



Peer Education Project

Loneliness

Finding our
connections to
feel less lonely

A Guide for Staff



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"To help reduce feelings of loneliness, you should find someone who you feel confident talking to and tell them how you are feeling."

Peer Educator
Peer Education Project

What is loneliness?

Loneliness is a universal human experience

Most of us will feel lonely at some point in our lives.

While loneliness is a universal human experience, it is unique to each individual.

Loneliness can be defined as 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

Though loneliness and social isolation are terms that are often related and used interchangeably, they do not mean the same thing.

Social isolation refers to a lack of social contacts, which can be measured by the size of a social network or through the number of relationships a person has.

The difference between loneliness and social isolation is the difference between feeling alone and being alone.

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

Transient loneliness

Transient, or short-term, loneliness can vary in length, and be caused by certain situations or events. For example, a change in a relationship.

Transient loneliness is often eased through improvements in the situational cause.

Chronic 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.

Chronic loneliness can lead to an increased risk of:

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

Loneliness can be experienced during times of change.

Young people often go through many changes during their time at school.

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

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

This can often be related to feeling stigmatised, and misunderstood, which can make it difficult for young people to open up or reach out to others.

Spotting the signs of loneliness in pupils

Although loneliness is something that we will all likely experience, we are not all equally at risk of loneliness.

For some of your pupils, 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.

Such circumstances and experiences can also make it more difficult for them to put things in place to help reduce their feelings of loneliness.

Read the [What Works Wellbeing's infographic on the characteristics of those most at risk of loneliness](#).

Due to the stigma around loneliness, pupils may find it difficult to reach out and say that they are feeling lonely.

However, there are still signs that may indicate whether your pupils are experiencing loneliness.

If you are worried about a pupil, speak with your designated safeguarding lead as a matter of priority.

Here are some signs to look out for in your pupils:

Social withdrawal

Are they as sociable as they normally would be?

Spending time alone in a way that is out-of-character can be an indicator of social withdrawal. Young people who are experiencing loneliness may begin to find social connection an anxiety-provoking experience.

Trouble sleeping

Has their attention in class changed?

Pupils experiencing loneliness are likely to have increased levels of stress and difficulty sleeping. Keep an eye out for pupils that are frequently coming to school tired or struggling to stay awake in class.

Check out our [Sleep School Pack](#).

Low self-esteem or a loss of confidence

Has their engagement with school life changed?

When experiencing loneliness, we may not feel our most comfortable selves. This may lead to struggles with our sense of self, causing low self-esteem. Keep an eye out for pupils that have withdrawn from speaking in class, or who are struggling to keep on top of their studies.

Feeling frustrated

Has the way they react to class work, peers and staff changed?

Loneliness is not a comfortable experience, and it can feel really frustrating at times. If your pupils are struggling with patience and getting frustrated easily, this may be an indicator that there are other feelings going on.

How to support pupils with emotional loneliness

Emotional loneliness refers to feeling a lack or loss of a meaningful relationship.

There are many circumstances in which your pupils may experience this. For example, transitioning from one school to another and changing friendship groups, parental separation or a bereavement of a family member or friend.

Pupils can also experience emotional loneliness by feeling 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 support pupils to find connections with themselves, such as creating spaces where they can understand, accept, and express their feelings.

By increasing emotional awareness, pupils can begin to understand what they, and others can do, to help them feel less lonely and improve their mental health.

Support pupils to understand, accept and express their feelings

Create safe, confidential spaces for pupils to explore how they are feeling.

You could provide art and writing materials in these spaces. Some pupils may find it easier to write or draw what they are going through, rather than talking to someone.



Offer regular in-touch points with pupils, to see how they are feeling.

This could be done in a class setting, such as using a feelings board or one-word check-ins during registration.

Check out [Samaritan's lesson plan](#) on how to remove barriers to asking for help.

Model healthy 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 cues, such as changes in or unhealthy patterns developing in their behaviour, which might indicate a pupil needs support.

Read the [Anna Freud Centre's resource](#) on talking about mental health with young people at secondary school.

How to support pupils with social loneliness

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

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

As schools provide the main space for young people to connect with others, it is important to offer pupils opportunities to develop healthy connections with peers, and the wider school community.

Embed healthy relationships as a topic within the curriculum.

Read [Fastn's set of principles](#) to help your school recognise and deliver excellent relationships education.

Promote opportunities for your pupils to actively engage with, and lead on, within school.

Check out our [Peer Education Project](#) – a pupil-led mental health curriculum programme.

Create social, comfortable spaces within the school environment where pupils can spend time together, play games, explore different interests etc.

How to support pupils with existential loneliness

Existential loneliness refers to a broader feeling of 'separateness' from the world around us, which can contribute to having a lack of purpose in life.



Even if pupils have meaningful connections with themselves and others, they may still lack a sense of belonging when it comes to wider society.

Set aside time for shared reflection on what can support pupils when they are not feeling their best.

By providing space for your pupils to share their interests and what makes them feel happy, we can help them to be more aware of how to use these when they are feeling lonely.

Signpost pupils to volunteer opportunities in school, and the local community.

Getting involved in the school and wider community, can help pupils to create a sense of purpose.

Promote school-based and community groups or clubs that pupils could join.

These could be online or offline and will provide opportunities for pupils to meet other people outside their existing social networks and explore what other interests they may have.

Encourage pupils to express gratitude.

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

Encourage pupils to show acts of kindness, to themselves and others.

Check out our [Kindness School Pack](#) for tips on promoting kindness across the school.



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 pupils to navigate, and can lead to them feeling lonely and experiencing negative effects on their mental health.

Use a [BBC Teach lesson plan](#) around trolling and cyber-bullying.

Activity - Gratitude Jar

Set up a gratitude jar in a communal space in your classroom for your pupils to add notes of things they are grateful for in the jar.

At the end of each week or month, go through the jar together and share what has been making each other feel grateful.



“If you are feeling lonely... it might help to try to get involved with a group or something that is going on. For example, joining a club so you feel more involved with something and have a safe space.”

Peer Educator
Peer Education Project

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.

[#UnlockLoneliness campaign](#)

The #UnlockLoneliness campaign aims to raise awareness of loneliness in young people, provide tips to manage feelings of loneliness and actions that the government can take to address loneliness.

[Education Support](#)

Education Support provides mental health and wellbeing support to teachers and education staff in schools, colleges and universities.

Call free on 08000 562 561 to speak to a qualified counsellor. They will offer you immediate, confidential emotional support.

Mental Health Awareness Week 2022

Hold a 'Wear it Green Day' for MHF

The green ribbon is the international symbol of mental health awareness.

Whether you go all out in head to toe green or show your solidarity with one of our [green ribbon pin badges](#).

Holding a 'Wear it Green' day is a great way to get the whole school involved and talking about mental health.



We'd love to hear about your Wear it Green day!

Get in touch with the team to let us know your plans: events@mentalhealth.org.uk

We can also send collection tins and fundraising materials.

Check out our [Schools Wellbeing and Fundraising Pack](#) for more ideas!

How to send the money to us:

There are two ways you can pay in your fundraising donations:

You can go to the Mental Health Foundation's online donation page: mentalhealth.org.uk/donate

Or

Send a cheque payable to Mental Health Foundation to:

Mental Health Foundation
Studio 2
197 Long Lane
London
SE1 4PD

If you'd like us to send you a paying in slip, please email events@mentalhealth.org.uk and this can be organised for you.

When sending us your donations, make sure you always bank the money yourself! Never send cash through the post, as it could get lost or stolen.

Thank you so much for your support!





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