

# The Loneliness Pandemic

Social connection is deeply ingrained in human nature, as evidenced by our inherent inclination to seek support and understanding from others. The significance of social connection goes beyond mere companionship, playing a pivotal role in our physical and mental wellbeing. But what exactly occurs within us that renders social connection so crucial to our overall health?

## WHAT IS LONELINESS?

Before we explore the positive aspects of social connection, it is essential to delve into the contrasting experience: loneliness.

During the height of the pandemic, the majority of Australians encountered some degree of loneliness due to prolonged lockdowns that restricted face-to-face interactions. It is worth noting that loneliness is a subjective phenomenon, and its impact varies from person to person. It is possible for individuals with large families and numerous friends to still experience loneliness, while others may find contentment in solitude.

In 2018, a group of Australian psychologists published "The Loneliness Report," which defined loneliness as the absence of desired emotional closeness and sincerity in relationships.

**Fundamentally, the emotion of loneliness is not solely determined by the number of people around us, but rather by the quality of the connections we have with them. It is the depth and authenticity of our interactions that significantly influence our experience of loneliness.**

## WHAT CAN LONELINESS DO TO US?

As per the findings of the Loneliness Report, the consequences of experiencing a lack of meaningful connections extend to both mental and physical wellbeing. In terms of mental health, the report identified a cyclic pattern of negativity. It revealed that loneliness not only increases the likelihood of developing depression or anxiety related to social interactions but also that experiencing depression and social interaction anxiety can contribute to feelings of loneliness.

The impact of loneliness on physical health is evident through

various indicators. The report highlighted that individuals who feel lonely often experience poorer sleep quality, an increase in symptoms such as headaches and stomach complaints, and a higher frequency of respiratory infections.

Further research conducted by psychologist Amy Sullivan, PsyD, from the Cleveland Clinic, demonstrated that loneliness triggers the production of cortisol, a stress hormone, in the body. Elevated cortisol levels can impair cognitive performance, weaken the immune system, and heighten the risk of vascular issues, inflammation, and heart disease.

Additionally, a Swiss national survey identified a correlation between loneliness and elevated cholesterol levels and the onset of type 2 diabetes.

## WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF SOCIAL CONNECTION?

Our relationships with friends, allies, and supporters play a crucial role in both celebrating our successes and providing strength during life's challenges. Social connection offers a wide range of benefits that positively impact our wellbeing, including:

**Sense of belonging and purpose:** Social connections increase our sense of belonging, helping us feel connected to a community and providing a meaningful purpose in our lives.

**Happiness and stress reduction:** Building social connections boosts our happiness and reduces stress levels. Having a support system of friends and loved ones can provide emotional support and serve as a source of comfort during difficult times.

**Confidence and self-worth:** Strong social connections contribute to improved confidence and a higher sense of self-



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worth. Positive interactions with others can reinforce our value and reinforce a positive self-image.

**Coping with life's challenges:** When facing major life changes such as divorce, illness, job loss, or grief, social connections provide a vital support network. They offer empathy, understanding, and practical assistance, making it easier to navigate through difficult times.

**Healthy lifestyle choices and emotional wellbeing:** Social connections encourage us to make healthy lifestyle choices and manage negative thinking and mood. Engaging in social activities and interactions can promote better physical and mental well-being.

In the workplace, experiencing a sense of belonging and connection is equally important. It influences our ability to collaborate effectively, advance our ideas, and cope with change, uncertainty, and stress. As we spend a significant portion of our waking hours at work, the quality of our workplace connections can impact other areas of our lives. It's fine if you'd rather keep work strictly professional; however, closer work relationships have been shown to foster greater productivity and engagement, increased job satisfaction and better opportunities for learning.

## TIPS TO STRENGTHEN SOCIAL CONNECTION

Loneliness is a common experience, but there are effective ways to cultivate and strengthen social bonds in both personal and professional settings. Here are some strategies to deepen your connections.

**Make time:** Despite busy schedules, prioritising social connections is vital for reducing loneliness. Set aside dedicated time to connect with friends, family, and colleagues, whether through regular outings, phone calls, or virtual meetings. Actively making time for social interactions can help combat feelings of isolation.

**Watch your social media use:** Social media can be huge fun, but it doesn't necessarily represent reality. If you feel that your friends have better social connections to you, remember that everyone struggles with feelings of loneliness.

**Be dependable:** Building strong connections involves honouring commitments made to others, both at work and in

personal relationships. By being reliable and following through on your promises, you demonstrate respect and show that you are there to support and engage with others.

**Open up:** While it may feel uncomfortable, sharing your vulnerabilities and personal experiences can foster deeper connections. By opening up and trusting others with your thoughts and feelings, you create an environment of trust and understanding, which can lead to more meaningful connections.

**Listen:** Providing a listening ear and offering support to others can strengthen bonds and foster connection. Actively engage in conversations, show empathy, and help people find solutions to their challenges. By being present and attentive, you create a sense of connection and support.

**Be kind:** Acts of kindness, expressing gratitude, and displaying generosity of spirit have a profound impact on wellbeing and connection. Engage in acts of kindness toward others, express appreciation for their presence in your life, and seize opportunities to help and support others. These actions not only boost your mood but also foster a sense of connection and community.

**Prioritising social connections and addressing loneliness may require effort, but the rewards are worth it. By making time for meaningful interactions, you can experience improved physical and mental health, increased happiness, and enhanced productivity in both personal and professional spheres.**

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