

Uniting Communities Overcoming Loneliness

Report Number 1

1. The state of loneliness: Key points

- COVID-19: 8% increase in the number of South Australians who are now lonely at least some of the time as a result of COVID-19 isolation
- Almost 2 out of every 3 people (61%) felt lonely often (14%) or some of the time (47%) in South Australia during COVID-19 isolation. (Survey data captured on 27 April 2020, a time that might be described as 'peak COVID-19' in SA)
- Loneliness is looming as a public health issue with similar levels of impact as obesity and smoking
- Loneliness should not be our next 'pandemic'
- More than 3 out of 4 young people (78%) aged 18-24 years felt lonely sometimes (53%) or often (25%), the highest levels of loneliness for any age group
- Reestablishing connections with each other will be crucial in post COVID-19 recovery, consider the part you can play in reducing loneliness

2. COVID-19 and loneliness impacts in South Australia

In late April 2020, Uniting Communities engaged local market research firm, Square Holes, to conduct a general population survey of adults across South Australia. This was the second such survey (first being in mid-March 2020) with the following baseline questions asked:

1. How often do you feel lonely?
2. How often do you feel that you lack companionship?
3. How often do you feel left out?
4. How often do you feel isolated from others?

Responses to each question were 'hardly ever or never', 'some of the time' or 'often'. These baseline questions are drawn from respected international research, providing a benchmark from which to compare South Australian responses.

Findings from this COVID-19 impacted survey included:

- 8% increase in the number of people who previously did not feel lonely, now feeling lonely some of the time – minimal change in the number who felt lonely often
- All measures of loneliness, and particularly isolation, increased from March to April 2020, explained by COVID-19 isolation responses
- 82% of 18-24 year old people felt lonely at least some of the time (13% often lonely and a further 69% feeling lonely some of the time) and remain the age group experiencing the highest levels of loneliness
- 24% (1 in 4) people felt isolated from others 'often,' 5% more than in March, with 65% of South Australians feeling isolated from others often or some of the time (compared to 52% in March)
- Feelings of being isolated from others were strongest for 25-34 year old people, 37% felt this often and 47% felt isolated some of the time. Only 4% of males in this age group rarely felt isolated in April.

Aspects of Loneliness (often and sometimes) SA and Australia, 2020 & 2018



Figure 1, Source: Uniting Communities Overcoming Loneliness surveys, 2020 and Australian Loneliness Report, 2018.

This chart shows that all measures of loneliness and isolation increased in South Australia from March to April 2020. The third column for each measure shows Australia wide results from 2018 and are similar to South Australia’s results for March 2020, before COVID-19 impacts.

3. What is loneliness and why does Uniting Communities want to overcome it?

Loneliness, as a public health issue has similar health impacts to obesity or smoking 15 cigarettes a day, meaning that loneliness can decrease a person’s life expectancy by up to 15 years.¹

Loneliness is a complex experience to define because it means different things for different people. Uniting Communities understands loneliness to leave people feeling unwanted, empty and that there is no place for them. Lonely people are desperate for human connection and a sense of belonging. Loneliness is therefore quite different from being alone – and comfortable ‘in your own skin’.

Loneliness is generally defined for survey and research purposes as “feeling lonely more than once a week”.

People struggling with loneliness have significantly worse health status, both physically and mentally, than those with strong connections. Lonely Australians are 15.2% more likely to be depressed, while 13.1% are more likely to be anxious about social interactions than those who don’t feel lonely.²

“Biologists have shown that feelings of loneliness trigger the release of stress hormones that in turn are associated with higher blood pressure, decreased resistance to infection and increased risk of cardiovascular disease and cancer. There’s even evidence that this perceived sense of social isolation accelerates cognitive and functional decline and can serve as a preclinical sign for Alzheimer’s disease.”³

In short, loneliness destroys lives for individuals, their families and communities; it frays the very fabric of our society. There is growing evidence that some aspects of modern life are contributing to increased loneliness. Uniting Communities is committed to overcoming loneliness as a means of enabling people to be more resilient and participate in the development of stronger, healthier communities that thrive.

1 Julianne Holt-Lunstad, Professor of Psychology and Neuroscience at Brigham Young University in Utah, USA, presented at 125th Annual Convention of the American Psychological Association in August 2017.

2 The Australian Loneliness Report, <https://psychweek.org.au/wp/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/Psychology-Week-2018-Australian-Loneliness-Report.pdf>

3 <https://blogs.scientificamerican.com/observations/loneliness-is-harmful-to-our-nations-health/>

4. Who is in lonely in South Australia?

To develop an understanding of levels of loneliness and isolation in South Australia, and as a basis for measuring progress, Uniting Communities commissioned surveys to provide a baseline for assessing change over time. This process commenced before the arrival of COVID-19 and the subsequent isolation and social distancing responses.

In mid-March 2020, the first survey was conducted with results including:

- 54% of people felt lonely often (14%) or some of the time (40%)
- 52% of people felt isolated often or sometimes, 55% of people felt left out and 51% lacked companionship
- 78% of people aged 18-24 years felt lonely sometimes (53%) or often (25%), the highest levels of loneliness for any age group
- In general, feelings of loneliness and isolation diminish with age, however increases for people in their 50's (early to mid) and from mid-70's
- Males are a little more likely to feel lonely or left out than females, except within the 18-24 year cohort
- Feelings of loneliness some of the time or often were higher outside of metropolitan Adelaide – 51% compared to 62% in regional South Australia

**How are South Australians Feeling?
March 2020**

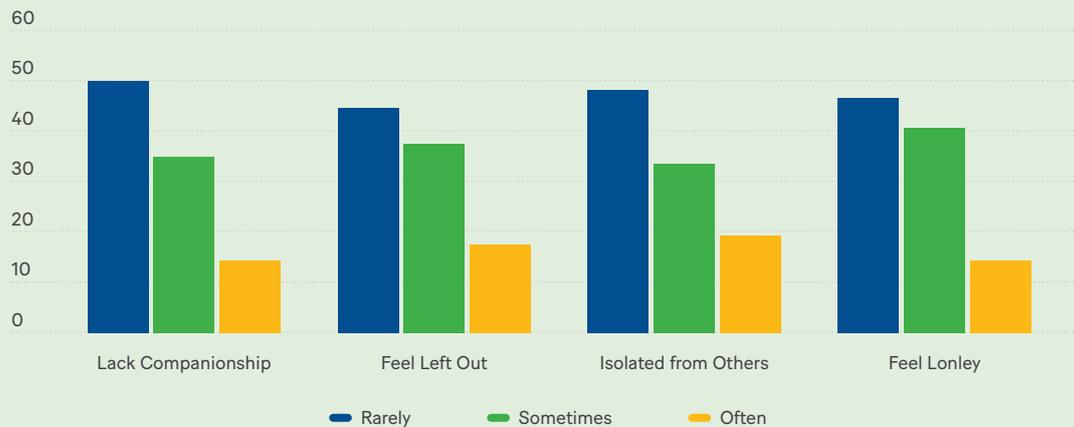


Figure 2, Source: Source: Uniting Communities Overcoming Loneliness surveys, 2020

These results are similar to those of the Australian Loneliness Report (Nov 2018)⁴ in that 50.5% of Australians feel lonely for at least one day a week, compared with 54% in South Australia who felt lonely often or some of the time in March 2020.

In response to being asked how often you feel that you lack companionship, 51% of South Australia responded often or some of the time, compared to 55% nationally in 2018.

⁴ Produced by The Australian Psychological Society and Swinburne University of Technology

5. How does SA compare with the rest of the world?

In 2018, The Economist and the Kaiser Family Foundation (KFF), an American non-profit group, surveyed people in three countries. They found that 9% of adults in Japan, 22% in America and 23% in Britain always or often feel lonely. This compares with 14% for South Australia, suggesting that by international comparisons, we are 'doing OK', but we face risks of moving in similar directions to countries that are more lonely now.

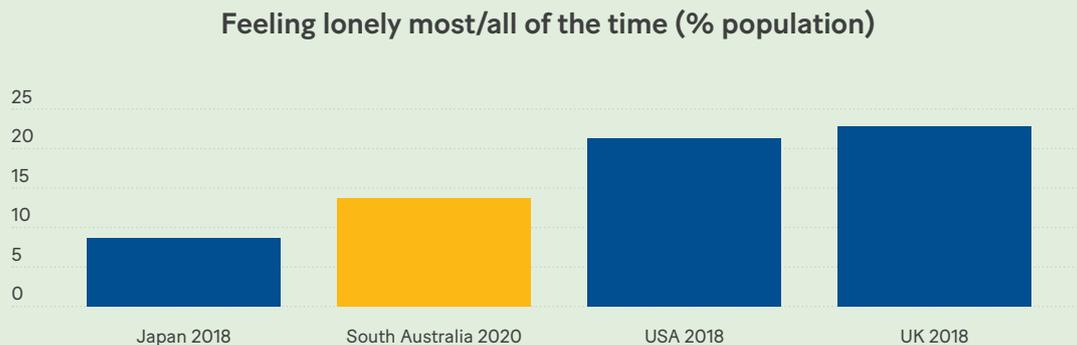


Figure 3, Source: The Economist with Kaiser Family Foundation 2018 and Uniting Communities Overcoming Loneliness Survey 2020

6. What is Uniting Communities doing to help overcome loneliness?

Uniting Communities believes that we can overcome loneliness and is encouraging community debate and action to address the emerging challenges. As a modern society, where connection through technology has never been a more dominant and accepted concept in our daily lives, we are increasingly isolated from each other and from meaningful engagement.

As part of responding to loneliness, Uniting Communities is acutely aware of its own responsibility to address loneliness across our communities and to seek new approaches to this societal challenge. We understand the importance of positive relationships in combatting loneliness, and encourage the continued focus on building and maintaining connection. Some recent actions by Uniting Communities to overcome loneliness by encouraging connections include:

- SA COVID-19 Mental Health Support Line (1800 632 753) to provide phone and online chat counselling to people feeling anxious, lonely or uncertain due, at least in part, to COVID-19
- Lifeline Adelaide (13 11 14), an ongoing service to help people to make connections when all seems lost
- Residential Aged Care maintaining opportunities for family members and friends to safely visit residents through this challenging time of restrictions and increased isolation. While not universally accepted across the industry, we consider that supporting some person to person family and community connection was crucial during the pandemic period
- LGBTIQ - the queer community is strong as a community and has actively developed webinars, training and mutual support to maintain connection throughout the COVID-19 response period. The community continues to demonstrate how to look out for each other, supported by our Bfriend program
- Alcohol and Other Drugs New ROADS Mt Gambier - clients in residential programs continue to be supported through COVID-19 isolation, including through art therapy. This is a very effective approach and is being maintained remotely, with materials being delivered and advice and support given by video link
- Low income and newly arrived people - operating from the halls of the Clayton Wesley Uniting Church in Beulah Park, Hope's Cafe provides support to individuals and families who are refugees, asylum seekers, overseas students and others who are isolated. The services builds connection within cultural communities and across these communities to help people who are new to Australia make connections quickly

7. How can individuals and communities help to overcome loneliness?

Our state and national post COVID-19 'roadmap to recovery' must include reestablishing and rebuilding connections between people. Much of the current focus is on reopening and rebuilding the economy, this will not happen effectively without communities reconnecting with each other – the two must go together.

While many people will readily reconnect with friends, colleagues and communities as restrictions ease, there are three groups that Uniting Communities says will need particular focus to help with reconnection:

- Young people aged 18-24 years who were already dealing with the pressures of finding their place in communities; some will struggle to reconnect
- Older people, particularly those over 75 years of age; some will find making connections with community difficult due in part to lack of confidence in reengaging or reentering daily life outside of the home
- Unemployed and underemployed people in industries where restrictions continue. For these people, extended financial and associated relationship pressures, and no clear path out of isolation will be challenging

We can all play an active role in being more aware of the risks of isolation and helping each other to reconnect as COVID-19 isolation eases.

For people who are feeling lonely:

- Use the phone, video links and technology to maintain connections
- Get back to doing the things that you were doing before COVID-19 isolation. Reestablish routine and community connection
- Identify your interests and look for local people with similar interests; community centres, church, social clubs and your local Council can all be good places to start
- Volunteer with an organisation that interests you

For people who are feeling lonely:

- Be 'loneliness aware' and reach out to people who may be struggling to reconnect
- Recognise the stresses for young people seeking to find their own identity, encourage them to connect with friends and interests, including activities beyond the device screen

8. Next steps

- Let Uniting Communities know how you are reconnecting and what works for you in overcoming loneliness. We want to share ideas about effective ways of overcoming loneliness. Find us on Facebook at @UnitingCommunitiesOz
- Uniting Communities will be publishing updates about the extent of loneliness in South Australia and effective approaches to overcoming loneliness at least twice each year.
- Find out more on our website –www.unitingcommunities.org/loneliness