

LONELINESS / NEED FOR CONNECTION

INTRODUCTION

Human beings have an intrinsic need for connection throughout life. Meaningful relationships are not optional; they are fundamental to our mental, emotional and physical health. From birth, our need for care and belonging shapes our physical and psychological development and wellbeing. We are hardwired for connection and when this need is unmet, the consequences can be profound. Social and emotional connection has protective factors across the lifespan, lowering the risk of serious health problems, reducing inflammation and supporting good mental health (WHO Commission, 2025).

Loneliness is a universal experience, yet its impact is often underestimated. It is not simply the absence of company. Rather, it is a deeply felt emotional state arising from perceived isolation or a lack of meaningful connection. Unlike solitude, which can be restorative, loneliness is distressing and, when persistent, can potentially harm both psychological and physical health.



Ireland has the **HIGHEST prevalence of LONELINESS** across Europe with 20% of people reporting that they experienced loneliness some or all of the time, compared to 13% of all Europeans. (European Commission's Joint Research Centre, 2022). Higher levels of loneliness are experienced among younger adults, older people, and those facing social or economic disadvantage.

UNDERSTANDING LONELINESS

Loneliness is subjective. It reflects an internal sense of disconnection and may be deeply felt even when in the company of others. Everyone experiences loneliness at times, often during periods of transition or loss – moving to a new place, starting a different role, coping with bereavement, or adjusting after a relationship ends. Post pandemic changes in the workplace, such as remote working and growing dependence on technology, can, at times amplify feelings of disconnection. These feelings can be temporary and sometimes even adaptive, prompting us to find ways to actively seek connection. Transient loneliness is typically shaped by situational changes, however, when it becomes chronic, it can increase vulnerability and significantly affect wellbeing.



WHY IT MATTERS...

Recent research highlights the seriousness of loneliness as a public health issue. It is associated with increased risks of depression, anxiety, cardiovascular disease and even dementia. Global health leaders have warned that chronic loneliness can be as harmful to your health as smoking or obesity. These findings underscore the importance of addressing loneliness proactively.

WHEN LONELINESS BECOMES CHRONIC

Our understanding of loneliness is rooted in the fundamental human need for connection, specifically the need for belonging and relatedness (Maslow, 1943). When a person experiences loneliness and all the painful and distressing feelings it brings, their world can begin to feel less safe. This can activate our threat systems. When we are not connected to others, our mind interprets this as being under threat and moves us into protective mode. Being in protective mode often results in changes in our cognition and behaviour. Connection can be resisted and we can move into avoidance out of fear (fight / flight) or shut down (freeze). These responses can reinforce feelings of loneliness. Over time, such experiences may intensify and contribute to maladaptive cognitive patterns, including negative self-evaluation. Feelings of inadequacy and shame can further distance individuals from connection, deepening distress and withdrawal.



PRACTICAL STRATEGIES FOR CONNECTION

NORMALISE THE EXPERIENCE

Loneliness is part of being human. Acknowledging and approaching this with compassion can reduce shame and encourage help-seeking. Moving into connection with our own feelings even if it is difficult.

Recognising that these unwanted feelings need to be met with acknowledgment and compassion. Bringing us into connection with the body and naming the difficult feelings is an important step into moving back into connection with the self. These gentle practices can invite connection.

[Click here to watch the CSEAS webinar "Turn on your off switch: Polyvagal Exercises"](#)

A number of significant studies propose that the most effective intervention for reducing loneliness is psychological intervention, particularly evidence-based therapies like CBT and Acceptance and Commitment Therapy, which invite change in how we relate to our internal states and supports a move into meaningful change. (Reference)

BUILD CONFIDENCE GRADUALLY



Loneliness can make us feel more vulnerable and negatively impact on our sense of self / self-worth. Start with small, achievable steps and acknowledge progress.

Take things gently and notice the small connections every day. Connect with nature and notice the feeling of this. Try not to wait until you feel motivated. Often, when we change our behaviour, our feelings follow. This can be uncomfortable, particularly if you're already feeling vulnerable; however, this is part of the process of inviting change and healing. You can ask your GP about a "Social Prescription" which can connect you with local groups in your community.

ENGAGE IN MEANINGFUL ACTIVITIES

Connecting with your values and what matters to you is important, and can help you to identify what you would like to move towards and plan steps in that direction. Exercise can be very beneficial and can be a very safe way of connecting with others through a shared activity.

Explore hobbies, join a group, or volunteer. Purposeful activity fosters connection and a sense of belonging. Reflect on what you are interested in or what you have enjoyed in the past.



LEARN TO VALUE SOLITUDE

Solitude can be calming and creative. Activities such as journaling, walking, or listening to music can help restore balance. Bring intentionality and presence to these practices.

BE MINDFUL ONLINE

Social media often presents an unrealistic picture of life and can become part of a maladaptive coping mechanism. Limit screen time/doom-scrolling and prioritise authentic, offline interactions.



WHEN TO SEEK SUPPORT...

If loneliness feels **OVERWHELMING** or begins to **INTERFERE WITH DAILY LIFE**, reach out for support.

- Speak to your GP
- Consider seeking counselling or therapy, and / or
- Reach out to the CSEAS for support

CONCLUSION

Loneliness is part of the human experience. We all have a universal need to belong. With small, intentional steps and the right support, it is possible to rebuild connection and improve wellbeing. Addressing loneliness is not only about reducing distress; it is about nurturing one of our most fundamental human needs.

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References and Resources:

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<https://www2.hse.ie/mental-health/life-situations-events/loneliness/coping-with/>

<https://www.hsa.ie/eng/campaign/workplacestress/isolation/>

<https://lonelinessresearch.org/hello-world/>

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