



Mental Health Awareness Week

9 - 15 May 2022

#IveBeenThere



It's Mental Health Awareness Week. This year's theme is loneliness, and how it impacts our mental health.

We've put together this special edition of our newsletter to highlight some of the causes of loneliness and share practical tips to help you manage if you feel lonely, and places you can go for support.

What is loneliness?

We all feel lonely from time to time, for many different reasons, and everyone's experience of loneliness will be different.

Being lonely is not always the same as being alone. You may choose to be alone and live happily without much contact with other people, while others may find this a lonely experience. Or you may have lots of social contact, or be in a relationship or part of a family, and still feel lonely – especially if you don't feel understood or cared for by the people around you.

Loneliness has many different causes, which vary from person to person. We don't always understand what it is that makes us feel lonely, but for some people, certain life events, such as moving to a new area, going through a relationship break-up; retiring or changing jobs or experiencing a bereavement can cause them to feel particularly lonely. Other people find they feel lonely at certain times of the year, such as around Christmas.

Research suggests that some people's circumstances mean they are more vulnerable to loneliness, for example, if they are excluded from activities due to a disability or money issues, or they are a single parent or care for someone else, they may find it hard to maintain a social life.

Some people experience deep and constant feelings of loneliness that come from within and do not disappear, regardless of their situation.

How can loneliness effect your mental health?

Loneliness and mental health problems are closely linked.

Feeling lonely can have a negative impact on your mental health, especially if those feelings have lasted a long time. Research suggests that long-term loneliness can increase your risk of having depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, sleep problems and increased stress.

Conversely, having a mental health problem can also increase your chance of feeling lonely, especially if you find it difficult to engage in everyday activities involving other people. Misconceptions about certain mental health problems mean you may also find it difficult to speak to other people about your problems.



How can you manage loneliness?

If loneliness is affecting your life, there are things you can try that may help. However, please remember that different things work for different people at different times. Don't try to do everything at once, just set small targets that you can easily achieve. And don't put too much pressure on yourself - if something isn't working or just doesn't feel possible right now, you can try something else, or come back to it another time.

Get out and about and make a connection

Don't wait for people to come and see you – get out and just be around people.

It can help you feel less lonely if you plan the week ahead and put things in your diary to look forward to each day, such as a walk in the park or going to a local coffee shop, library, sports centre, cinema or museum.

It's often the small things that make our day that little bit better. A smile, a 'hello' or even a brief chat while waiting in a queue can help us feel more connected to other people and remind us we all share the same world. Although it can take some nerve, and it's hard to step outside of your comfort zone, starting a conversation about the weather could be the perfect ice-breaker!

If not having transport is holding you back, and catching public transport is a challenge for you, Devon has a number of [community transport schemes](#) and providers that can help you, whether that's with lifts to essential appointments, or to activities nearby where you can meet others.

Join a club, take up a new hobby or volunteer

Making friends can be a challenge if you feel lonely as it can affect your confidence. Taking up a new hobby or learning something new are great ways to connect with people and improve your self-esteem. Join a group or class based on something you think you might enjoy and then you may find you have lots in common with the other people there. If the idea of chatting to strangers makes you nervous, choose a club where you might be doing something side by side, like craft or a choir, then there's less pressure to talk if you don't want to.

There are all kinds of [activities you can take part in locally](#) to make new friends and [adult learning facilities](#) are available for parents, adults and senior citizens as well as charities providing activities for those with disabilities.

Try the links below to discover just some of the huge range of community and social groups in Devon:

- [Social clubs](#)
- [Befriending](#)
- [Friendship groups](#)
- [Community groups](#)
- [Lunch clubs](#)
- [Parent and toddler groups](#)
- [Men in sheds](#) - support for older men who want to share and learn new skills
- There are also local branches of organisations such as [University of the Third Age \(U3A\)](#), [Women's Institute](#) and [Rotary](#).

Volunteering is also good way of meeting people, and helping others can also really help improve your mental health. [Our Pinpoint website](#) has lots of information about opportunities for you to make a difference to people's lives or improve your local community.



Try to open up and talk about how you are feeling

You might know plenty of people, but you may not actually feel close to them. Talking to them about your feelings could help.

If you don't feel comfortable opening up to the people you know, you could try speaking to a health professional or counsellor or [using a peer support](#) service. You can also contact [Samaritans](#), by [calling 116 123](#) or emailing jo@samaritans.org if you need someone to talk to.

[Age UK](#) and [The Silver Line](#) offer free weekly friendship calls. It can be a great way to speak to someone new.

Those with a disability, long term health condition or Deaf people who use BSL can contact '[Time to Talk](#)' - a free, confidential listening support and advice helpline run by Living Options Devon. Freephone [0300 303 3691](tel:03003033691); text 07856 426 940; email time2talk@livingoptions.org or message on [Facebook](#).

Look after yourself

Feeling lonely can have a big impact on your general health and wellbeing, which might make it even harder to make positive steps to feeling better.

Having a well-balanced diet can make a difference to your mood and energy levels. Exercise can also really help your self-esteem, especially when done outside, as spending time in green spaces boosts your mental wellbeing. [Why not join a local sports club](#) to take regular exercise and help you to meet new people? Or take part in Naturally Healthy May, which is about us all getting outside and connecting with nature to feel happier and healthier. [Visit Active Devon's website for more information.](#)



How can you help someone who is feeling lonely?

It can be difficult for people to admit that they are feeling lonely and even harder for them to ask for help, so it's important to look out for and recognise the signs, for example:

- Has there been a change in their routine? For example, are they getting up a lot later or struggling to sleep?
- Do they avoid social situations or decline offers to get together or talk?
- Are they more unproductive than usual or have less motivation?
- Do they put themselves down or get stuck on the negatives?
- Have they neglected their health or personal hygiene?
- Has there been a change in their eating habits?

You can help someone who is lonely by just being there and offering your time to talk. They will know that there is someone there to talk to when they are ready and in the meantime you can check in on them with a regular text or call.

Encourage them to make connections with other friends or family, or suggest taking up a new hobby or learning something new together.

Being active together is also a great way to start lifting their mood.