

## **About Loneliness**

The terms loneliness and social isolation are often used interchangeably, but it is possible for people to be isolated but not lonely and vice-versa, and so clarity about what we are talking about is important. Loneliness is a subjective state, a response to people's perceptions and feelings about their social connections. Loneliness has been defined as "the subjective, unwelcome feeling of lack or loss of companionship". Loneliness is an emotion that may have been caused through evolution to ensure humans remain in close contact with each other.

Social research over the past few decades has shown that an average of 10% of older people feel "always" or "severely" lonely.

A distinction is often drawn between social loneliness and emotional loneliness: emotional loneliness is the absence of a significant other with whom a close emotional attachment is formed (eg: a partner or best friend); social loneliness is the absence of a social network consisting of a wide or broad group of friends, neighbours and colleagues. Friends and family members as well as those working with older people should be sure which type of loneliness the person they are trying to help is feeling and be aware of the individual's wishes, needs and preferences.

## **The case for action - Why is loneliness a problem?**

Loneliness is a bigger problem than simply an emotional experience. Researchers rate loneliness as a similar health risk as lifelong smoking, with links between a lack of social interaction and the onset of degenerative diseases such as Alzheimers, an illness which costs the NHS an estimated £20 billion a year. Loneliness has also been linked in medical research to heart disease and depression.

"Inactivity and isolation accelerate physical and psychological declines, creating a negative spiral towards premature, preventable ill health and dependency."

Report of the House of Lords Select Committee on Science and Technology on Ageing, 2005.

## **The scale of the issue**

Research over decades has found a fairly constant proportion (6 to 13 per cent) of older people feeling lonely often or always. Over the same time period, there has been a growing percentage of older people who sometimes feel lonely. As populations age, ever more individuals are likely to be lonely. Recent estimates place the number of people aged over 65 who are often or always lonely at over one million.

Loneliness and isolation is a major issue for older people across the country:  
12% of people feel trapped in their own home  
6% of older people leave their house once a week or less  
Nearly 200,000 older people in the UK do not get help to get out of their house or flat  
17% of older people are in contact with family, friends and neighbours less than once a week and 11% are in contact less than once a month.  
Over half (51%) of all people aged 75 or over live on their own.

### **Risk Factors for loneliness**

Key risk factors for loneliness include being in later old age (over 80 years), on a low income, in poor physical or mental health, and living alone or in isolated rural areas or deprived urban communities.

### **What are the barriers to participation and inclusion of older people?**

Many older people will be able to access events and activities, and will have a lot to offer in terms of experience, knowledge and skills. However some older people will experience barriers to joining in, taking part in activities and sharing their skills, due to either life course events or personal circumstances:

Life course events that can lead to a loss of role and participation include:

- Decline in mental or physical health
- Retirement or loss of work
- Death of partner, friends and family
- Experience of crime
- Becoming a carer
- Relationship breakdown
- Children leaving home
- Family moving away

Personal circumstances:

- Poor transport
- Lack of financial resources
- Non-English speaking
- Fear of crime
- Living alone
- No local services
- Geographical isolation (e.g. rural, deprived area)
- Ongoing poor health
- Gender/marital status – men are more likely to be isolated, but marriage reduces the incidence of isolation among men  
(Sure Start to Later Life)