Coping with loneliness and social isolation as a carer

20 September 2023

GL GRIEFLINE

carer•KAFÉ

Acknowledgement of Country

We acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of the land throughout Australia and recognise their enduring connections to the land, sea, and community. We extend my sincere respect to the Elders, both past and present, for their wisdom, leadership, and stewardship of this ancient and diverse land.

carer•KaFÉ

Kinship and Foster Care Education

Your facilitator

Bryan Petheram

Counsellor, social worker and
group facilitator

About Griefline

National not for profit supporting the community for 30+ years

Support people experiencing loss, grief and loneliness

We want to change the way people think and talk about grief

30+ years

Part 1: Understanding Loneliness

The experience of loneliness in Australia is plagued by stigma and misconceptions

1. Loneliness only affects older people

2. Making friends should be easy

3. People who are lonely are a burden

4. Something is wrong with me

5. I need to know more people

ENDING LONELINESS TOGETHER

Loneliness stigma can prevent people from talking about their experiences of loneliness and seeking help.

Understanding the factors that can lead to loneliness could help reduce both social and self-stigma associated with feeling lonely.

The difference between loneliness and being alone

Sometimes we might feel more alone when surrounded by others, because it is an internal state. Solitude on the other hand is more of a chosen state, can be coupled with mindfulness and self-reflection.

We must be careful not to vilify loneliness either – it can be a useful indicator of what we value and what is lacking; human need for connection, belonging and community.

'Feeling lonely does not always mean being alone just as being alone does not always mean feeling alone. A person can feel lonely in a marriage or in a huge crowd.'

J. T. Cacioppo et al., 2009

Definition of loneliness

According to Ester R.A. Leutenberg the author of [Coping with Loneliness workbook](#),

"Loneliness is the absence or perceived absence of satisfying social relationships, accompanied by stress and psychological distress because of this lack of relationships.

People who are lonely experience powerful feelings of emptiness and isolation."

Definition of social isolation

"It's a compromise between loneliness and "aloneness" dependent on whether choice is involved."

- Kileen 1998 (as cited in Costello, 1999)

Isolation can be an outcome for both loneliness and solitude, the difference being whether it's chosen or not.

Withdrawal and social isolation can be a negative impact of feeling lonely and unworthy; whereas if introverted people, or people who value their solitude, that isolation looks and feels different.

We'll have a look at the signs of loneliness later on in the presentation to be able to discern these differences.

The Prevalence of Loneliness in Australia

In the August 2023 [State of the Nation Report](#) it was revealed that:

➤ Almost 1 in 3 Australians **feel lonely**

➤ 1 in 6 Australians are **experiencing severe loneliness**

➤ 15% of Australians **often/always feel lonely**

➤ **37% of carers feel lonely**

Let's explore some further statistics to understand the perceptions and misconceptions of loneliness held by the Australian community.
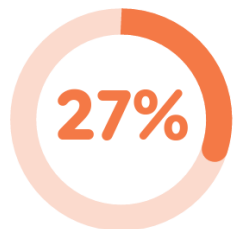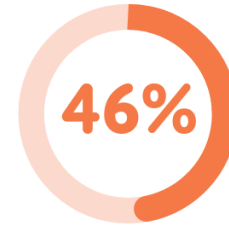
Perceptions and misconceptions of loneliness

46% Nearly 1 in 2 Australians **describe people who are lonely as having negative traits**
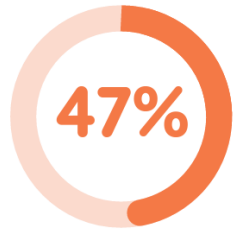
47% Nearly 1 in 2 Australians **believe people would feel less lonely if they just knew more people**

42% 2 in 5 Australians **believe loneliness only affects people 65 years or older**

27% More than 1 in 4 Australians **think making new friends should always be easy**
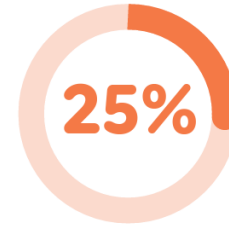
25% 1 in 4 Australians **think that people who are lonely are less worthy than others**

12% More than 1 in 10 Australians **believe there is "something wrong" with people who are lonely**

29% More than 1 in 4 Australians **think their community believes being lonely is a sign of weakness**

Perceptions: stigma and discrimination

Perceptions of people who feel lonely

46% of people describe people who are lonely as **having negative traits**

50% of people state that they **do not want to be friends with a person who is lonely**

57% of people state that they **would not like a person who is lonely**

Perceptions: stigma and discrimination

Community stigma

25% of people think that **people who are lonely are less worthy than others**

41% of people think that **their community respects people who are lonely**

28% of people believe that **their community thinks that there is something wrong with people who are lonely**

29% 29% of people believe that **their community thinks that being lonely is a sign of weakness**

Model for the cause of loneliness

The 'Model for the causes of loneliness' gives us a snapshot of the risk factors that increase the likelihood of loneliness

We'll take a closer look at each predisposing (risk factor)now.

PREDISPOSING FACTORS

Characteristics of the person

Characteristics of the situation

Cultural values and norms

Needed or desired social relations

Actual social relations

+ PRECIPITATING EVENT

Mismatch of needed and actual social relations

+ Cognitions and attributions

Experience of loneliness
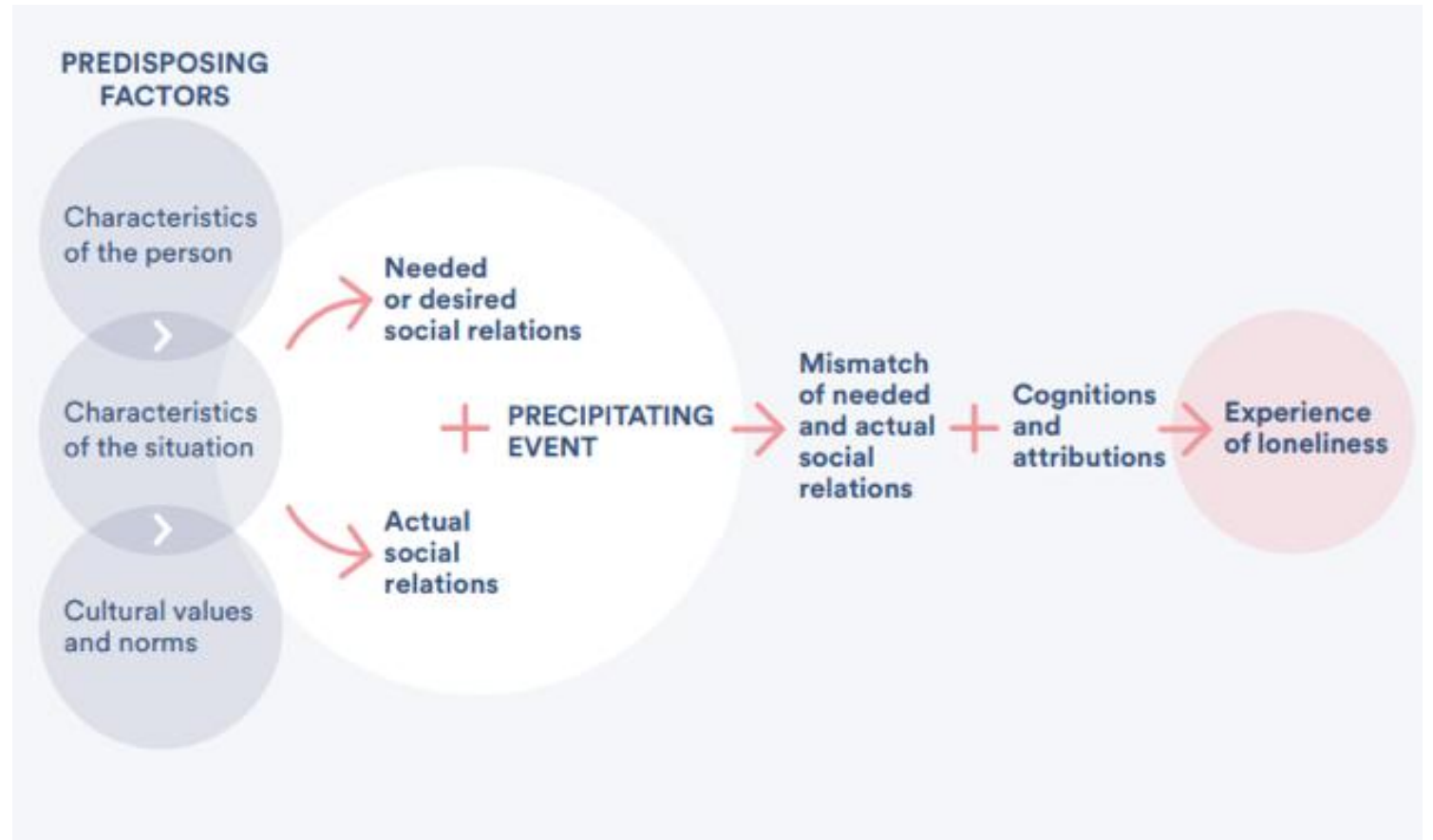
Situational characteristics

The situational event or context is probably the biggest factor out of the 3 risk factors from the model; having a look through what's listed on the here you can start to reflect on how complex loneliness is.

As we mentioned earlier, loneliness it's not a vacuum, and being a carer brings all sorts of contexts and changing situations. These are all human experiences which don't discriminate.

- Bereavement and widowhood
- Recent divorce or separation
- Living with psychiatric disorders
- Poor or declining physical health
- Limited mobility
- Limited ability to communicate
- Children moving out of home
- Retirement
- People living with a disability
- Unemployment
- Financial problems
- Single parents
- Moving out of home/starting university
- Living alone
- Migrant background
- Non-English speaking
- Enforced isolation (pandemic)
- Being a carer

Situational characteristics cont'd

Have a think about what you might notice in yourself. Isolation or withdrawal makes a lot sense when we are processing these major life changes or transitions; being aware of how loneliness intersects.

These precipitating events might trigger a concern that there is a gap between what the person feels they <u>need</u> in their social network and what they actually <u>have</u>.

A life event like a **bereavement** deeply affects our sense of place, identity and belonging and so loneliness often surfaces.

- Bereavement and widowhood
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How does loss trigger loneliness?

Loss is recognised as a significant life event which can trigger loneliness.

The image to the right includes dozens of different losses that a person can experience in a lifetime – many of which are living losses.

Did you know that both death-related and non-death related losses can cause a grief response of similar intensity?

Death of a loved one Serious illness of a loved one Breakdown of a marriage or family unit Relationship break-up Loss of a livelihood Death of a beloved pet Loss of identity Loss of friendship Death of a friend Loss of physical abilities A miscarriage Loss of a home or community Personal illness Retirement Emigration Loss of cognitive abilities Loss of abilities Life transitions Loss of predictability in life Unemployment Emigration Loss of abilities Life transitions Loss of predictability in life Estrangement Death of a hero Loss of faith in community Loss of hope due to climate change Loss of ability to have a child Addiction Leaving home

How does loss trigger loneliness? Cont'd

When someone experiences a "living loss", the thing that dies might be their hopes or dreams, a relationship, or an ability that has escaped them.

Symptoms for those grieving a living loss generally replicate those of the bereaved.

The ongoing uncertainty and feeling unsettled can also lead to anxiety and fear for the future.

Death of a loved one Serious illness of a loved one Breakdown of a marriage or family unit Relationship break-up Loss of a livelihood Death of a beloved pet Loss of identity Loss of friendship Death of a friend Loss of physical abilities A miscarriage Loss of a home or community Personal illness Retirement Emigration Loss of cognitive abilities Loss of abilities Life transitions Loss of predictability in life Unemployment Emigration Loss of abilities Life transitions Loss of predictability in life Estrangement Death of a hero Loss of faith in community Loss of hope due to climate change Loss of ability to have a child Addiction Leaving home

Losses experienced by carers

The losses experienced by carers can be split into primary loss and secondary loss.

While it's important to note that secondary losses are not any less important or intense, or difficult than primary losses, they simply emerge out of or are consequences of the primary loss.

Primary loss: This is the initial loss that leads to the need of foster or kinship care. For example, the child's inability to live with their birth parents due to death, abuse or neglect. This can be a significant emotional event for both the child and the carer.
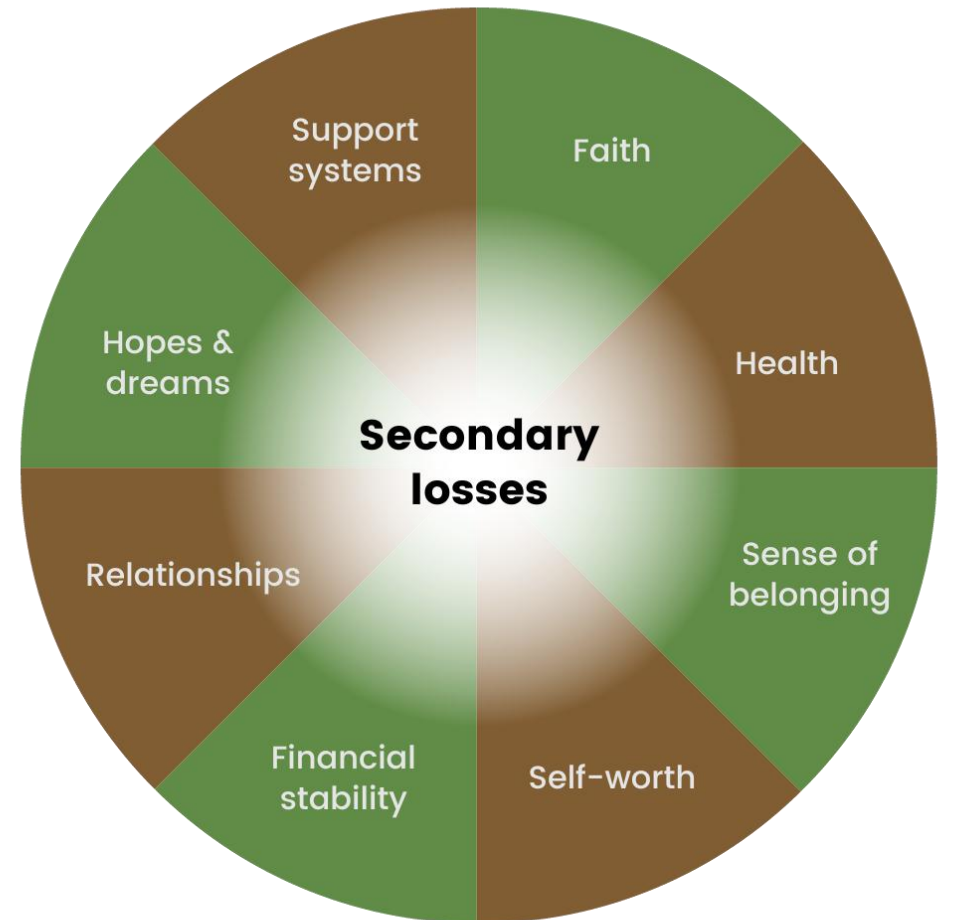
Losses experienced by carers

Secondary loss: These are the losses that occur as a result of the primary loss.

For carers, secondary losses can include:

- Loss of community and friendships
- Loss of connection with other family members
- Disruption of routine
- Social isolation
- Financial loss
- Loss of identity

Psychological characteristics

Psychological factors influence loneliness through different coping styles, personalities, life experiences and social understandings.

From these examples we can see the difference in the concept of open or growth mindset vs fixed.

How when we are alone, we can equate it to being about our self-worth or the situational factors, and how this greatly determines our feelings of loneliness.

"I'm lonely because I'm old"
- Emotion focused
Those who manage problems by managing emotions are more likely to lower expectations of life

"I'm lonely because I just moved to a new city"
- Problem focused
Those who see the problem is external are more likely to attempt to fix it

Cultural characteristics

Social roles, status and identity influence how people interpret their life, family and friends.

Our cultural values and norms, social roles and status will impact on our thoughts, feelings, experiences and meaning-making around loneliness.

There's complexity in this space and without being able to go into huge depth with this, it's important to reflect on how the collection of cultures the Australian community are containers for these cultural impacts – and how we navigate loneliness.

Cultural characteristics cont'd

In a grief context, for example, there may be a lot of disparity in what grieving looks like for different cultures – when people are ostricised from their communities because of the grief and subsequent loneliness, or whether the community can hold that space and reduce the loneliness.

There may be cultural assumptions that people shouldn't or can't be lonely if surrounded by community or people.
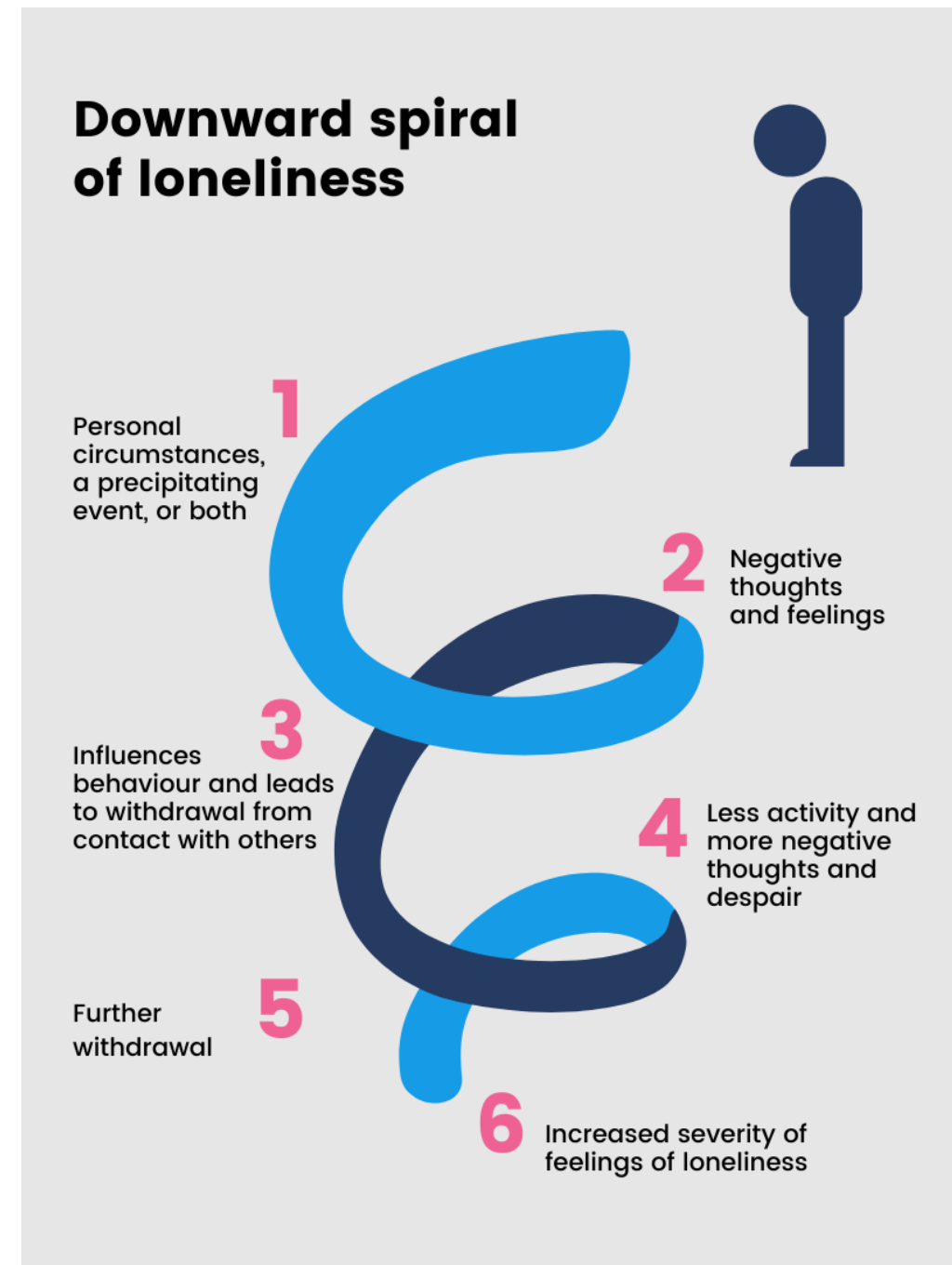Or there may be difficulty in understanding people being alone by choice, regardless of context.

The downward spiral of loneliness

The feelings of loneliness can lead to a loss of confidence and influence behaviour, perhaps causing people to withdraw from contact with others.

This behaviour can in turn set off a downward spiral of more negative thoughts and despair, leading to more intense feelings of loneliness, leading to more prolonged periods of isolation.

Source: The Psychology of Loneliness: Why it matters and what we can do, 2020

Downward spiral of loneliness

1 Personal circumstances, a precipitating event, or both

2 Negative thoughts and feelings

3 Influences behaviour and leads to withdrawal from contact with others

4 Less activity and more negative thoughts and despair

5 Further withdrawal

6 Increased severity of feelings of loneliness

The impacts of loneliness

Referring back to the 2023 <u>State of the Nation Report</u>, it shows that the impact of loneliness on the health and wellbeing of Australians is of great concern.

Those affected by loneliness are:

- Less engaged in physical activity

- More likely to have a social media addiction

- Less productive at work

2x More likely to have **Chronic disease**

4.6x More likely to have **Depression**

4.1x More likely to have **Social anxiety**

5.2x More likely to have **Poorer wellbeing**

Quality of connection vs quantity of people

People assume that loneliness is about being around people or not, however it's more about quality of connection vs quantity of people.

The **lack of one or more emotionally significant relation ship/s** has a bigger impact than the lack of a broad social network.

The images here demonstrate how loneliness can lead into anxiety and depression, in different ways.

Social loneliness
can lead to anxiety

Lack of a significant
relationship can lead to
depression

Impacts on mental & physical wellbeing

Increased risk of:
- mental health problems
- insomnia
- low self-esteem & confidence
- increased stress (linked to cortisol)
- higher risk of dementia & Alzheimer's
- poorer cardiovascular health
- reduced immunity
- obesity
- stroke
- cognitive decline
- premature death

How do you identify loneliness in yourself or others?

When people feel lonely, they start withdrawing themselves from social events. As a result, peers, friends and even family may also stop including them in activities and decision-making processes. This disrupts the healthy relationships between peers and can cause internal conflicts.

Someone sitting next to a shy, introverted person may assume they are disinterested and ignore them as a result. While this disinterest may appear intentional, it rarely is; it's important to recognise all types of personalities and encourage intermingling.

Loneliness and carers

Sometimes, being in a caregiving relationship can lessen feelings of loneliness. Some caregivers view loneliness as a problem they might face in the future.

However, ignoring their current lack of social interactions outside of their caregiving duties can actually increase their feelings of loneliness.

This happens especially when the caregiving relationship alone is no longer fulfilling or providing enough social interaction.

Loneliness and carers

As a caregiver, it's crucial to have an identity beyond just your caregiving duties.

The stress you experience as a caregiver doesn't just come from the responsibilities of caregiving itself.

If the support you receive only focuses on helping you with your caregiving duties, it might overlook the chance to address your broader needs as an individual.

Loneliness and carers

Some research in Australia suggests that many foster caregivers mainly concentrate on their caregiving duties and how important these duties are in their lives.

This research also found that these caregivers often don't realize the benefits of seeking social support outside of their caregiving duties.

Feeling lonely is part of being human

When you feel lonely, your body might be trying to tell you that you're lacking social connections.

This feeling of loneliness is a signal from your body that you might need more social interaction or a deeper connection with others.

> To be alone for any length of time is to shed an outer skin. The body is inhabited in a different way when we are alone than when we are with others.
>
> – David Whyte

Whyte's exploration of loneliness in 'Consolations' is a deep dive into the transformative power of longing and how it shapes our perception of ourselves and our surroundings.

Part 2: Coping with loneliness

Upward spiral out of loneliness using psychological techniques

6 Increased activity and engagement reducing loneliness severity

5 More positive thoughts and feelings leading to change in behaviour related to engagement with people or place

4 Experiencing a shift in thoughts and feelings and a belief of positive change

3 Knowing that these patterns can be changed. Challenging negative automatic thoughts and feelings by practicing psychological techniques that help to re-frame them.

2 Recognising that unchallenged negative thoughts and feelings have led to patterns of behaviour that have become hard to shift

1 Awareness that thoughts and feelings related to loneliness influence behaviour

The upward spiral out of loneliness

Through awareness of the situational, psychological and cultural factors, we can turn towards loneliness with compassion and understanding.

- Self-awareness
- Challenging negative thoughts
- Reframing thoughts
- Positive shift in thoughts
- Change in behaviour
- Increased engagement with others

How to connect with others and broaden your social network

Increased activity and engagement with social networks have been shown to reduce the severity of loneliness.

Here are some ways you can create connections while supporting yourself in your role as a carer...

Identify a trusted friend or family member that listens and validates your concerns and emotions without judgement or attempts to 'fix' anything.

Connect with an organisation or professional that provides appropriate information and support.

Such as:

- financial support
- fitness and health training
- meal preparation

Getting help to complete a difficult task or providing a way of completing a task.

Such as:

- getting help with maintaining your garden
- asking someone to pick up your groceries,
- borrowing something from a friend or neighbour

Spend time with others without talking about problems.

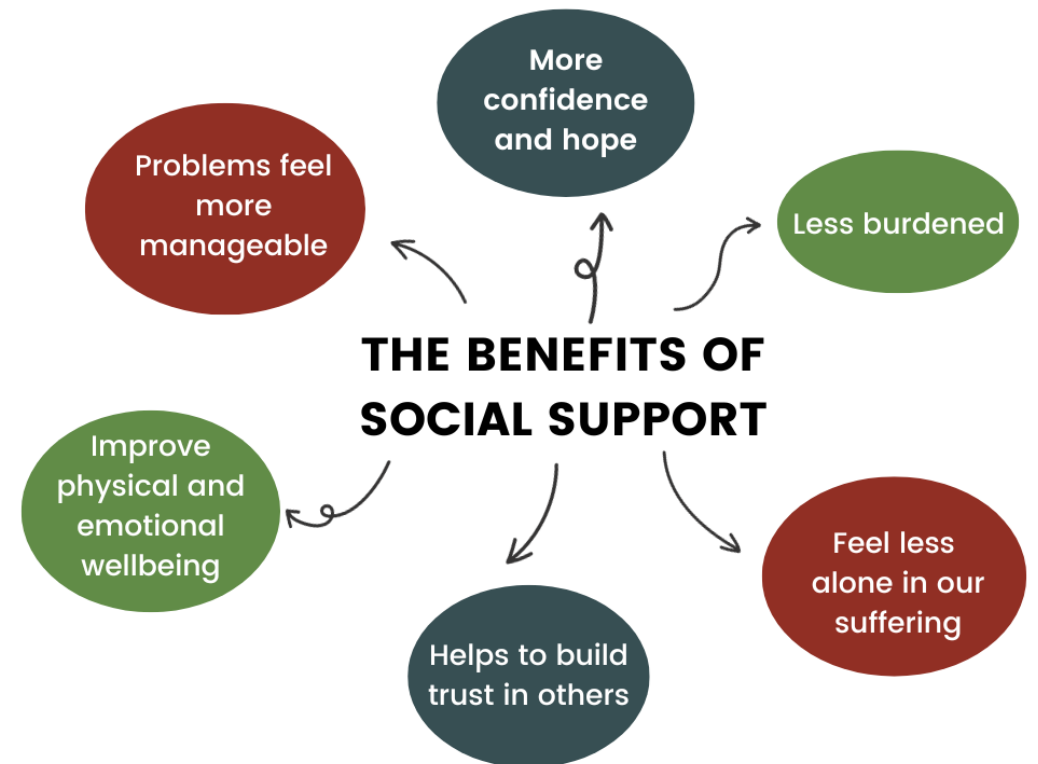This can include going for a walk, sharing a meal or watching a movie.

Help others such as volunteering at school or community events - while always remembering to balance your support of others with time for yourself.

Social support has many benefits

- You often feel more confident and hopeful about dealing with problems
- Your problems can feel more manageable.
- When you share your problems with others it can help lighten the burden
- When you hear about other people's problems it can help both of you feel less alone in your suffering
- For people with few trustworthy supports it can help you to build trust in others
- Helping to build trust in others (e.g. for people with few trustworthy supports or with difficulty trusting others)

Problems feel more manageable

More confidence and hope

Less burdened

Improve physical and emotional wellbeing

THE BENEFITS OF SOCIAL SUPPORT

Helps to build trust in others

Feel less alone in our suffering

Connecting with the community

A 3-step plan

1. Recognise that loneliness is common and accept it as a normal part of being human.

2. Plan to stay connected. Focus on what is possible rather than what's not possible. This might include planning to reach out to friends or family or trying new activities – either out in the community or at home via online platforms.

3. Take action – small steps are still movement forward

Manage being alone

We must be realistic about the fact that we will all feel lonely at times.

We need to take on a positive attitude to managing being alone to provide a buffer for these times.

Some ways to manage being alone:

- Focus on the positives – explore ways to enjoy solitude.

- Focus on the short-term future

- Talk about loneliness

Keep busy

Activities can provide distractions from negative thoughts.

These vary enormously from simple pastimes like reading, listening to the radio, or doing puzzles to more creative interests like gardening, arts and crafts and singing.

Connecting with outdoors

Spending regular time outdoors, with or without other people, can help to ease feelings of loneliness.

Going outdoors, stepping into a garden or balcony, or even looking out of a window can provide a sense of connection with nature or the outside world which has been shown to promote physical and mental wellbeing.

Getting additional support when you need it

There are many organisations in Australia equipped to support those in the community who need assistance for coping with feelings of loneliness or social isolation.

Griefline is available 7 days a week to provide emotional support and information to normalise the experiences of loss, grief and loneliness.

There are also several organisations dedicated to supporting people in foster and kinship carer roles.

In the next few slides, you will find links to access these services, along with additional third-party sources of support and information.

The final few slides include all the references of information we share in this presentation.
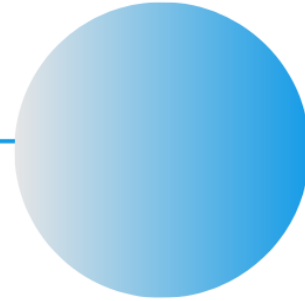
Griefline's programs and services
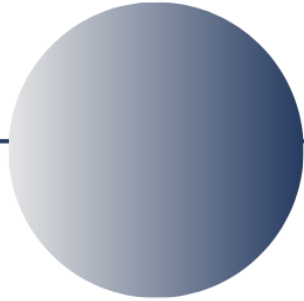
Prevention & education

Online self-help resources

Self-paced online learning & workplace training

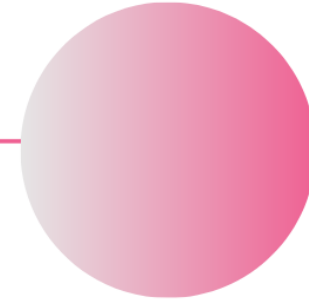YouTube series & podcast

Translated fact sheets

Early intervention

National telephone support

- toll-free helpline
- booked grief support calls

Online moderated forums

Online bereavement support groups

Specialised care

Grief & bereavement sessional counselling & support programs

- Policeline (Vic only)
- Integrating grief (NSW only)

Griefline resources

YouTube series: **Courageous conversations**

Grief and loss resource hub: **Loneliness and isolation**

Fact sheets

Community and connection comes in all forms.

Inviting courageous conversations

Call our national helpline
1300 845 745
6am-midnight AEST

Visit our website for support resources and online forums

griefline.org.au

Are you ready for a courageous conversation? Join Matthew Jackson as he explores loneliness during lockdowns and how to show up for your mates in hard times.

Support for Carers

Kinship Carers Victoria https://kinshipcarersvictoria.org/contact-kcv/

Foster Care Association of Victoria https://www.fcav.org.au/contacts/fcav-contacts

Permanent Care and Adoptive Families https://www.pcafamilies.org.au/contact

Information and resources

 Friends For Good https://friendsforgood.org.au/

 Ending Loneliness Together https://endingloneliness.com.au/resources/

 Meetup https://www.meetup.com/en-AU/

What to do if you feel lonely

Resource adapted from APS (2018) by Dr Michelle Lim and testimonies from the 1000 Voices Lived Experience project

ENDING LONELINESS TOGETHER

1. Think positive

Worrying about social situations can make us overthink our interactions. Try shifting your focus to the other person or topic of conversation.

2. Forget comparison

Comparison can often make us feel inferior to others. Instead of focusing on what you lack, try to focus on and develop the things you have.

3. Expect change

It's natural for relationships to change over time. Knowing this can help you to better adjust as your relationships change and evolve.

4. Sit with discomfort

Anxiety in social situations is common. Meeting new people, despite some discomfort, can help to improve your social confidence.

5. Active listening

Meaningful engagement starts by really listening and giving others our full attention. Show you are engaged through your actions and words.

6. Practice small talk

Many of us worry that we have nothing to say. Starting small talk with others can lead to deeper and more meaningful conversations.

What to do if you feel lonely

Resource adapted from APS (2018) by Dr Michelle Lim and testimonies from the 1000 Voices Lived Experience project

ENDING LONELINESS TOGETHER

7. Say names

Saying someone's name signals that we are engaged. Offering your name, and saying theirs, can make for a more connected conversation.

8. Go offline

It's important that we continue to nurture our relationships in the non-digital world. Make time to go offline and interact with others in real life.

9. Start a conversation

Unexpected moments of connection greatly improve our mood. A simple hello can go a long way to helping others and you to feel connected.

10. Be kind

Helping others makes us feel good. Being kind to others, by offering help or support, can help you to build more meaningful connections.

11. Join in

We all have different interests. There are social opportunities to suit everyone. Find out what activities are available in your area and join in.

12. Reconnect

All of us lose touch with friends over the course of our lives. But it's never too late to reach out. Take small steps to reconnect with old friends.

Endinglonelinesstogether.com.au

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