

Loneliness: A guide for teachers and education staff

In collaboration with:



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Introduction

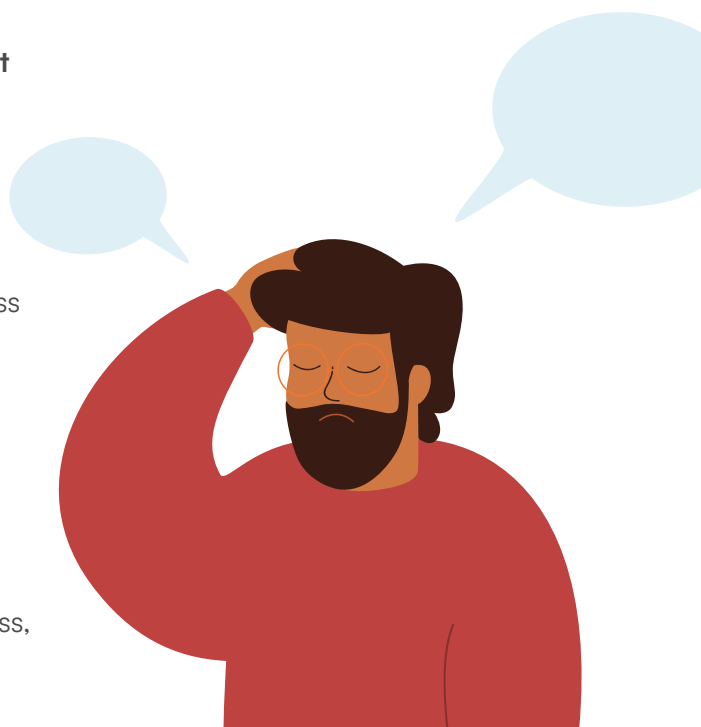
Loneliness is something we can all experience, at any point of our lives. We can feel lonely, whether we are alone or surrounded by people. It's also worth remembering that spending time alone doesn't mean we are lonely.

Time alone can be essential for our wellbeing

Research has shown chronic or long-term feelings of loneliness can lead to both physical and mental health problems.

It is crucial that those working in education recognise the signs of loneliness in themselves and others, so they build connections or access support if they need to.

In this guide for teachers and education staff we unpack the concept of loneliness; what it is, the different types of loneliness, and explore some ways to support ourselves and peers.



What is loneliness?

Loneliness is a complex human emotion that everyone feels at some point in their life. However, it is experienced uniquely by each individual.

Unlike social isolation — which is the physical separation from other humans — loneliness can be experienced even when we are with other people. Loneliness is ultimately a state of mind, and feelings of loneliness can take a huge toll on our mental and physical health.

In recent years, loneliness has been recognised as a key priority in public health and education. In 2018, the UK Government published its first national strategy on loneliness and appointed the first Minister of Loneliness. In 2018, schools across the UK included loneliness on the syllabus, teaching students how to protect themselves from and reduce these feelings if they emerged.

The pandemic highlighted the inequality of risk across the population, with certain population groups being more at risk of experiencing loneliness. During the pandemic, many of us experienced feelings of loneliness, especially during lockdown periods. Some of us may still be experiencing chronic loneliness, and finding it difficult to re-establish our support networks and working patterns. As education staff, you continually provided support to students, colleagues and parents/ caregivers during the pandemic. It is important to pause and reflect on your experiences of the pandemic, and how you are feeling.



Types of Loneliness

Loneliness is not one-size-fits-all. We will all experience loneliness differently, influenced by our own circumstances.

Loneliness is something we can experience in a number of different ways, such as:

Transient Loneliness:

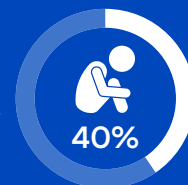
Transient loneliness describes short-term periods of feeling lonely that usually occur when we may experience a temporary change in our circumstances, environment or relationships. Sometimes, even when this change may be positive, such as accepting a job promotion, we may still experience feelings of loneliness as we adjust to the change. Although transient loneliness generally eases with time and adjustment, when feelings of loneliness remain, we can begin to experience long-term loneliness, which is characterised by feeling disconnected to ourselves and others, and feeling isolated. See the section for chronic loneliness for more details.

Situational Loneliness:

Situational loneliness is based on our circumstances changing or no longer meeting our needs. Perhaps you have moved to a new town or started working at a new school, and you are finding it difficult to adjust and forge new friendships. Or maybe you have lived through a global pandemic and, like many of us, lost your social bearings!



A common stereotype is that loneliness is mainly experienced by older, isolated people.



Research shows **40% of 16 to 24-year-olds often or very often feel lonely**, compared with 27% of over 75s. This was the same for young people across cultures, countries, and genders. Therefore, it is important to develop support systems for all staff, especially for ECTs, who are starting out in their careers.

If you are experiencing situational loneliness, be kind to yourself. It can take time to adjust to new circumstances — we have all been the new member of staff!

Chronic Loneliness:

Although often triggered by transient or situational bouts of loneliness, chronic loneliness defines experiences of loneliness that persist over a long period of time, and become a defining state of being.

Chronic loneliness can be exacerbated by financial distress, medical issues, mental health problems, and experiences of abuse. It is important to reach out for support if you begin to feel lonely. Don't dismiss it, prioritise it. If someone you know is struggling with feelings of loneliness, encourage them to do the same.

Loneliness can also be expressed as three main types: social, emotional and existential. When we experience loneliness, we can often show signs of each type.

Social Loneliness:

Social loneliness is related to a lack of social connection. This might be exacerbated by feelings of social anxiety, shyness or low self-esteem.

Even though teachers and education staff are usually part of a team (i.e. a department, key stage or year group) it's not to say everyone automatically feels connected. It can be difficult to see other teachers forming closer relationships, even friendships, when you don't feel like this mirrors your own experience.

Psychologist Dr Spelman suggests that social loneliness — similarly to existential loneliness listed below — needs to be dealt with from the root. She writes:

“Different approaches can help. For example, if the root issue is one of low self-esteem, tackling this first should make a positive difference. Trying a structured approach to socialising, such as joining an online or virtual group that gets together to discuss or engage in a particular hobby, can be a good way to start to end a vicious circle.”

Emotional Loneliness:

Emotional loneliness refers to the absence or loss of a significant other, such as a partner or close friend, with whom you have a meaningful relationship. Dr Becky Spelman notes, this kind of loneliness “comes from within.” It doesn't matter where you are or what you're doing; there is always this deep-seated disconnection and feeling lonely. Perhaps a traumatic childhood experience or an early separation or dramatic life change lies at the root. Whatever the cause, you're not at fault, but you might benefit from some extra help in starting to understand why you feel this way.

Dr Spelman recommends counselling, group therapy, or cognitive behaviour therapy to combat this type of loneliness, noting that it is essential to discover the route cause. She shares:

“The person in question can start to understand why they are lonely, how their background and experiences have contributed to behaviours that make things worse, and how they can develop a new set of behaviours.”

Anyone in your school could be experiencing loneliness at any time. Small acts of kindness and genuine curiosity could be the difference between a good day and a bad day.



**Open to everyone working in education.
Call Education Support's helpline for
24/7 emotional support: 08000 562 561**

Existential Loneliness:

Existential loneliness is a sense of feeling disconnected from others, and as though life is empty and lacks meaning. When we are experiencing existential loneliness we may find it difficult to connect with others and the world outside and feel isolated, empty, and a sense of abandonment. Sometimes we can feel this when we are in times of crisis or experiencing traumatic events. We can even feel existential loneliness during the process of self-development.

When we experience existential loneliness it usually indicates that something is not quite working in our lives. It's not providing you with the satisfaction or the completeness that you need. By building in points of reflection during our week, we can take time to explore these feelings. Mindfulness can be a useful practice in these moments, to help us connect with our feelings in the moment.



How can loneliness impact our physical and mental health?

Loneliness can affect both our mental and physical wellbeing. In fact, the risk to health that loneliness can bring is greater than those associated with many factors that currently receive substantial public health attention and resources such as obesity, lack of exercise and air pollution.

Some mental health symptoms that may occur from loneliness include:

- Anxiety
- Depression
- Social isolation
- Poor quality sleep
- Enhanced stress
- A perpetual unpleasant feeling

According to the Royal Society of Nursing, loneliness can also have these serious physical health implications:

- High blood pressure
- High cholesterol
- Poor nutrition
- Increased stress hormones and inflammation in the body
- Digestive problems
- Heart disease
- Weight gain
- Deficits in self-care and motivation, exercise and personal hygiene

Teachers, Mental Health, and Loneliness

Caring for teachers' and school staff mental health is critical if we want our education system to thrive. Many teachers and school staff report symptoms of burnout, stress and exhaustion. Yet we expect them to manage classrooms efficiently and shape the minds of our next generations. The pandemic added to existing pressures, and teachers and students had to learn how to manage classrooms digitally without any training or any forewarning.

Professor of Education Patricia Jennings shared:

“The demands on teachers have gotten greater... and [they have] fewer resources and fewer choices—when you combine those two, you're basically putting teachers in a vice

Moreover, loneliness has a particular impact on those from ethnic minority backgrounds. According, to Education Week:

“Teachers of colour are in a particularly tough spot, as they experience both the isolation of working alongside predominately white colleagues and the pressure of often feeling obligated to lead conversations at their schools about racism and inequities, on top of all their other responsibilities.”

Helping each other and shaking stigma

Teachers across the UK have been reflecting on the concept of loneliness and how they could be supported with feelings of loneliness in their line of work and by their colleagues. In a recent survey, carried out by The Mental Health Foundation, 30 teachers were asked questions about loneliness.

Here is what we heard:

1 What advice would you give to someone dealing with loneliness?

- “Take time for yourself, exercise, meet friends and family. Get outside.”
- “Make connections and join a club or group.”
- “Outside activities that they enjoy, practice mindfulness and seek help.”
- “Spend time with positive people.”

While not everyone has someone to call, the digital age has opened up a plethora of possibilities when it comes to finding *communities on social media channels like Twitter and Facebook*. This might be a positive step for teachers who are struggling with perpetual feelings of loneliness. Outside activity also gleaned serious traction in the responses, with many suggesting how a simple walk or a conversation with a peer could make a huge difference.



**Education Support helpline:
teachers and education shall
can access immediate emotional
support by calling 08000 562 561**



2 What could a colleague do if you're feeling lonely? How could they support your wellbeing?

- “Listen to my worries and be non-judgemental.”
- “Not try to fix it or point out where I am going wrong. Invite me over for a cup of tea or suggest a walk.”
- “Take me for a walk. Message me. Remind me that I’m not alone but that I do need to reach out sometimes to those around me.”
- “Help me connect with the world again by reminding me that I am worthwhile, and my ideas are valued.”

Human connection is a common theme in these responses, as is the idea of lending a listening ear without judgment.

How do we shake the stigma attached to loneliness, and how can we share our experiences of loneliness without feeling ashamed or judged? It’s important for all types of mental health discussions to be normal in the workplace. Can they become as commonplace as a conversation about the weather? The power of telling our own stories, and being honest, can help to challenge shame around loneliness.

Here are our tips for tackling stigma:



Stay informed and bust myths:

It can help to be fully informed on the facts. The better informed we are, the better equipped we are to identify and respond to stigma. Sharing this resource or offering training which builds awareness around loneliness and tackles misconceptions is a great way to overcome stigma



Check-in and measure progress:

Regularly checking in on colleague's wellbeing and measuring progress if you are a school leader can contribute to building a psychologically safe environment where staff feel safe to talk about loneliness.



Don't be afraid to share your story:

The power of people telling their own stories, and being honest, cannot be underestimated in challenging stigma around loneliness. Could you share your own story during a team meeting, in a blog or on the staff intranet? If you think you may struggle to do this, you could ask to do an anonymous submission.

Strategies for reducing feelings of loneliness

So, what can you do, as teachers and education staff, to reduce feelings of loneliness? The world's largest survey on loneliness — the *BBC Loneliness Experiment* — asked 55,000 people about ways of addressing loneliness. Here are some of the top tips:

Take time to think about why you feel lonely:

The first step is to consider what type of loneliness you are feeling. Are you feeling lonely because of the situation you are in, or being disconnected from important others, or is it something you have

been feeling for a long time? Identifying why you're lonely can help you decide how best to tackle it.

Tell someone: One of the most important, yet difficult steps you can take when feeling lonely, is to talk to someone about how you feel. Try a trusted family member, friend or colleague. If you are new to a role, it can be daunting to ask questions and seek support, but reach out! Speak to more experienced members of your team for advice.

Remember, teachers and education staff can call us to talk through all kinds of concerns, including loneliness. **When you call you'll talk to a qualified counsellor who will offer you immediate, confidential emotional support: 08000 562 561.**

Reconnect with yourself: By taking the time to reconnect with yourself, whether this is by trying a new hobby or activity, writing in a journal, or following a mindfulness video, you can begin to understand and process what you are feeling.

Engage in social activities at work: When you feel lonely, sometimes you may want to retreat and avoid other people. However, connection can help reduce feelings of loneliness, especially if it is situational. Joining social activities at work might help or you could get involved in further roles and training activities such as CPD, break duties or after-school clubs.

But make sure you don't put pressure yourself. Start small, do what works and be kind to yourself. Lunch with a departmental colleague may be a good place to start.

Join a social club outside of school: You might try online platforms like MeetUp where people build communities and join various group events according to your interests. Online communities offer some great support to those wanting to forge connections. Since there is less pressure than real-world meetups, it can be a great first step. Volunteering at community projects is another fantastic way to broaden horizons and feel connected to the world around you.



Take a risk: It can be hard to invite people to do things without fearing rejection. Can you give it a try? The pay off might be huge! What about arranging an after school BBQ, quiz or a picnic?

Other strategies for teachers:

Connect with other adults during breaks:

Even if you are in a classroom filled with students, being the only adult can be a lonely experience. Especially when you have a long, busy period not leaving your classroom all day. The same goes with the extra responsibilities aside from classroom teaching; you can spend hours on your own just marking, lesson planning, reading, researching, behind a laptop and not communicating with anyone.

Make sure you do things during gaps in lessons to break up the tasks so the loneliness doesn't creep in and build up. Connect to someone in those breaks. Even if it's a quick text to a friend, or a chat with someone in the staffroom, or going for a walk around the playground and chatting to someone on break duty.



Try mentoring: Connecting with different levels of the school hierarchy can be challenging. Perhaps you are the only teacher trainee, and the rest of the team are lead practitioners? Try to make relationships with others in a similar role, meet regularly, and share your experiences.

If there's no other trainees, suggest a mentor with a senior staff member. This can be a great way to make relationships whilst getting advice from someone with different responsibilities. Having a mentor you know you can turn to, at school, for immediate support can make all the difference.

Try new ways of working together to inspire and connect with each other. Team teaching, observations, or marking together is another way to support each other. It doesn't even need to involve lots of talking, but knowing and seeing a teacher next to you doing the same thing, and being in your presence, can be comforting enough. Or doing something that makes you feel connected like observing an activity (assembly, other lessons) can make a big difference.

Join a peer support group: We know from our *Teacher Wellbeing Index* that it can be lonely at the top - when school leaders need support, they're much more likely to seek it from people outside the school setting. It can be challenging to be vulnerable in front of your team.

If this rings true for you as a school leader, our *online facilitated peer support* might be a good option. It can give you the opportunity to discuss your challenges with others in leadership roles, who are likely to be experiencing similar things.

Remember, not every solution will work for everyone. If one thing doesn't work, try something different. It may help to keep a journal to write down how you feel after trying each option above. If you are still struggling with feelings of loneliness, don't forget you can always reach out to us for additional support.



Mental Health
Foundation



Mental Health Foundation

This resource has been created in collaboration with the Mental Health Foundation to support their '*Loneliness — finding our connections to feel less lonely school pack*'. The school pack provides the materials and resources needed to support pupils and teachers to understand what loneliness is, how it can make us feel, and where to find support. The pack is designed to be used in secondary schools, but it has lots of useful information for primary schools too. It's available in English and Welsh.

To download a full, free copy of the pack please follow the link above to their website.



Sources:

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