



Peer Education Project

Loneliness

Finding our
connections to
feel less lonely

A Guide for Parents and Caregivers



Mental Health
Foundation



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“We can reduce feelings of loneliness by talking to someone we trust or doing something we love. This could include talking to your parents and friends or planting trees or cooking.”

Peer Educator
Peer Education Project

What is loneliness?

Loneliness is a common human experience

Loneliness is something we can all experience from time-to-time, throughout our lives, and will be unique to each individual.

Loneliness is the negative feeling we have when there is a difference between the relationships we have and those that we want.

A [YouGov poll \(2020\)](#) of 13-19-year-olds, found:

69%

said they felt alone "often" or "sometimes" in the last fortnight.

59%

feel like they "often" or "sometimes" have no one to talk to.



The difference between loneliness and social isolation

Although feeling lonely is often connected with being alone, they do not mean the same thing, or always happen together.

Being alone, sometimes called social isolation, means being physically separated from the people, and things, that bring us comfort and support.

A person who is socially isolated does not necessarily feel lonely.

Short-term loneliness

Short-term loneliness can vary in length, and be caused by certain situations or events. For example, a change in a relationship or the school holidays.

Short-term loneliness is often eased through improvements in the situation.

Long-term loneliness

If loneliness continues to be a long-term experience, affecting daily life, then this could be considered chronic loneliness.

If we are constantly feeling lonely, this can lead to poor mental health.

How can loneliness affect our mental health?

Mental health is made up of our thoughts, feelings, mood, and behaviour. We all have mental health, just like we all have physical health.



Although loneliness is not a mental health problem, it is an experience that can affect our mental health.

Long-term experiences of loneliness can increase the risk of:

- Low mood
- Low self-esteem
- Poor sleep
- Increased anxiety
- Increased stress

Children and young people often go through many changes during their time at school and at home, that can be lonely experiences.

For example, moving from primary to secondary school, shifting friendships, and going through puberty.

Sometimes, if children and young people are already experiencing poor mental health, there is an increased risk of feeling lonely.

This can be related to misunderstood, which can make it difficult to ask for help.

Spotting when your child or young person feels lonely

Loneliness is something that we will all likely experience.

For some people, their risk of loneliness may be higher due to their circumstances and experiences. For example, some may feel lonely if they are discriminated against due to their ethnicity, race, sexuality, gender, or disability.

It may not always be easy to spot the signs of when your child or young person is feeling lonely. They may find it difficult to reach out and share what they are feeling.

Here are some changes to look out for:

Social withdrawal

Are they as sociable as they usually are?

It's ok for your child or young person to spend time alone, we all need moments to ourselves.

However, if they begin to spend time alone in a way that is out-of-character, this can be a sign of social withdrawal. Children and young people who are experiencing loneliness may begin to find social connection an anxiety-provoking experience.

It can take time to find people we connect with. Remind your child or young person that there will be many opportunities in life to meet new people and build healthy relationships with those who make us feel like we belong.

Trouble sleeping

Are they noticeable more tired than usual?

Children or young people experiencing loneliness are likely to have increased levels of stress and difficulty sleeping.

Getting good sleep can be daunting for children and young people, but there are many things you can do with your child or young person, to understand and improve their sleep patterns.

Check out our [Parent Guide on Sleep](#).

Low self-esteem or a loss of confidence

Has their engagement with the things they enjoy changed?

When experiencing loneliness, we may not feel our most comfortable selves and may experience low self-esteem.

When struggling with low self-esteem, connecting with others may be more challenging and produce feelings of disconnection and further loneliness.

Read [Young Mind's parent guide](#) on how to support your child or young person with their self-esteem.

Feeling frustrated

Has the way they react to day-to-day situations and people at home changed?

Loneliness can feel uncomfortable and frustrating at times.

If your child or young person is struggling with patience and getting frustrated easily, this may be an indicator that there are other feelings going on.

If you are worried about your child or young person, speak to [Young Mind's Parent Helpline and Webchat](#).

How to support your child or young person with emotional loneliness

Emotional loneliness is feeling a lack or loss of a meaningful relationship.

There are many circumstances in which your child or young person may experience this. For example, moving from one school to another and changing friendship groups, changes in the home environment, or a bereavement.

Your child or young person may also feel disconnected from themselves, unsure of who they are and what they like.



When experiencing this type of loneliness, finding connection with ourselves can be really helpful.

There are many ways to encourage your child or young person to find connections with themselves, such as creating spaces where they can understand, accept, and express their feelings.

Support your child or young person to understand, accept, and express their feelings

By supporting your child or young person to recognise how they are feeling, they can begin to understand what they, and others can do, to help them feel less lonely and improve their mental health.

Put in time for activities to do together.

Activities where your child or young person can feel comfortable and supported to share how they are feeling could include, going for a walk, playing a game or cooking together.



Model healthy emotional behaviours.

By sharing how you are feeling, you can positively reinforce that it is ok to share your thoughts and feelings.

Be mindful that behind every behaviour is a feeling.

Look out for any significant changes in their behaviour, which might suggest they are in need of more support.

Look at [Young Mind's tips and activity ideas](#) for opening up a conversation with your child or young person.

Help your child or young person to access further support

There are many helplines who can be there to listen and support your child or young person when they are struggling with their mental health and feelings of loneliness.

[Childline](#)

Free to call on 0800 1111.

Childline is open 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Anyone can either call on 0800 1111 or use their 1-2-1 chat online, where a trained counsellor will be there to listen and support.

[Samaritans](#)

Free to call on 116 123.

Samaritans offer a safe place to talk at any time. Available 24 hours a day, 365 days a year, a trained volunteer will be there to listen and support.

[Shout 85258](#)

Free text service.
Text "SHOUT" to 85258.

Shout 85258 is a free, confidential, 24/7 text messaging support service for anyone who is struggling to cope.

You can also reach out to GP services and your child or young person's school for support and advice.

How to support your child or young person with social loneliness

Social loneliness is feeling a lack of a wider social network of friends, that can often bring a sense of being part of a community.

By building meaningful connections with others, often with like-minded people, we can feel less lonely.

Your child or young person may have both positive and challenging relationships, which may influence their thoughts and feelings.

Being a listening ear and showing interest in your child or young person's relationships, will open lines of communication. This may make it easier for them to come to you when they are struggling with their relationships.

Read [Fastn's top tips](#) on talking to your child or young person about their relationships.

Peer relationships are important for children and young people to develop their self-identity and interests.

This is especially true during adolescence, when these relationships become a more significant part of their support network.

However, sometimes peer relationships can be stressful and difficult to manage.

Read [this guide by the Children's Society](#) on how to support children and young people with their friendships.

How to support your child or young person with existential loneliness

Existential loneliness means feeling disconnected from the world around us, which can contribute to having a lack of purpose in life.



Even if your child or young person has meaningful connections with themselves and others, they may still lack a sense of belonging when it comes to wider society.

Find a good time to talk with your child about what they enjoy doing.

By exploring together their interests and what makes them feel happy, you can remind them to do these when they are feeling lonely, to connect with the world around them.

Encourage your child or young person to sign up to volunteer opportunities in school, and the local community.

Volunteering can help your child or young person to create their sense of purpose.

Explore together if there are school-based clubs and community groups that your child or young person could join.


Encourage your child or young person to express gratitude.

By finding moments to reflect on what they have, children and young people can form a good understanding of the people and things they can look to for support when feeling lonely.

Encourage your child or young person to show acts of kindness, to themselves and others.

Check out our [Kindness Guide for parents and caregivers](#) for tips on promoting kindness.

[Hub of Hope](#) is a national database that brings together local mental health services, so you can find support close to home.



Social media can be a useful tool to feel a wider connection and share interests with others.

However, it can also be a difficult place for children and young people to navigate and can lead to feeling lonely and negatively affecting their mental health.

[Childnet](#) offers advice around the [impact of social media on young people's mental health](#).

Find out more...

The Campaign to End Loneliness

The Campaign to End Loneliness believes that people of all ages need connections that matter.

The Campaign works to ensure that:

1. People most at risk of loneliness are reached and supported.
2. Services and activities are more effective at addressing loneliness.
3. A wider range of loneliness services and activities are developed.

It shares research, evidence and knowledge with thousands of other organisations and the public to make a difference to people's lives.

Every Mind Matters:

[Looking after a child or young person's mental health guide](#)

Young Mind's:

[Getting mental health help for your child guide](#)

Mental Health Foundation

[A guide for parents and carers to help children understand, protect and sustain their mental health.](#)

NSPCC

[A guide to talking about difficult topics with your child.](#)



mentalhealth.org.uk

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