A guide to combatting loneliness

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Every year, **Mental Health Awareness Week** is celebrated across the UK with the aim of shifting the public focus onto achieving good mental health nationwide.

The initiative was started by The Mental Health Foundation 21 years ago, and each year the event is centred around a specific theme: this year's being **'loneliness.'** In celebration of MHAW in 2022 *(which runs from 9–15 May)* we at Plumm have put together this simple toolkit for you and your team combat loneliness both in the personal and professional context.

This easy-to-use guide covers the following key areas:

- The effects of loneliness on mental and physical health
- COVID-19: Loneliness during the pandemic and in a post-COVID era
- Loneliness in the workspace – coping with isolation in remote work settings
- Ways to combat loneliness *(within ourselves)*

Understanding loneliness: The effects of loneliness on mental and physical health

Loneliness is generally defined as the feelings of distress and discomfort that result within a person when they perceive their social interactions and connections with others to be insufficient for their personal needs and desires. In short, it is the feeling we get when our need for human-interaction is not being met.

What causes loneliness?

No one is immune to loneliness; it is built into our biology as humans and is as much an unavoidable part of life as hunger and thirst. Loneliness is what makes us aware of our social needs – which our body recognises as having been an essential part of our ancestors' ability to survive. Throughout human history, those who had the ability to collaborate successfully and form connections with other humans were typically favoured by natural selection, and this has led to this instinct becoming engraved into our biology.

Who is most affected by loneliness?

Different people have different needs when it comes to social interactions, with some seeking frequent exchanges and stimulation from a variety of individuals, while others may prefer the company of only a precious few friends or close family members. That is why we each have a different threshold for how much time we can spend alone before we start to feel lonely. Some of us may feel comfortable spending days, or even weeks, in our own solitude, while others may start to feel incredibly lonely after just a brief period of isolation.

However, loneliness does not always imply physical isolation from others, and may also result when we feel that our interactions or relationships with others lack the quality, stimulation, and emotional depth that we desire. For most, if not all of us, a large room full of people can feel just as lonely as an empty one if it lacks the authentic human-connection or emotional stimulation we desire. Loneliness is a very subjective experience and is caused by a variety of factors that affect each individual differently.

Regardless of what each of us desire in our interactions with others, satisfying social relationships are essential to both our mental and physical wellbeing as humans. In the sections to follow, we explore some of the consequences that loneliness can have on the different spheres of our collective wellbeing. It is something that affects us all, and that can be felt regardless of our wealth, popularity, social standing, personality, or social skills. It affects introverts and extroverts alike.

The effects of loneliness on mental health

When feelings of loneliness persist, it can lead to mental health disorders such as depression and anxiety. These mental states can make it more and more difficult for the lonely to build the connections with others that they yearn for, creating a toxic feed-back loop of increased isolation and alienation.

When loneliness becomes chronic, it becomes self-sustaining, which means that the mechanisms in our brains responsible for detecting social pain (i.e., feelings of loneliness) shift into self-preservation or 'defence' mode. Some studies have shown that the brains of people experiencing loneliness are far more alert and receptive to social signals, yet simultaneously less effective at interpreting these signals correctly, and that this gets progressively worse over time. In other words, lonely individuals pay very close attention to others but seem to understand them less.

Another psychological phenomenon that occurs in those suffering from loneliness is that they find it harder to recognize faces or read others' expressions, as the part of their brain responsible for this function starts to confuse neutral facial features and expressions with hostile or threatening ones. In addition, loneliness can make one assume the worst when it comes to others' intentions towards you, leading to more self-centred and anti-social behaviours – perpetuating their feelings of isolation.

The impact of loneliness on physical health

The findings from several large studies have indicated that stress linked to chronic loneliness is one of the most unhealthy and damaging kinds of stress a human can have. This kind of stress can weaken immunity, make a person age faster, and can even aggravate the severity and progression of existing diseases such as cancer and Alzheimer's disease. It has also been found that loneliness is twice as deadly as obesity, and is as damaging to the body as smoking a packet of cigarettes per day, which highlights the severity of its threat to our physical wellbeing.

COVID-19: Loneliness during the pandemic and in a post-COVID era

It's normal to feel lonely from time to time, especially when we undertake major life changes such as changing schools, moving into our own apartment, starting university or a new job in a foreign town, or losing a loved one that we used to spend a lot of time with. However, research has shown that the incidence of loneliness over the last few decades has been on the rise, and has been experienced more chronically by those reporting it. Data from 2019 indicated that, in the UK, as much as 60% of individuals aged 18-34 reported feeling lonely often, while 46% of the US population (all ages) reported feeling lonely regularly.

In a modern-day world where we are technologically more connected than ever before, many of us may find it unexplainable that the world is starting to feel like a seemingly lonelier place to live. Amid the COVID-19 pandemic, technology served an important role in keeping us connected to our loved ones through video calls and various virtual platforms, but many still felt that these interactions were incomparable to the connection we feel during face-to-face interactions. The national lockdowns that took place in almost every country around the world caused many to become isolated from loved ones and vital support networks within their communities, leaving far more people vulnerable to chronic loneliness than ever before. This also led to an increase in the incidence of other mental health issues and disorders, which placed a burden on families, businesses, and health systems globally. The negative impacts of loneliness on individuals, communities, and families is therefore indisputable.

In a post-COVID era, many have been able to return to regular, face-to-face interactions with others on a daily basis. However, many businesses have opted for remote work settings regardless, due to the fees that they are able to save on overheads such as renting an office space. While many enjoy the flexibility that comes with this new way of working, some people may find remote working environments to be extremely isolating, and this can be especially difficult for employees who receive limited daily communication or support from their co-workers. Companies who have opted for remote work settings should be aware of the potential impact this can have on the wellbeing of their employees, and should make a point of making the workspace more interactive and sending them frequent reminders that they are valued and appreciated members of the workforce.

Ways to combat loneliness

Experts within the field of mental health have suggested that loneliness should be addressed as an issue in its own right, rather than being treated as a by-product or a cause of other mental health issues such as depression.

When we are faced with persistent feelings of loneliness, it can be greatly beneficial for us to talk to a trained professional such as a therapist, psychologist, or psychiatrist. When utilizing the services of these professionals, special attention should be given to the loneliness as a problem in its own respect, so be sure to raise this with your psychologist/therapist to make it a priority.

When it comes to our mental health, we need to take responsibility and ownership of the feelings and experiences we are facing, meaning that we cannot just rely on external support, but need to do our bit in the healing process.

Here are some key ways in which you can actively work at alleviating loneliness:

♻️ Recognise the vicious cycle of loneliness that you may be trapped in

Are you giving interactions with others a fair chance or are you looking at them through a selectively negative lens, expecting doom, disapproval, and rejection from your interaction with them? Try to give yourself and others a (more) fair chance.

🚫 Banish negative thinking

This may be easier said than done, especially for those who come from a long pattern of negative self-talk and perceptions of negative experiences with others. Old patterns can be hard to shake, and it certainly won't happen overnight, which is why we should try to take small steps to gradually unlearn these negative thought patterns day by day. Become aware of what you focus your attention on, and try to ask yourself why you think you are having certain negative thoughts, and whether these thoughts are rooted in any truth. Be kind to yourself, latch on to the positive thoughts, and celebrate the small victories.

👟 Step outside your comfort zone

When we experience loneliness we naturally feel more disconnected from others, and we may even begin to behave differently, or try to avoid social interactions. This only intensifies feelings of isolation. As already discussed, however, we all have very different social needs, and so stepping outside of the comfort zone can mean something different for each person. It may be as simple as going out for coffee with a friend that you were once comfortable with, and now feel estranged from, or accepting an invitation to a small gathering to which you previously would have declined. Every step counts.

📝 Remind yourself that loneliness is normal

Do not be ashamed of feeling lonely, it is something that we all grapple with and a very normal part of being human.

🔍 Address it at the root cause

Reflect on this feeling of loneliness; when did it start; what made it worse; and in which circumstances do you feel the most likely to overcome it. Try to create such circumstances for yourself more regularly. Slowly try to eliminate factors or environments from your life that cause you to feel more lonely.

💻 Creation over consumption

The way we use technology can have a big impact on our feelings of loneliness and the ways in which we relate to one another as humans. When we use social media and other one-way digital platforms which require us to merely consume information, we take time away from opportunities that we could have used to create or interact with the world and those around us. Mindless scrolling can not only lead to feelings of alienation and inadequacy, but will also result to us becoming even more isolated than we already may have been feeling, as it distracts from our immediate environment and doesn't require us to develop or utilize any of our social skills. A better way to use technology when you are trying to combat isolation is to use it for two-way interactions with others in real time (e.g., video calls with friends and family).

📝 Actively practise gratitude and mindfulness

This can be grounding and help us to reflect more realistically on our place in the world and to focus positive energy into ourselves and recognize our own value.

If you have a loved one, colleague, or family member struggling with loneliness, the above points can be utilized to help them too. What we can do in addition is to invite them along to social gatherings, send them a friendly message, or make a point of calling them more often to check in. Remind them how much they mean to you, and how much you enjoy spending time with them and doing things with them. In addition, motivate them to utilise the services of a trained professional, especially if their loneliness is becoming chronic and debilitating.

Plumm resources for combatting loneliness.

Weekly 1:1 video sessions with your accredited therapist or coach

Chat therapy with your therapist or coach *(available 24/7)*

Live classes where you can ask questions anonymously

Online courses on mental health related topics, presented by experts in the field

Guided meditations, soundscapes, and more

We hope that you have enjoyed finding out more about this year's Mental Health Awareness Week topic, and that this toolkit has served as a valuable and informative guide in your and your colleagues mental wellbeing journey.

References

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