

Tackling Loneliness and Social Isolation

Creating connections to tackle loneliness and social isolation



Is loneliness the new pandemic?

By Libby Potter, Head of Portfolio Health Education England

There is talk of a new and devastating pandemic, which is harmful for physical and mental health and affecting millions of us worldwide. This new pandemic is loneliness.

The Beatles' song 'Eleanor Rigby' asked: "All the lonely people, where do they all come from?" In fact, the UK is a nation of lonely people, ranking only second in the world for the number of single occupancy households.

However, being socially isolated does not necessarily equate to being lonely: it's not about the *quantity* of the interactions but about the *quality* of them. It's about having authentic relationships with others, feelings of trust, being a part of things, and being valued that matters.

It is vital we bring an end to the shame of feeling lonely as it can make things even worse for our mental states as we enter a state of what psychologists' call 'hypervigilance for social threat'. The person tends to experience and see the world in increasingly negative terms, and therefore begins to both expect and remember instances of rejection – an unfriendly encounter in a shop, say, or a dismissive tone used by a friend that in different circumstances might not register. This can reinforce the anguish and make people less likely to reach out and connect with others. Trying to gently help people drop the shame, take positive steps to reconnect in a meaningful way with others can really help.

Fear of missing out (FOMO) has been exacerbated by the surge of social media, and the impact of repetitive images of people having the time of their lives has also been linked to higher levels of loneliness. We often relate FOMO to teenagers and young people, but a [recent study](#) found that FOMO is felt by all age groups. The study highlights the need to live in the moment in a meaningful way rather than focus on others, and to consider removing yourself from social media altogether if FOMO is causing distress. One of my favorite sayings comes to mind: 'Comparisons are odious'. For me, this is about not comparing your life and what you have and haven't got with others. We can always find someone who appears to be living a better, more fulfilled life.

Finally, our students and trainees are another group of people who can suffer with loneliness, often exacerbated with leaving home for the first time, feelings of FOMO, social anxiety, home sickness and having to make new friends and relationships.

This can be really hard and the charity [MIND](#) has advice on how to manage if you are a student and are lonely. According to a recent Office for National Statistics

(ONS) survey on [loneliness](#), more than one in four university students have said they feel lonely often or always, so it's vital that our support for students at universities remains a focus for us all.

Health Education England has been working with key partners to create the [Tackling Loneliness and Social Isolation e-learning programme](#). This is aimed at health and social care workers and is a direct response to the 2017 [call to action](#) from the Jo Cox Commission on Loneliness to “equip people with information about the potential triggers for loneliness and ensure they know where to go for support.”

Programme sessions enable learners to understand the potential negative health outcomes of loneliness and social isolation, have conversations with people to detect if they are at risk and know how to refer or signpost those identified as at risk. This is invaluable, especially as we recover from the Covid-19 pandemic.

As a society, we can all play a part in tackling loneliness in ourselves and others if we understand and get to know the signs of loneliness. This bespoke [e-learning programme](#) will help us with that.

Let's put an end to this 'new pandemic' together!