Loneliness

We all feel lonely from time to time. Feelings of loneliness are personal, so everyone's experience of loneliness will be different.

One common description of loneliness is the feeling we get when our need for rewarding social contact and relationships is not met. But loneliness is not always the same as being alone.

You may choose to be alone and live happily without much contact with other people, while others may find this a lonely experience. On the other hand, you may have lots of social contact, or be in a relationship or part of a family, and still feel lonely – especially if you don't feel understood or cared for by the people around you.

"One thing I've learned is the difference between feeling alone and feeling lonely - and how you can feel lonely in a crowd full of people, but quite peaceful and content when alone"

Is loneliness a mental health problem?

Feeling lonely isn't in itself a mental health problem, but the two are strongly linked. Having a mental health problem can increase your chance of feeling lonely.

For example, some people may have misconceptions about what certain mental health problems mean, so you may find it difficult to speak to them about your problems

Or you may experience social phobia – also known as social anxiety – and find it difficult to engage in everyday activities involving other people, which could lead to a lack of meaningful social contact and cause feelings of loneliness.

Feeling lonely can also have a negative impact on your mental health, especially if these feelings have lasted a long time. Some research suggests that loneliness is associated with an increased risk of certain mental health problems, including depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, sleep problems and increased stress.

What causes loneliness?

Loneliness has many different causes, which vary from person to person. We do not always understand what it is about an experience that makes us feel lonely.

For some people, certain life events may mean they feel lonely, such as:

- experiencing a bereavement
- going through a relationship break-up
- retiring and losing the social contact you had at work
- changing jobs and feeling isolated from your co-workers
- starting at university
- moving to a new area or country without family, friends or community networks.

Other people find they feel lonely at certain times of the year, such as around Christmas.

Some research suggests that people who live in certain circumstances, or belong to particular groups, are more vulnerable to loneliness. For example, if you:

- have no friends or family
- are estranged from your family
- are a single parent or care for someone else – you may find it hard to maintain a social life
- belong to minority groups and live in an area without others from a similar background
- are excluded from social activities due to mobility problems or a shortage of money

- experience discrimination and stigma because of a disability or long-term health problem, including mental health problems
- experience discrimination and stigma because of your gender, race or sexual orientation
- have experienced sexual or physical abuse – you may find it harder to form close relationships with other people.

Resources:

Helping others who are lonely

Stories of Loneliness

Talking about loneliness

What is loneliness

What meaningful connections

Coping with loneliness

Coping with loneliness

https://www.livewellwithsharonmartin.com/coping-with-loneliness/

Loneliness

https://www.mind.org.uk/media-a/3124/loneliness-2019.pdf