



Press release August 2020

What is loneliness and how can you manage it?

A mere century ago, almost no one lived alone. Today, many do and it is not unusual. The recent lockdowns and isolation periods have amplified feelings of loneliness. But why do we feel lonely? Why do our bodies experience social pain? Learn about what we can do to improve our situation, prevent chronic loneliness and minimise the tremendous impact it has on our health.

Solitude and choosing to be alone can be bliss. Over the last sixty years the number of people living alone has increased in developed countries by more than 50 percent. In countries such as Denmark, Sweden and Switzerland, it is very common for people to live alone. But this does not translate into higher levels of [self-reported loneliness](#). Many people have friends or family they can interact with on a regular basis.

However, it is important to recognise that this choice is different to loneliness, which can be a state of profound distress. Loneliness is a purely subjective and individual experience that can be felt by anyone, no matter their social, educational, gender or age demographic. Humankind are social creatures by nature – we struggle without it – and social connections are important to our health and emotional wellbeing.

Loneliness is a problem when we feel that no place is home; when we are in a group and we still feel social separation; when we spend time with our family but we feel like we don't belong; or when we lose a relationship and struggle to adjust. It is a growing phenomenon in modern times, a by-product of our individualism, long-distance study and career opportunities or time-consuming work commitments.

The pandemic, with its required isolation and social distancing, has added additional stress to many households, but feelings of loneliness or adverse effects of social isolation are particularly prevalent in one-person households and young people aged 12–25. According to a study by [VicHealth](#), even before COVID-19 young adults and adolescents reported high levels of loneliness, social isolation, social anxiety and depressive symptoms. Additionally, it is men who tend to [report higher levels](#) of loneliness than women.

Reported loneliness is on the rise. In 2017 and 2018 former US Surgeon General Vivek H. Murthy declared 'an epidemic of loneliness,' and the UK appointed a Minister of Loneliness. In these two countries, one in five adults reported that they often or always feel alone; in Australia, it was one in four adults. And this was *before* COVID-19, which makes us realise the mental and emotional impact lockdown has on individuals.

What happens to our bodies when we experience loneliness?

Neuroscientists, such as John Cacioppo, identify loneliness as 'a state of hypervigilance whose origins lie among our primate ancestors and in our own hunter-gatherer past'. Our ancestors needed to belong to an intimate social group to survive. Cacioppo explains that our bodies respond to being alone, or being with strangers, as though we were in a dangerous situation.

Separation from other people (the group) triggers a fight-flight-or-freeze response and we feel social pain. While physical pain is primarily a sensory experience, social pain is the emotional state that comes from the distress of being lonely. Like the bodily sensation of hunger, it alerts us to a need, but instead of food the need is social interaction.

Loneliness generates anxiety: our breathing quickens, our heart races, our blood pressure rises and we struggle to sleep or sleep well. If we don't pay attention, over time we start to act more fearful, defensive and self-involved. All of these actions drive others away and tend to stop those experiencing loneliness from doing what would benefit them the most: reaching out to others. It is a vicious cycle and one that is especially challenging for older and younger individuals.

Tactics to help cope with feelings of loneliness.

To belong is to feel at home in a place or situation where you feel included, comfortable and connected with others. In his assessment, Vivek H. Murthy wrote, 'To be at home is to be known ... You can feel at home with friends, or at work, or in a college dining hall, or at church, or in Yankee Stadium, or at your neighbourhood bar. Loneliness is the feeling that no place is home.' Having relocated to different cities and countries and re-establishing my life over and over again, I can certainly say that loneliness can be a challenge.

How can we combat the feelings of loneliness and the anxiety that comes with it, before it becomes chronic and we find ourselves even more isolated over time?

The first step in moving forward is acknowledging how you feel. Give those feelings a name with a specific timeframe; for example, *today I feel alone* or *since I've been in lockdown, I have felt alone* or *since I lost my partner, I feel disconnected and lost*. By doing this, we focus on the present and do not label our entire existence as lonely.

My personal strategy is to go outside if the loneliness gets too 'heavy'; connect with other people through looks and smiles (even under a face mask our eyes can smile); call friends and family regularly; or schedule a brunch or glass of wine with friends (in person or video chat).

Practising random acts of kindness and gratitude, for others and ourselves, is another very effective and very positive way of bringing us back into the present moment and improving our overall wellbeing. Energy flows where our focus goes. It takes effort and sometimes it is indeed easier to just give in and watch a light-hearted movie on the couch. And that's fine too!

If you are ever experiencing loneliness, I recommend exercising your social muscles and also seeking support. Remember that your feelings are normal as we are biologically fine-tuned to being with and interacting with others. However, you will need to make changes to avoid jeopardising your health. Once loneliness becomes chronic it becomes self-sustained and you will begin exhibiting defensive behaviour. As a defence mechanism, loneliness makes you assume the worst of others and you (your brain) become hypersensitive to social signals that might be interpreted as hostile towards you, when in reality people might just be trying to help you.

Large studies have shown that feeling lonely has a tremendous impact on your health: it can make you age quicker, cause dementia to advance faster, weaken your immune system and lead to anxiety and depression. Many people turn to substance abuse which only serves to numb the symptoms, rather than treat the source. And while you can find so much information online, knowing is not enough. Remember that reaching out for help is not a sign of weakness but one of strength. So please reach out to your network, talk to your health professional or get in contact with me.

There are different ways to improve your overall wellbeing. Let's discuss.