

What is loneliness?

Loneliness is a negative distressing feeling you get when your current relationships with others are not meeting your social needs.

If you feel lonely, it's a signal that you need to make a meaningful social connection with one or more people.

Loneliness is more about the quality of your relationships with others than it is about the number of people you know or the number of friends you have.

Loneliness is a personal feeling of social isolation.

What is social isolation?

Social isolation is when you have minimal contact with others.

You can be socially isolated but not feel lonely.

You can feel lonely but not be socially isolated.

How common are loneliness and social isolation?

[Most people](#) will experience feelings of loneliness at some point in their lives.

[One in four Australian](#) adults have problematic levels of loneliness. Loneliness is particularly common among younger (18-34 years) and middle aged men (35-49 years). Men who live alone, who are dealing with high stresses and mental health pressures, those who have a chronic disease, or live with a disability are the most likely to be lonely.

[One in four](#) Australians aged 15 years or older experience social isolation over the course of a year.

Signs and symptoms

Loneliness is a negative feeling that can be experienced in different ways by different people. People who feel lonely often report that people misunderstand them, that they have no one to talk to or turn to, even when they are around others.

There are [ways to measure loneliness](#), which can be as simple as answering the question, "how often do you feel lonely?"

Social isolation is related to the number of connections you have with others. [Signs of social isolation](#) include: deep boredom; losing interest in others, withdrawing from others; not taking care of yourself, your home or your possessions.

What causes loneliness and social isolation?

The causes of loneliness and social isolation are different for everyone because everyone's circumstances and vulnerability are different.

[Risk factors for loneliness](#) are different for different groups of people:

For young people

- Difficulty making friends
- Changing school
- Abuse or bullying
- Bereavement
- Family conflict
- Illness or disability
- Having mental ill health (e.g. depression or an eating disorder)
- Long periods of isolation from family and friends during the COVID-19 pandemic.

For older people

- Being single, divorced or separated
- Living alone
- Living in aged care
- Poor health
- Low income or poverty
- Bereavement
- Retirement
- Giving up driving
- Lack of public transport or other facilities
- Digital exclusion.

For ethnic minorities

- Not feeling valued, included, safe, and able to join in community activities
- Discrimination and xenophobia.

Loneliness is higher than normal in people with disabilities.

How are loneliness and social isolation managed?

There are [things you can do](#) to help you feel less lonely or isolated:

- First, acknowledge your need to build better social connections to improve your wellbeing and life satisfaction
- Shift your focus from yourself to other people, interests, hobbies or activities etc.
- Avoid comparing yourself to others
- Accept changes in relationships as natural consequences of life

- Accept the discomfort you may feel in social situations and understand this may be part and parcel of making and maintaining friendships
 - Engage meaningfully with others by giving them your full attention
 - Don't avoid small talk. It can lead to meaningful conversations
 - Use people's names, and introduce yourself using your name, to help feel more connected
 - Spend time offline to foster real-world relationships
 - Make contact and start conversations with others
 - Offer help and support to others to feel the benefits of being kind
 - Join in with social opportunities like volunteering, sports clubs, professional societies or community activities
 - Keep in touch with friends, even if it's been a long time since last contact.
- ☐

You might need help to manage loneliness and social isolation. Organisations that can help include:

- [Ending Loneliness Together](#)
- [Men's Tables](#)
- [Australian Men's Sheds Association](#)
- [Tough guy book club](#)
- [Griefline](#)
- [MensLine Australia](#)
- [Friendline](#)

What do loneliness and social isolation mean for my health?

Loneliness and social isolation are both [bad for your health](#), and increase the risk of early death.

If you are lonely or socially isolated, you are more likely than usual to experience these health conditions:

- cardiovascular disease
- stroke
- heart failure
- heart attack
- dementia
- depression

- anxiety
- diabetes
- high cholesterol
- loss of physical function

Loneliness and social isolation are also associated with [worse outcomes](#) of disease.

What should I do about loneliness and social isolation?

We do not always know what works to help people who feel lonely or who are socially isolated because people have different social needs, resources, and circumstances. Help for people who are lonely or socially isolated needs to be tailored specifically to each individual because everyone's experience of the problems is different.

If you are lonely or socially isolated, reach out to someone for help. You could talk to a counsellor, either by phone or in person, to work on some steps to build social connections. Make an appointment to see your doctor, so they know about your loneliness and to see if your health is affected.

For some people, health problems can be the reason for loneliness or social isolation, so managing your health problems can help.

What questions should I ask my doctor about loneliness and social isolation?

1. Could my living situation be affecting my health?
2. What can I do to increase my motivation to go out and meet people?
3. How can I manage my health better, so my health problem(s) don't get in the way of me catching up with friends and meeting people?
4. How can I connect with others? What can I say or do? Where do I start?

Medically reviewed by

Dr Ravind Pandher

Updated on 1 December 2023