

What are Loneliness and Isolation?

Loneliness is feeling sad about being by yourself, particularly over a long period of time. Isolation is being separated from other people and your environment. Loneliness can sometimes be felt even in relationships or when surrounded by people.

Loneliness and isolation become more common as we age. Some reasons you might feel lonely or isolated as you get older are:

- losing your spouse, partner or friends (e.g. through death or relocation)
- living alone
- a lack of close family ties
- difficulties meeting new people and feeling like you don't belong
- feelings of loss or grief
- poor physical health or frailty
- mental health conditions (e.g. depression, anxiety) – not getting out to meet people and also due to social stigma and/or rejection from others
- inability to participate in activities due to illness, mobility or transport issues
- retirement from work
- a lack of purpose or meaning in life
- language barriers or reduced connections with your culture of origin.

What helps?

There are many ways to overcome loneliness and isolation and get connected.

Connect with friends and family – staying in contact with loved ones can prevent loneliness and isolation. If your family don't live nearby, technology can help you to stay in touch. Email, text messaging, social networking sites, the internet are all great ways to stay connected. Local libraries often offer courses in using the internet and other technologies.

How do loneliness and isolation affect wellbeing?

Everyone feels lonely sometimes, but long periods of loneliness and social isolation can have a negative impact on your physical and mental wellbeing. Common signs of loneliness include:

- physical symptoms - increased aches and pains, headaches or worsening of illnesses or medical conditions
- mental health conditions - depression, anxiety, paranoia or panic attacks
- low energy or lack of motivation
- difficulties sleeping
- loss of appetite, sudden weight loss/gain
- increased alcohol consumption, smoking or use of medications/drugs
- feelings of worthlessness, hopelessness or thoughts of suicide.

Get out and about – if you can, regularly getting out for social functions, exercise, visiting friends or simply doing your shopping can help to overcome loneliness. If you have transport or mobility issues, there are services that can assist. Call Lifeline (13 11 14) for information about services in your area.

Look after yourself – sometimes when you're feeling down, you might forget to take care of yourself. Remember to eat healthily and exercise regularly. It's also important to get at least 7-8 hours of sleep each night. Alcohol is a depressant and can make you feel worse, so it's best to limit your intake.

Get involved in your community – older people who are involved in educational or social activities are less likely to feel lonely. You might want to try a new hobby, join a club or learn a new skill. Visit your local library, community centre, TAFE or university to find out about activities, courses and clubs.

Volunteer – helping others is a great way to get out and about, meet new people and give something back to your community. Volunteering Australia can help you find volunteering opportunities in your local community (www.volunteeringaustralia.org).

Consider getting a pet – pets are wonderful companions and can provide comfort and support during times of stress, ill-health or isolation. Contact your local RSPCA, veterinarian or pet shop for advice on finding a pet that's suitable for you.

We can all work together to be caring and accepting of others and create socially inclusive communities.