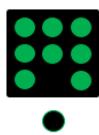


CONVERSATIONS AROUND LONELINESS AND MENTAL HEALTH:



Loneliness & Social Isolation in Mental Health
Research Network

Mental Health
Policy Research Unit
mhpru

Conversations Around Loneliness and Mental Health

Loneliness means different things to different people. For some, it means not being physically around other people. But for others, it is the quality of the connection that counts: it's about not feeling understood, or part of a community. Whatever the reason, it can be hard to acknowledge and talk about.

We are a group of people with lived experience of mental health challenges, who worked alongside academic researchers on a study exploring what it is like to be lonely if you also struggle with your mental health. The study was coordinated by the UKRI Loneliness and Social Isolation in Mental Health Research Network and the NIHR Mental Health Policy Research Unit at University College London and King's College London in 2020-2021.

We interviewed 59 people during 2020, so some of the answers will have inevitably been influenced by the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. The people who took part were from all walks of life, using a variety of mental health services or none, were from different regions of the UK, both urban and rural, and included people aged 21-74, of diverse ethnicity, gender and sexuality.

As part of the interviews, we asked people what (if anything) had helped them feel less lonely; we wanted to share their words with you, in the hope that some of their experiences might help others. We'd like to thank all the people we interviewed, all of whom gave permission for us to use their anonymous quotes.

We know there is lots of advice around about how to help yourself if you are lonely and how to manage your mental health. We also know it's often not as simple as it sounds to put that into practice. So what we are sharing are the words of the people we spoke with about what worked for them, with as little extra from us as possible, although we have shortened some quotes. There is space at the end of this booklet to make notes if you decide to try out any of their ideas. We hope that you can take what is useful to you and let yourself leave whatever is not.

"Loneliness very much depends on the person, and what makes one person better will make another person worse, and vice versa. They just have to figure [it out] - trial and error really, they just need to see if anything helps."

What helped?

(1) Small steps, small goals

"Take small steps and set yourself very, very small goals in terms of trying things or dipping your toe in to connect with other people."

"Start with where you're at. Who are the people that you do have? What are the relationships that you do have?"

"Try and take a risk and not have preconceived ideas about things or notions about anything and just go for it and try it, anything once. And if you don't like it, you don't have to do it again. And if you like it maybe you have found a real passion in one's life."

(2) Developing a positive relationship with yourself

"I think the best thing I did was get help from Cognitive Behavioural Therapy and I would recommend that because it looks at triggers and helps you understand and reflect on yourself and your emotions and gives you coping mechanisms that you can put in place when you start feeling low, so you don't drop too far."

"Find the things that you can do that make you happy, whether you do them with somebody else or not. And then find those groups of people that feel the same way, and you are likely to find people that make you feel less lonely."

"Don't beat yourself up. It's not because there's anything wrong with you, and spending time on your own can be good because you can do things that you can then share with people, tell people about when you do have contact with them. You can have fun on your own."

(3) Relating to other people

"Listening to people and asking questions, and giving to people. Those elements tend towards a more holistic situation where you are more full, more satisfied."

"I'm trying to focus on the things that I can control. With loneliness, what I can control is who I'm around and who I feel most comfortable with, so not hanging on to these friendships that make me feel even more lonely, even more isolated."

"I've become a lot more willing to, not drop friendships, but not try and force friendships to be the kind of relationships I think they should be, and just let them be what they are."

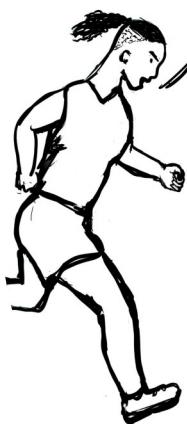
(4) Finding the connections you need

"Phone a friend strategy is definitely the main one for me and it's not just loneliness, it's from a pure mental health point of view."

"Structured socialization [e.g. going to an organized activity with others]...gives you a purpose so that you feel compelled to keep going and make friends and stuff, and be sociable with other people."

"I made a point of trying to go out each day. Just for a walk around the village, and I'd go to the park and it got me talking to other mums and dads by the swings. I made a really good friend from that. And she ran the mums and toddler group, so from that I was able to meet other parents."

(5) Trying to do stuff that interests & inspires you



"I think you've just got to find that thing that you can connect to another human being with, that interests you to just break that non-communication barrier... That's what I've found and for me it's been the gym...the key thing is just finding something that you can find in common and knowing that you're not alone."

"I just have this thing that, when you walk around a town, in most towns, there's always posters and notices up of things happening. At least I find that anyway, even in your local ...supermarkets, you'll have what's happening in your local community, so it's worth always looking there. Libraries have loads of things happening now."

(6) Getting outside & connection to nature

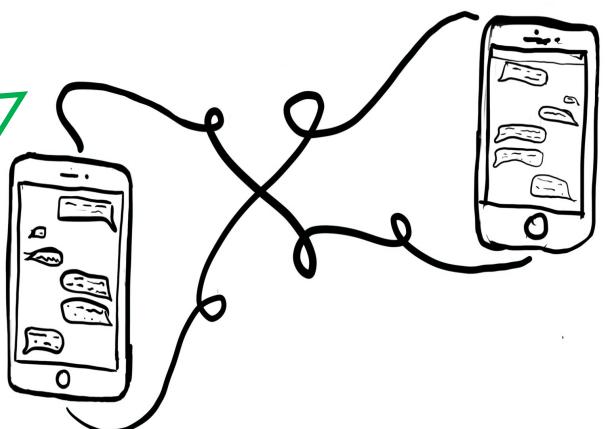
"Being connected to nature [helps] because it's the most grand thing you could find in the world and it's always there for you if you give it love."

"Get a dog, if it's possible, because it's much easier to interact with people in that case."



(7) Using technology helpfully

"Talk to people. Watch people streaming things online, live streaming, because then it feels like you've got somebody talking nearby. That can help a little bit in softening the initial barriers to reaching out to people and talking to them specifically."



"Talking to people online in smaller groups is a lot more effective than larger gatherings online. Four to five people is the maximum, especially when it is voice only. Anything larger is too easy to feel overwhelmed and more like an observer than someone taking part."

"I have a blog but I don't have followers... that interact, so I can put my stuff online and it's out there but there is no pressure of writing things to please other people. You can just write what you feel and if someone comments it's fine; it doesn't really make a difference, so that helps me."

What if it doesn't help?

Sometimes what you try doesn't feel right, and that's ok. For example, one of our interviewees tried using a website that listed local activity groups, but was put off by not being able to browse the activities without joining the group first. Another participant tried to join groups and meet with friends, but this didn't help them feel less lonely. It's important to remember that different things may work for different people, and at different times for the same person. Some people also described how things they tried worked for a while, but then they started to feel more lonely again: feelings of loneliness fluctuated. Try not to beat yourself up or think negatively if things don't work out, and try something different.

"Find someone to talk to. And if the first person doesn't work then keep trying. And just keep trying until you're actually heard."

What we learned from what people said

What we've taken away from what people suggested is that there isn't a 'one size fits all' solution and each person needs to try out different things to see what suits them best at a particular time. One of the key things that people talked about was finding out what each of us enjoys doing and what we each find inspiring. Taking small steps can help in trying new things. What helps may not be the first thing that we try and we should try not to let that put us off trying something else.

We also learned that feeling less lonely doesn't have to be about meeting people – it can also be about connecting with yourself and connecting with the world around us. Some of the people we interviewed talked about loneliness fluctuating over time: sometimes they felt lonely and sometimes they didn't. When we do feel lonely, what helped before may not help this time, so we each need to create a toolkit of different things that we can draw on when we need to. We've provided a space on the last page to help you reflect on what your tools might be, which we hope you'll find useful.

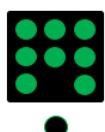
Want to know more?

What has helped them address their loneliness was just one of the questions we asked the people who generously agreed to speak with us. We will add a longer article about the results of the broader research project to our website as soon as it's ready.

Our website: <https://tinyurl.com/MHLoneliness>

Twitter: @UCL_Loneliness | @MentalHealthPRU

This booklet was co-produced in 2021 by (in alphabetical order) Bev, Ellie, Mary, Patrick, Prisha & Rachel. Cover image by Rachel Rowan Olive.



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Small Steps, Small Goals – What I would like to do next...

A large green rounded rectangle surrounds a grid of 20 horizontal lines for writing goals.

The grid consists of 20 horizontal lines, each with a slightly different height, intended for writing down small steps or goals. The lines are evenly spaced vertically.