

Loneliness and isolation – understanding the difference and why it matters

Introduction

Loneliness is not the same as social isolation. People can be isolated (alone) yet not feel lonely. People can be surrounded by other people, yet still feel lonely. The distinction between these two concepts is often overlooked by policy makers and researchers, which makes it difficult to understand what can help people reduce their feeling of loneliness.

How do loneliness and social isolation differ?

Loneliness is a subjective feeling about the gap between a person's desired levels of social contact and their actual level of social contact. It refers to the perceived quality of the person's relationships. Loneliness is never desired and lessening these feelings can take a long time.

Social isolation is an objective measure of the number of contacts that people have. It is about the quantity and not quality of relationships. People may choose to have a small number of contacts. When they feel socially isolated, this can be overcome relatively quickly by increasing the number of people they are in contact with.

Are loneliness and social isolation linked?

Loneliness and social isolation are different but related concepts. Social isolation can lead to loneliness and loneliness can lead to social isolation. Both may also occur at the same time.

People can experience different levels of social isolation and loneliness over their lifetime, moving in and out of these states as their personal circumstances change. Loneliness and social isolation also share many factors that are associated with increasing the likelihood of people experiencing each, such as deteriorating health, and sensory and mobility impairments.

Why is it important to distinguish between loneliness and social isolation?

Loneliness has been an emerging social issue for many years, with organisations including Age UK and the Campaign to End Loneliness raising its profile. Most recently, the Jo Cox Commission started a national conversation on loneliness and successfully encouraged the government to accept many of its recommendations with the appointment of a Minister for Loneliness to take forward the work.

With this new impetus, it is important for policy makers, practitioners and researchers to understand the distinction between loneliness and social isolation in order to ensure that solutions are not focussed simply on increasing opportunities for people to meet or speak, but on helping build, maintain and re-establish meaningful relationships.

That is, bringing people together to increase the number of social contacts is not an end in itself – to combat loneliness, the quality of relationships needs to be addressed.

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Key references:

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