Don't leave loneliness alone.

UNITING COMMUNITIES

Loneliness in South Australia

Report Number 2

Call to ACTION
Has time slipped away?
Call someone today. - Don't leave loneliness alone

In association with the release of this summary report, Uniting Communities is encouraging South Australians to reach out to someone you haven't seen for 6 months – after 6 months of COVID-19. This can help to maintain and rebuild connections lost in isolation.

Explanation:

Loneliness can have major health and wellbeing impacts, indeed research suggests that loneliness is likely to have a greater, negative health impact on our society than obesity or smoking up to 15 cigarettes a day.
It is now 6 months since COVID-19 shut downs began in Australia that has, necessarily, increased insolation of people with an associated increase in loneliness for some people.

So 6 months on from the arrival of COVID-19, we are urging South Australians to reach out to someone they haven't seen in the last 6 months

Connection builds resilience for individual, families and communities

1. SA Situation.

The Data

From March to July 2020, Uniting Communities engaged Square Holes to explore and help understand attitudes and behaviours towards overcoming loneliness.

Multiple tracking surveys of South Australians conducted during this time (representative of age and gender across metro and regional SA) reported that levels of **feeling isolated** heightened through April (due to the COVID-19 pandemic) and decreased in June back to the reported lower levels in March. Yet the presence of **loneliness** remained relatively consistent over time and through qualitative research, found that loneliness can be more common to experience on an ongoing basis regardless of a person's network of friends and family.

Loneliness can be suffered as more of a perceptual or psychological experience rather than a physical reality. Often those experiencing loneliness are surrounded by friends and loved ones, yet still feel lonely, whether through a lack of connection, shortage of confidence to share emotions, poor support or an indescribable sense.

Figure 1 shows responses to the 4 questions asked in each of the surveys, showing the percentage of respondents who answered either "often" or "Sometimes" to questions about the extent to which the 4 characteristics were experienced.

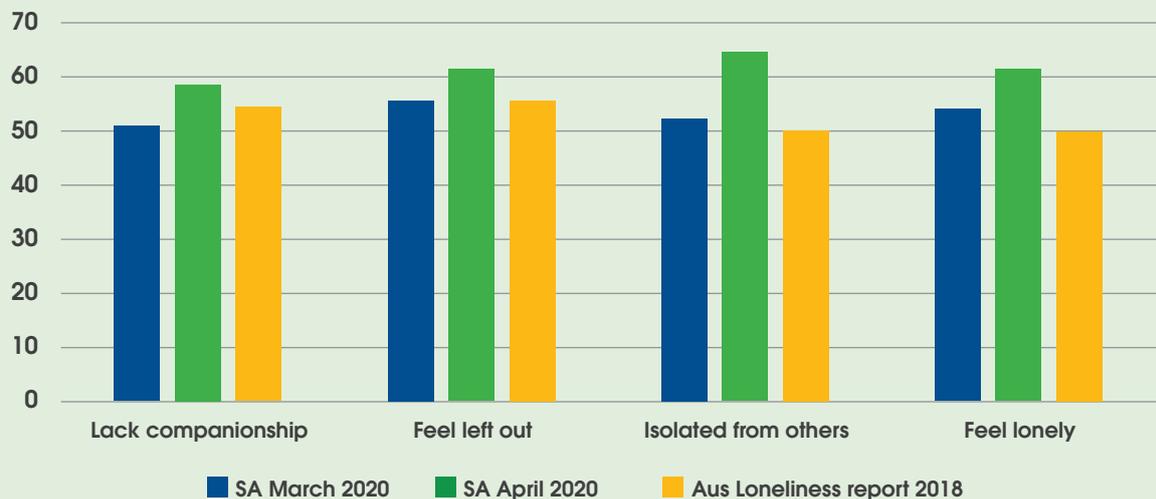## Aspects of Loneliness (often and sometimes) SA and Australia, 2020 and 2018

Figure 1. Source, Uniting Communities from surveys conducted by Square Holes

There is a level of interconnectedness with these four characteristics due to a perceived source of weaker connections (in community or society), yet not all dependent on each other. This presents opportunity to build strategies to overcome each element as part of the bigger picture.

"*You **could be totally isolated, but you could not feel alone**, but on the other side of the spectrum, you can be surrounded by a good support network and you can still feel alone*".

(18-35 year old focus group participant.)

Triggers often stem from a disconnection from community, sudden life changes and a level of uncertainty and were found as more prominent in certain demographics.

Who is most impacted?

Survey results indicated that regional South Australians consistently reported higher levels of all loneliness measures than people from metropolitan Adeaide, peaking in April and decreasing in June. Focus groups with people from regional SA discussed the entrenched perceived culture of community supporting each other due to a history of hard times. Yet, some noted that such small communities can hide an underlying fear of admitting to loneliness and other mental health challenges.

Some noted regional communities as potentially prone to gossiping or simply not sympathetic to people uncomfortable with just reaching out to neighbours and other community for support. Online mental health was noted as not enough, especially for those less technology literate or preferring face-to-face. Support that allows for easy local access to mental health professionals when need, without long waits due to a lack of sufficient staffing, was recommended as critical to overcome the downward spiral that can be associated with isolating oneself from necessary community interaction.

Figure 2 shows results, by age group, for people feeling lonely "often" for each of the three surveys.

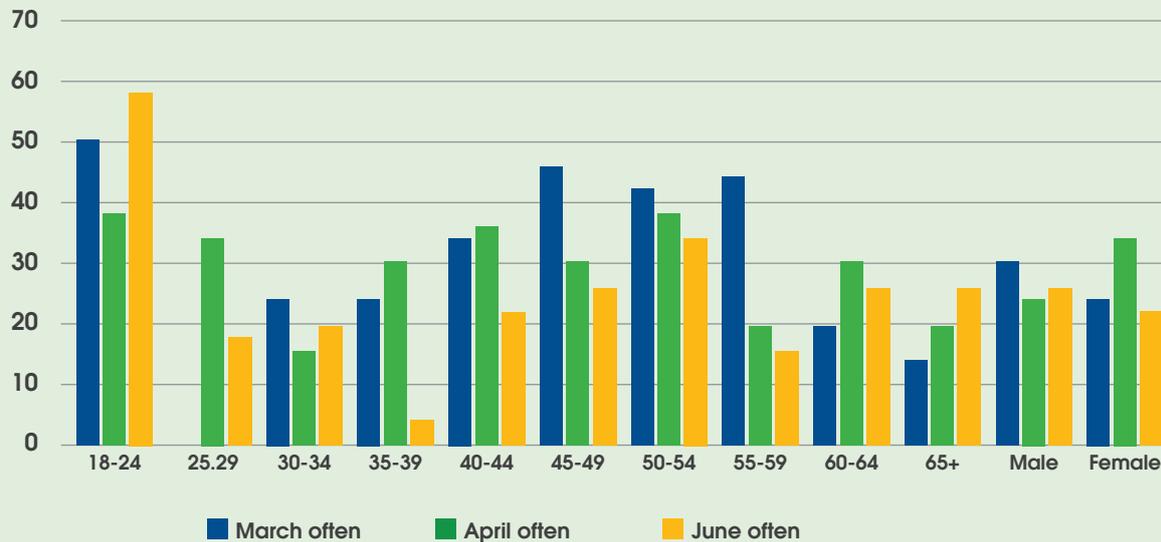## Feelings of Loneliness "Often" by age, March, April, June 2020, SA

Figure 2. Source, Uniting Communities from surveys conducted by Square Holes

The research has indicated 18 to 24 year old's as experiencing loneliness more commonly than older age groups. Qualitative insights indicated that this younger age group are often struggling with the uncertainty of life, who they are and where their life is heading, as well as which friends and family are able to offer support and connection. While in some extreme examples of loneliness stemmed back to mental health challenges they may have already being getting professional support for, others were suffering loneliness very much in silence and alone, even if in actuality they had a strong friend and family network. For other young people, loneliness was about not setting expectations too high on how they measure their life success, or resilience skills in managing the complexity of life. Professional and informal mentoring and support, and information was suggested as worthwhile in overcoming loneliness for younger people.

People in their 50s, particularly males, also stood out in survey results as more likely to experience feelings of lacking companionship, isolation and being left out more often than any other age group. Exploring possible foundations of this through qualitative research, uncovered that this is a time of much change including diminishing connection with children in teenage years and older, possible relationship breakdowns and other complex stage of life challenges. This means mental health can be impacted, resulting in self-isolation and then escalating loneliness as they ruminate on difficulties they are facing.

Why are people Lonely?

A change in life, location or relationship circumstances can break down connections that can then be difficult to re-establish (pick up where you left off when others have moved on) or create new connections. Having the confidence to adapt can be hard to build.

Adaption strategies include recognising the triggers and going through process whereby feelings of loneliness are analysed and reflected upon for actionable change and an alteration of behaviour to be implemented in order to best cope/ overcome issues presented by poor mental health.

Creating a culture that promotes inclusivity and welcomeness for all, whilst ensuring education of mental health issues and available resources to foster awareness and encourage those who are struggling to speak out and seek help.

Loneliness is an issue having a significant impact across South Australians. Many are dealing with it well, often chose to be alone, and actively seek opportunities to remain connected with friends, family and their community. For example, from the research, while older South Australians have the potential to be lonely, for many life has taught them the importance of remaining connected to the community, and sometimes it takes real effort beyond what may seem easier to just stay home. Activities such as volunteering and other ways to mix with different groups of the community were noted as valuable to minimise loneliness and associated negative emotions.

Different age groups and segments of the community are impacted differently by loneliness, and likely require unique support fitting their needs, lifestage and other factors. This research has illustrated that loneliness is by no means one size fits all, and it is complex and even contradictory – i.e. one can have many loved ones but feel lonely. Fundamentally, overcoming loneliness comes back to encouraging a connected community, beyond judgement of those who may be struggling more than others.

2. Findings about overcoming loneliness, from interviews with SA people

Uniting communities is interested in understanding the extent of loneliness in our communities, but more interested in how to overcome loneliness. In order to explore strategies that people use to overcome loneliness, or the potential of loneliness, people were interviewed from metropolitan and rural South Australia. Some of the responses about overcoming loneliness are given in this section:

Structure to Overcome Loneliness

"I think a lot of it's about planning. I'm a great advocate, again for structure. You've actually got a plan "I want to do this on that day." (regional, aged 51)

"just making sure to stay in contact with people, really, and making sure to continue organising, to do things with your friends and make sure that you're still spending time with them and that you're not isolating yourself." (Metro, aged 18)

Self Esteem and Confidence to Overcome Loneliness

"definitely self esteem and resilience. Because if you can be confident in yourself, you can be confident in your ability to fit in with others and being able to keep those connections open. And also need to build up the idea that your friends don't want to push you away, and that you can still trust them." (metro, aged 18)

Support Networks to Overcome Loneliness

"I got a lot of help and support from my friends and my family. And then this year going to university and that, has really been able to support feelings of loneliness and isolation being in a new environment with also new people that have very similar interest to myself. And then being able to just spend a lot of time there and working on stuff with a lot of other people has definitely helped. (Metro aged 18)

"This whole COVID thing would've been eye opening for a lot of people because a lot of people wouldn't have ever had to have done that. They'd just work or they've just always sort of... They've never had to spend time alone" (Metro aged 19)

Talking to Overcome Loneliness

"I did notice that when I was feeling the most lonely, if someone were to, for instance, to turn around and focus the attention on me and just talk to me, I wouldn't feel lonely at all anymore … Is having the connection with someone, to one-on-one connection with someone that really, really helps. Just knowing that they're thinking about me." (Metro aged 25)

Understanding Emotions to Overcome Loneliness

"It might be really hard for (individuals) to identify with feelings (are) coming from. Is it from a sense of loss? Is it from a broken relationship? So having those feelings where everybody else around us thinks that we look like we're doing okay because we are participating, we are functioning, but it's those inner feelings that we may not be sharing or to simply don't know how to even articulate to ourselves." (Uniting Communities program manager, regional)

Benefits of Connection

People interviewed identified 'connections' with other people as providing several benefits:

- Different points of view
- An opportunity for education, learning and personal growth
- Accessible support network
- Improved mental health and wellbeing

"I know times when I haven't felt as connected and how that's affected me.. (You just) get to a really busy point in your life and you're working or something. Then I just feel, it makes you feel not as happy if you aren't able to bring (things) up with your friend, or get together and have a chat and stuff like that…You need those connections… It's part of enjoying life, I guess"

(Metro 18 to 35)

"(Connection is) almost like a soundboard, where if you've got questions that you're trying to answer, you've got all these people that you can try and figure out the answer with you and that gives you a better understanding. If you've got something to share, that can also go so much further and so much faster if you've got all these people together versus just yourself"

(Metro 18 to 35)

Overcoming Loneliness

When asked about the actions or behaviours that help to overcome loneliness, manu of the responses referred to the following 2 factors:

- For many, a big step to overcoming feelings of angst and loneliness is to openly talk through their issues
- This involves having access to good quality relationships (i.e. friends or family) who are willing to listen and possess genuine care, or through the availability of appropriate mental health services and resources (e.g. counsellors, medical centres etc.)

"It's a social thing as well, like you've got a small tight circle, so you can just be with your circle and then that's all you need because you've all got each other. However you are feeling, you've got each other, it's kind of different, I think small circles are a really good thing" (Metro 18 to 35)

"Taking the first step and just talking to someone, because then once you talk to them, you feel better about talking to them again… (Now you're) in a position where you have a person that you know you can talk to,

because not everyone has that… Once you've talked about it once, then a week or two passes, whether you feel better or you feel worse you've (at least) said something once, so it's easier to bring up again, it's easier to talk about again"

(Metro 18 to 35)

When to seek help

Help seeking for loneliness was also discussed with the following key triggers being identified for when help should be sought out:

• The issue can't be resolved simply by the individual on their own
• Negative mental health and emotions are experienced over a prolonged period of time
• Feelings become too overwhelming and debilitating which ultimately negatively influence other aspects of life
• People need to be aware of the warning signs of loneliness so they can encourage those who are struggling to speak up and seek help if they do not possess the knowledge or capacity to pursue assistance on their own

"I've had people say to me you're just having a rough day, even though it's been months"

(Regional 50+)

"Will you have the motivation to seek help if you are that bad though? I would hope the community would band together and help people through it"

(Regional 50+)

Wisdom from Communities

The following were identified, by focus groups and interviews across South Australia as key considerations for overcoming loneliness.

1. Be proactive: Amongst all the mechanisms utilised to overcome feelings of loneliness, the enactment of proactive behaviour was perhaps one of the strongest in getting the better of negative emotions.

2. Create structure: Enables focus and purpose to occupy time.

3. Seek strategies to improve: self esteem and confidence. Those who are better connected with their feelings and better understand themselves are better at adapting to poor emotions and have more clearly outlined strategies in place.

4. Build support networks: Getting involved with community groups if family and friends are not available. Seek ideas to build connections.

5. Help others: Often loneliness is viewed as a weakness in regional communities. Work towards supporting others and developing genuine care and accountability for people.

3. What Uniting Communities is doing

• Residential Aged care

Throughout the COVID-19 period of restricted movement in South Australia, uniting communities actively sought ways to ensure that residents of aged care facilities were able to maintain connection with friends family and community this means that visitors were still encouraged very strong precautions in place to minimise the risk of disease transmission and to recognise the importance of maintaining connection with family and community for older people.

• U City has been awarded Australia's top design honour – a Good Design Award in the category of Social Impact.

This award is a recognition of how we've all brought U City to life, and testament to the many people who have made it the community it is – our residents, tenants, visitors and, of course, our Uniting Communities staff and volunteers, both those working here and visiting from other sites.

Winning a Good Design Award is no mean feat. Good Design Australia, the country's peak international design body, received a record 835 entries across its range of categories, from entrants all over the country. The panel of judges praised U City for its innovation in combining 'a number of progressive ideas to help break down barriers and offer better wellbeing' for residents, tenants and clients.

Our vision for U City was always to create a diverse, inclusive and thriving community in Adelaide's CBD. We should each feel enormously proud of our contributions to making this a reality, and of this award recognising our combined efforts.

• Bfriend

Bfriend is a free service that supports LGBTIQA+ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex, Queer, Asexual/Agender, etc.) people of all ages in metropolitan Adelaide. It is best known for its peer support work provided by Bfriend's Community Workers and volunteers who link LGBTIQA+ people with supports, networks and activities that are very effective in reducing isolation and loneliness.

• Psycho-social mental health

Uniting Communities provides psychosocial rehabilitation and support for people over 65 in partnership with the clinical Older Persons Mental Health Services across metropolitan Adelaide. The services provide regular events for small groups of clients to actively link them with the broader community and to build and maintain active friendships this program is very effective at reducing isolation and hence loneliness for a group of people who would otherwise be at high risk of isolation and heightened mental health concerns.

• Foster care

In providing foster care services, Uniting Communities staff are very active in maintaining connection with birth parents (as well as foster parents) to help them maintain connections with their personal networks and with the broader community. This group of people can also be at high risk of health and mental health deterioration this if they become isolated from the rest of society

• New ROADS, Mount Gambier

This drug and alcohol service actively supports Clients through residential care services that were closed during Covid isolation but people were still being visited and some group activities were maintained online. For example, art therapy is a very effective therapeutic response and this program was maintained remotely during Covid shutdown, with materials being delivered and advice or support given by video link. This creative response helped maintain connection with broader communities for people who could easily have reverted to destructive past behaviours without active connection being maintained.