

# LONELINESS & MENTAL HEALTH



# WHAT'S THE ISSUE?

- Having a mental health issue increases the chance of someone becoming isolated and feeling lonely, and feeling lonely can have a negative impact on your mental health. This creates a vicious cycle that can be hard for people to break without support.



# THE CHALLENGES

Social contact is a recognised key contributor to good mental wellbeing.

- Many mental health issues such as depression and anxiety can make it difficult for people to make or maintain relationships and social connections, for example;
  - Anxieties about going out to new places, using transport etc can deter people from going out.
  - Fears and assumptions about what others think.
  - Low or unstable mood makes communication difficult to sustain, which has a negative impact on relationships (eg losing touch with friends during a low period then not feeling able to re-establish communication.)
  - Fear of judgement and feeling that no one understands makes it difficult for people to have to confidence to reach out.
  - Anxiety and fear of failure can make people reluctant to commit to things or see them through (eg social commitments) which impacts on friendships and triggers low mood/a sense of 'not being good enough.'

**“MY ANXIETY AND DEPRESSION  
ISOLATE ME FROM PEOPLE, STOP ME  
FROM BEING ABLE TO DO THE THINGS I’D  
LIKE TO DO SO SOCIALLY IT CUTS ME  
OFF.”** *Mind Service User*

# CHILDREN & YOUNG PEOPLE

- There is often an emphasis on isolation in older people, but surveys suggest that the issue is even more prevalent among young people.
- A recent UK survey showed that young people's greatest fear was 'not finding someone to love' – ranking higher than war, illness and family death in the responses. This suggests that many young people are concerned about the risk of long term loneliness.
- Expectations, social media, issues with anxiety and gaps in support all increase the risk of young people becoming isolated.
- In young people, anxiety and other mental health issues can often present as issues with challenging or aggressive behaviour and social boundaries, further limiting the young person's social opportunities. This can increase feelings of failure and being different and creating a vicious cycle which can be difficult to break without support.
- Children and young people can find it harder to understand and articulate their feelings, making it more difficult for them to access appropriate support and increasing the chances of them becoming isolated.
- In teenagers, loneliness and associated mental health issues can look like 'normal teenage behaviour' such as spending a lot of time in their rooms, which can make recognition of any problems slower.

# STUDENTS

**Although students often have a reputation for partying, for many the experience of going away to university can be lonely, and have an impact on their mental wellbeing. Risks include:**

- **Living away from home** - usually for the first time, isolated from family and friends. As well as not having people to talk to, this also means that those people who know them best and would be most likely to notice warning signs of mental health issues are not around to do so. With no one that knows them well around, young people at university are at risk of becoming very unwell before anyone notices.
- **Expectation** – The expectation that students will ‘have the time of their life’ at university is strong and for many, hard to live up to. This can lead to feelings of inadequacy, which can make young people retreat further into their shells and ultimately become isolated.
- **Making friends** – many friendships are formed in the early days at university and for those that find the transition difficult they can end up feeling that they have ‘missed the boat.’
- **Accessing help** – Understanding who to ask for help can be daunting, as well as the fact that for many they will be needing to access things independently for the first time. For example, registering with a GP and asking ‘teachers’ for support may all be things that were previously done by parents and be overwhelming to a young person facing them by themselves. This can add to the anxiety and isolation, and delay support.
- **Feeling inadequate** – young people often compare themselves unfavourably to their peers, and those feelings can become overwhelming especially when away from usual support networks and with no one they trust to talk to. Young people at university can compare themselves both to their new peer group and also to friends from school/college who have gone to different universities, in particular via social media. This can make people feel ‘lost’ in between the two groups, who they perceive to both be ‘doing better’ and having more success than them. This can cause them to withdraw and become increasingly lonely and potentially unwell.

# SOCIAL MEDIA & LONELINESS

Whilst social media in theory gives us more ways to connect with other people than ever, in some cases it can actually add to loneliness, particularly for young people.

- The increasing emphasis on comparisons with other people and their lives also contribute to loneliness, and feelings of isolation.
- The rise in social media contributes to this, especially for younger people, who can feel 'out of sync' with their peers, increasing anxiety and reducing their self esteem.
- For students or young people away from home, social media can act as a reminder of the things they miss, and make them feel that others are coping better with the transition making them feel lonelier still.
- Social media gives a 'filtered' version of life which is unrealistic and unsustainable for most people, which can lead to feelings of failure.
- An ever increasing number of ways of communicating can make people feel overwhelmed and anxious – as they are being 'bombarded' from all sides. This have the opposite effect of making people withdraw and communicate less, becoming isolated.
- Face to face contact is shown to be beneficial to mental wellbeing – for some people, social media can gradually take over from 'real life' contact, having a negative effect on mood and wellbeing in the long term.

**“SEEING OTHER PEOPLE  
PROMOTE THEIR HAPPINESS  
ON SOCIAL MEDIA MAKES ME  
FEEL EVEN WORSE.”**

Mind Service User



**“GOING TO BED OR THINKING ABOUT WHAT OTHERS ARE DOING TENDS TO EMPHASISE THE LONELINESS.”**

Mind service user

# FURTHER BARRIERS

- Transport – A significant number of the people we work with at Solent Mind struggle to access transport due to anxiety, sensory issues and cost. This leads to people becoming very isolated within their own communities and increases loneliness, which then further impacts mental health.
- A further issue is that people who are isolated often do not access or even know about support opportunities.
- We need to consider how we promote and deliver services and opportunities in a range of ways so that they are accessible to a wide range of people;
  - For examples posters in community settings will not reach people who are not going out.
  - Referral from statutory services will not reach those people who struggle to engage with services or attend appointments
  - Location is important - many people who have become isolated will find accessing services in traditional mental health settings daunting and need something much more localised.

# USING PEER SUPPORT TO TACKLE LONELINESS

- At Solent Mind, we believe that peer support is key to combating isolation, as it offers a very grass-roots approach to helping people reach out. We try to ensure that there is no 'wrong way' to access support so that it is accessible to all.
- We promote peer support not as a 'service', but as a relationship between people with a shared experience, based on understanding and empathy.
- We operate a number of peer-led initiatives to help combat loneliness and increase people's access to social opportunities to encourage them build relationships and connections.
- We develop peer support, such as our Side by Side programme, with a strong community development basis – holding groups in community venues, offering a range of access routes and promoting the opportunities in a wide range of ways. People with lived experience are involved in the planning and development of our work at all levels.

# ACCESSIBLE OPPORTUNITIES

- **Group Peer Support** – A wide mixture of group activities, led by volunteers with lived experience, held in community venues such as cafes, community centres and shops across Southampton and the New Forest.
- **One to One Peer Support** – Regular peer support from one of our volunteers based on the needs and interests of the participant. Some examples have included supporting people to use public transport, go to shopping centres or just a chance to talk. This is a flexible, usually short term, approach to support people in building confidence which is usually used with people who have become very isolated and would be unlikely to access a group.
- **Social Opportunities** – Informal social meet ups in venues across the area, such as supper clubs, walks and football.
- **Online Support** – We promote Elefriends, Mind's online peer support community, which is accessible 24/7.

# SUPPORTING OTHER ORGANISATIONS

- We work to support and train other organisations to develop peer-led, 'grass roots' support to ensure that as a wide a range of people as possible have access to social opportunities.
- We offer training and information to raise people's understanding of mental health issues, as we believe mental health is everyone's business, and by tackling the stigma within communities we reduce loneliness and isolation.

# FURTHER INFORMATION

- **SOLENT MIND** – [www.solentmind.org.uk](http://www.solentmind.org.uk)
- **NATIONAL MIND** – [www.mind.org.uk](http://www.mind.org.uk)
- **YOUNG MINDS** – [www.youngminds.org.uk](http://www.youngminds.org.uk)
- **STUDENT MINDS** – [www.studentminds.org.uk](http://www.studentminds.org.uk)

