit.ly/3awgdVN

Acknowledgments

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- Ros Knight, APS President, counselling and clinical psychologist
- Dr Michelle Lim, clinical psychologist, Senior Lecturer, Swinburne University, Scientific Chair and Chairperson Ending Loneliness Together
- Prof Jo Badcock, Adjunct Professor, School of Psychological Science, University of Western Australia, Vice Chairperson, Ending Loneliness Together.

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The APS has a number of resources available to assist Australians in managing their mental health during the coronavirus outbreak.
Visit psychology.org.au for more.