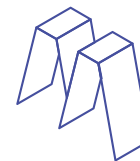# Mental Health Uncovered

MEDNET GROUP

Mental Health Awareness Week 2022:
Loneliness and Mental Health

#MentalHealthUncovered

The World Health Organization describes loneliness as:

A feeling of malaise or distress that the person concerned attributes to a lack of relationships with other people with whom to exchange feelings and ideas and to do things[1]

Contents:

Background

Consider an illness that can make an individual feel sad, stressed, melancholic, and withdrawn, while also increasing the probability of an early death by 26%.[2] The condition is communicable, and social class, income, gender, or education are not safeguarding factors. This illness is called loneliness. Yet, it is often stigmatised, downplayed, or dismissed altogether.[2-4] Moreover, loneliness is becoming more prevalent, and the number of adults affected is increasing, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.[5]

Most of us have experienced loneliness at some point in our life, it is a complex emotion that is unique to each individual.

However, when feelings of loneliness persist, they can have a detrimental impact on a person's physical and mental wellbeing. In England, up to 48% of adults reported feeling occasionally, sometimes, or often lonely between April 2020 to March 2021.[6] This is an increase from figures reported in the 2017/18 wellbeing report by the ONS. More younger adults (16–24 years old) reported feeling lonely often/always (11%) compared to other age groups.[6]

The COVID-19 pandemic contributed to the rise in reports of loneliness as repeated lockdown measures reduced meaningful contact with others and further isolated individuals.

"Loneliness is affecting more and more of us in the UK and has had a huge impact on our physical and mental health during the pandemic. That is why we have chosen it as our theme for Mental Health Awareness Week 2022."

Mark Rowland,
CEO of the Mental Health Foundation[8]

One in four adults in the UK reported feeling lonely in the pandemic with a higher proportion of young people reporting feelings of loneliness.[7]

Long-term loneliness increases the risk of morbidity and mortality. It raises the risk of depression, anxiety, stress and inflammation in the body, low self-esteem, increased risk of cardiovascular disease, diabetes, high blood pressure and problems associated with poor sleep.[9] Since there is no common cause for loneliness, the prevention and treatment of this state can vary considerably. There is no one-size fits all method to deal with loneliness and so interventions need to be tailored to individual needs.

Loneliness is a growing public health concern that needs to be addressed with the full engagement and support of all aspects of society.

Research shows there are four main types of intervention which can be beneficial:[9]

- Improving social skills
- Offering social support
- Increasing social interaction opportunities
- Addressing maladaptive social cognition

Case Studies

In 2007 I was diagnosed with bipolar disorder which meant that I would suffer from long dark depressive episodes followed by manic episodes. This led to me ostracising myself from family and friends, creating intense feelings of loneliness. It felt like a deep dark fog that had descended over me making it not only difficult to navigate but it also made me feel constricted on what I could do about it. I would often use social media as an outlet as I didn't have to engage if I didn't want, and I could easily withdraw myself. I came across an announcement asking people to get involved in a focus group. After being asked to get involved, I decided to put myself forward. This was to be the beginning of my transformation from lonely moth suffering from mental health issues to a bright social butterfly with friends up and down the country. I then got involved with several charities and started opening-up about my experience with loneliness and mental health, I eventually found myself again. I developed the tools to keep the dark fog at bay and started to practice self-care and mindfulness.

28-year-old male

When you get older your whole life changes. Your children have grown up and gone, and I don't think anyone can explain what the loneliness is like. I was in a terrible state. I know that if I didn't have someone come to see me I would die. Then I was put in touch with a befriending service through my GP. They phoned me up one day and said they have a man who will come and see me. That was the best thing that ever happened. It has made a world of difference to my life.

57-year-old female

Case Studies *continued...*

During the pandemic I felt very lost. I didn't feel connected to anyone or anything. I struggled to find my purpose and connect with my work or anyone around me, I began to develop feelings of self-hate and unworthiness. This developed into anxiety, and I began to withdraw myself from engaging in social events and activities. I began to feel very lonely as I was struggling to build a connection with others. During this time, I threw myself into my work and became obsessed with productivity.

I felt disconnected and lonely, but I knew I didn't need more friends or more people around me because it wasn't that type of loneliness. I felt lonely from within, and I tried to fill this void by keeping busy and working as a coping mechanism. Eventually I had a breakdown. This forced me to take a step back and led me to see a therapist, since working through the root cause of my issues I have been able to reconnect with family and friends and improve my feeling of loneliness.

23-year-old female

After my wife died, I was on my own. I have nobody to talk to and as I am unable to get out of the house very much, I am unable to go and talk to anybody. So, I get up and make breakfast and then sit on my own until it's time for bed. If the weather is good, I go out and sit in my garden for hours just watching the birds and trees, but in the winter, I can't go out and it does get depressing. It is lonely.

70-year-old male

Mednet and mental health:
Loneliness

Loneliness is a serious mental health issue with widespread consequences impacting the physical and mental well-being of individuals. It is an important factor contributing to higher levels of distress, resulting from people's sense of isolation and reduced ability to connect with others. Therefore, tackling loneliness should form part of an employer's mental health and well-being strategy as they have a 'duty of care' towards their employees.

Research shows that loneliness can lead to a decline in both physical and mental health.[9] During the COVID-19 pandemic there was a shift in working patterns with most employees working from home if able to do so and this trend is increasing. However, such changes in work patterns can have a detrimental affect on employees' mental health and one aspect that can come to light is loneliness.

Employees can feel isolated working alone from home and miss out on the social aspect of an office environment but also newcomers to a business can feel overwhelmed and under supported as they try to navigate their new role and adjust to their team dynamics.

Therefore, it is vital that employers take into consideration the mental health effect remote working can have on their staff in particular feelings of loneliness.

Employers must recognise loneliness is a growing health concern and if an employee is affected, they should provide them with adequate support. With an increasing number of people working from home, employers need to consider how this can affect employee's mental health.

If employees feel they can openly discuss topics surrounding mental health, then it is less likely that problems will build up.

There needs to be strategy and action to prevent and help employees who are struggling from loneliness and mental health. As a result, this could mean less time off for a mental health issue and improved morale in the work environment. It could also reduce the risk of developing physical health problems if addressed early on.

Since its inception, Mednet have been championing inclusion, diversity, and mental health. Mednet have implemented several strategies to help tackle loneliness, particularly during the pandemic and beyond as working practices post-pandemic, continue to adjust.

Mednet have a mental health strategy which we are continually looking to build on and evolve to offer appropriate support to employees who may struggle with mental health.

Attigo CIC, part of the Mednet Group, is a social enterprise which aims to provide employment to people who may struggle to gain or retain employment due to long-term health conditions, including mental health problems.

Across Mednet Group we have 'Mental Health Champions' who are employees in the company trained to help people who may be struggling from mental health.

Other employees can go to these individuals to seek help and guidance if they are struggling.

In addition to this, regular social events are organised which foster greater team bonding and provide an opportunity to meet colleagues in person who may usually work from home. Mednet have a **'buddy call'** scheme within the company where colleagues connect with each other and check in to ensure team members are supported and not feeling lonely or isolated.

In addition, Mednet regularly volunteers in the local community and have partnered up with Age UK to extend a helping hand to those in the community. These are just some examples of how Mednet are trying to tackle loneliness and improve employee mental health and morale as well as give back to the community.

What do our colleagues have to say:

"Working from home can be difficult, especially if like me, you are just starting out in a new company at the beginning of your career and need to have access to support. At first, I didn't know how this would work, but Mednet provided the support I needed by holding **frequent calls with my team, and organising social events made me feel welcome** and helped with the adaptation process."

— Martyna Zwierzynska,
Junior Designer and Strategist

"I am on the social team and help to plan our work social events, which are always good fun! **I'm grateful to work for a company that value their employees** and understands how important it is to check in with others outside of the work environment. We have weekly buddy calls which provide the opportunity to chat with colleagues about anything other than work!"

— Charlotte Thomson,
Senior Account Executive

"I enjoy having the option to go into the office and I go in at least twice a week, I like working with other people around a**nd being able to get to know different people from outside of my direct team**. The socials have been great fun and good way to meet everyone in the company."

— Rebecca Whalley,
Senior Account Co-ordinator

5 tips to manage loneliness

Feeling lonely can be unpleasant and have a negative impact on your overall health, making it even more difficult to take positive measures towards feeling better. Here are 5 tips to get you started on your journey towards better health:

1. Take it easy

It can be daunting thinking of meeting new people or opening-up to people for the first time especially if you've been lonely for a long time.

- Don't rush into anything

- Do take things slowly and if that means seeing only one person as a time, that is okay. You can build up to seeing a group of people

- Do spend some of your time each day with your family, for example, going for a walk with them or having dinner together

2. Try talking therapies

Talking enables you to take the burden off your shoulders. Therapy can help you to try and examine and understand your feelings while also assisting you in developing healthy coping mechanisms. It can be a safe space to talk about the emotional issues you are facing.

- Don't try to bottle up feelings and keep what is happening to yourself

- Do talk to someone

- Do try to have regular sessions with a therapist

- Do try cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) if social anxiety is making you feel alone

3. Take up a new activity

Feeling like you have purpose can instil greater self-confidence and can improve your mental wellbeing. Having something to do outside of work can be fulfilling and can foster a sense of accomplishment increasing your feeling of self-worth.

- Do try to learn something new, for example: try a new recipe, or take on new tasks at work

- Do try a new hobby that challenges you or is exciting to you, for example: a new sports activity, pottery or perhaps sign up to a practical skills course you've always wanted to try

- Don't feel you have to try everything, pick something that you enjoy and make it a part of your life

4. Practice self-care

Feeling lonely can be unpleasant and have a negative impact on your overall health and wellbeing, making it even more difficult to take positive measures towards feeling better.

- Do pay attention to the present moment and practice mindfulness

- Do some physical activity

- Do find an activity which makes you feel you are taking care of yourself. For example, have a spa day or go to the salon

- Spend time outside in nature

- Do get enough sleep
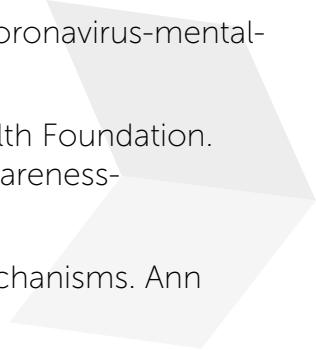
- Don't compare yourself to others

5. Make and maintain connections

You may feel like you know a lot of people, but the problem is that you don't feel connected to them. It may be beneficial to open-up and reconnect with those you know as well as building new relationships.

- Don't rely on social media to build new connections

- Do try to meet friends in person perhaps over a coffee or perhaps have lunch with a colleague

- Do try volunteering this gives you a feeling of purpose and helps you meet new people

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Useful contacts

Befrienders Worldwide

If you need to talk to someone or need emotional support, you can reach out to someone via the befrienders worldwide directory.

Campaign Against Living Miserably (CALM)

If you need to talk to someone you can call CALM on 0800 58 58 58 (5pm–midnight every day), they also offer CALM webchat service.
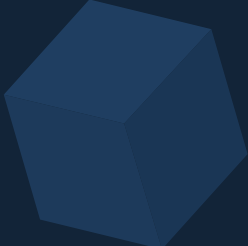
The Mix

If you're under 25 and need support, you can call The Mix on 0808 808 4994 (3pm–midnight every day), you can also request support by email using this form on The Mix website or use their crisis text messenger service.

Nightline

If you're a student, you can see if your university or college offer a night-time listening service on the Nightline website. All Nightline phone operators are students too.

NHS 24-hour urgent mental health helpline

If you live in England, you can call the NHS urgent mental health helpline for support at any time. On the NHS website there is more information on how to access the urgent mental health helpline.

Mental Health Uncovered

With diversity and inclusion at its core, Mednet Group consists of **Attigo CIC** and **Mednet Ltd.**

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