

LONELINESS

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According to the *Australian Loneliness Report*, loneliness is experienced by 1 in 4 Australians and people under the age of 65 report experiencing higher feelings of loneliness. Even though we might associate loneliness with growing older, an article I read recently explained that loneliness is not just something experienced by the elderly, who in fact report to feel the least lonely in society.

How do we define loneliness? It can be defined as the feeling or perception of being alone and separate from people. In contrast, social isolation is defined as physically being apart from people. Thus, loneliness is unique to every individual. You can physically be alone but not feel lonely, or you can be surrounded by many people and feel lonely.

Research shows loneliness focuses on the quality of relationships we have and not the quantity. A quality relationship is a meaningful connection where the individual feels understood by others.

Some facts about lonely people:

Lonely people report having poorer health, both physically and mentally, than those who feel more connected.

Lonely people have increased levels of depression and anxiety regarding social interactions.

Additionally, higher levels of loneliness are associated with increased levels of social interaction anxiety, reduced social interaction, poor mental wellbeing and a poorer quality of life.

STRATEGIES FOR CONNECTION

So, with all this loneliness doom and gloom, how can one feel less lonely and more connected?

- **Stop comparing yourself to others and how many friends they have.** Remember, it is about the quality of relationships and not the quantity.
- Change is a normal part of life. **Accepting change or welcoming it** means that you are prepared or can adjust to moments when you lose significant individuals from your life, which is inevitable.
- **Contextualise discomfort, as social interaction anxiety may stop you from socialising.** The feeling of awkwardness does not mean you have done something wrong. Continue to reach out to people, and over time your skills will improve.
- **Preparation can be useful for when the conversation slows down.** You can prepare questions or discussion points for this moment, for example, what movie has the person recently seen, have they travelled or been to a museum lately?
- **Actively listen to the person you are speaking with.** Listen to the person's response when you ask them a question, rather than waiting for your moment to speak. Paraphrase what they have said to you, as this will ensure the person is aware you are genuinely listening to them. Focus on your posture, facial expressions and the words you say. Say their name while speaking to them or anyone else in connection to them, such as their mother's name or pet name. Once again, this highlights that you care and have been paying attention.
- **Take a rest from social media.** This might be a great way to feel instantly connected to people. Social media can be a way of focusing on the quantity of relationships and not quality. Try to create and maintain a healthy offline life. It might be an idea to arrange a meet-up with trusted online friends.
- **Explore unexpected moments of social interaction,** smile at a stranger or make eye contact with people a little more often. Unexpected social interaction can be a way to improve your mood instantly.
- **Think positively and do not worry or overthink social interactions.** Try to shift your focus from how you are being perceived to what you are discussing and the person you are talking to.



- **Help someone out, or ask for help if you need it.** Join in a local community group, volunteer or attend your next local haemophilia event. Helping someone out or sharing an activity with someone is an instant way to feel connected.
- **Reconnect with people from your past.** Most people will welcome this reconnection and feel that you care. It might be an idea to meet at a place that has significance or where you shared fun experiences.
- **Stress management is key.** Figuring out a way to manage your stress, such as deep breathing or mindfulness, can help you through stressful moments.
- **Spending time with pets** can also be a way to reduce or ease feelings of loneliness. If you do not own a pet, arrange to spend time with a neighbour or friend's pet.
- **Chat with your HTC social worker or psychologist** if you are worried or anxious about social interactions as we can help support you and assist in building up your social skills.

Loneliness might not be specific to the haemophilia and rare bleeding disorder community; however, it is something we all experience. Having the knowledge and ability to identify and respond to feelings of loneliness can have positive impacts on our physical and mental health that are instantaneous. 🐾

1. REFERENCES

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