

# Love Over Loneliness

FOR ALL AGES



**TAKE ACTION**

FOR MENTAL HEALTH



Loneliness can happen at any age, and most of us have felt it. No matter what age we are, feeling lonely can affect our mental and physical health. It can also increase the chances of suicidal thoughts.

Throughout our lives, we need love and connection. Even with family or friends, we can feel lonely if we are not experiencing emotional connection in a way that meets our needs. We need meaningful relationships (including non-romantic relationships and friendships), rewarding experiences, and/or a sense of belonging. Any of these can happen in-person or online.

Research has found that loneliness is often highest among children, teens, and young adults, lowest in middle age, and then rises again as people get older. We all have a role to play in preventing loneliness in our communities for people of every age.

Here are practical strategies for identifying people in your life who may be lonely and for fostering connection with them at each life stage.

## Early childhood (birth through age 5)\*



### Common causes:

Early childhood is so important to a child's social and emotional development, as 90% of a child's brain develops within the first five years of their life. This time is critical for them to develop and hardwire brain connections through everyday experiences, positive and rewarding interactions with family and caregivers, and learning how to manage emotions.

Traumatic experiences, such as witnessing violence, experiencing abuse or neglect, loss of a caregiver or parental separation, or surviving a natural disaster or accident

Other big changes, like moving homes or changing early care providers

Not receiving regular, positive interactions with safe, stable, and nurturing family and caregivers

### Signs

While infants and toddlers may not always be able to voice feelings of loneliness, they may still show signs, including:

- Seeming more clingy than usual, or wanting their caregiver to play with them more than usual
- Changes in behavior or communication, like misbehaving or crying more than usual
- Seeking attention through misbehaving or disrupting
- Exhibiting increased separation anxiety
- Withdrawing or showing increased signs of sadness, tiredness, or avoiding interacting with others

## Strategies for parents and caregivers



- Put your screens down, fully dial into your child, and spend time listening and engaging. Listen to them with your full attention. Make regular eye contact, smile, and show them physical affection
- For younger children, engage in "floor time" where you play and interact with your child on the floor together. Follow their lead!
- Limit your young child's screen time and use that time for connection and interaction with them
- For younger children, teach them what loneliness is. Share your own experiences of feeling lonely, using age-appropriate examples like: "When I haven't been around people for a while, sometimes I want to spend time with someone. That means I'm feeling lonely"
- Ask your child what they'd want to do if they could be doing anything. This can give you clues about what they might be missing. For example, playing or spending more time with you, playmates, or friends

## Strategies for early childcare providers



- Early childcare and preschools are often where children first learn to interact with others. Fostering social skills through play and making classrooms feel more inclusive can support a child's socio-emotional development and confidence
- Attend trainings to recognize and address signs of loneliness and withdrawal
- Make changes in how classrooms are arranged, to support group learning and teamwork
- Offer diverse toys, books, posters, and more so all children can see themselves reflected in the classroom, and help foster inclusion and belonging
- Spend more 1:1 time with any children who may be showing signs of loneliness

## Strategies for communities



- Support parents and caregivers. Early childhood can be taxing on time, energy, and mental health. Offer to help with errands, chores, or even childcare so they can have some time to practice their own self-care, and in turn, recharge and show up for their little one
- Help children (and parents) engage in community or cultural traditions, to encourage feelings of bonding, belonging, and closeness to others
- Be a safe, supportive, and nurturing adult for a child in your life. Show up to important family events for the child. Studies have found that children who have two supportive and caring non-parent adults in their lives can foster positive childhood experiences that build resilience in children who have experienced trauma or may experience it later in life

\* **Please note** that signs and symptoms may vary by child, or may be the result of a different, underlying issue. If you are concerned about your child or think they are struggling, reach out to your child's doctor.

## Children (Ages 6–12)\*



### Common causes:

Moving to a new house, changing schools, bullying, family changes (like a new sibling, grandma moves in, or divorce)

### Signs

- Physical complaints like stomach aches or headaches
- Acting timid or unsure of themselves
- Behavior changes like clinginess or irritability

### Strategies for parents and caregivers:



- Ask your child if they are lonely, then listen to and support them
- Talk openly about feelings and help them understand social interactions
- Schedule hangouts and social activities
- Encourage joining games (like soccer or pickup basketball) or clubs based on interests
- Go on outings that stir creativity and imagination: like free-admission days at the museum, summer and day camps, or having a picnic, cookout, or dinner in the park
- Encourage them to talk to you about who their online friends are
- Seek help from a mental health professional if loneliness leads to distress

### Strategies for schools and teachers:



- Create inclusive classrooms where everyone feels they belong
- Use buddy systems to make sure nobody is excluded
- Teach empathy and social skills
- Offer access to school counselors

### Strategies for communities:



- Host child-focused events where kids can make friends
- Support local youth programs and libraries
- Provide opportunities for families to volunteer together
- Share mental health resources for kids



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## Teens (Ages 13–17)\*

### Common causes:

Ongoing conflicts with parents/caregivers, divorce, bullying, lack of close friends, being single when friends have partners, social anxiety

### Signs

**Remember:** “alone time” can sometimes be helpful, because many teens need a balance of social time and solitude. If your teen is an introvert, that alone time is their opportunity to recharge

- New or sudden changes in behavior
- Often seeming sad or depressed, if it goes beyond just needing some alone time
- Not having friends to get together with outside of school
- Not spending time with friends they used to hang out with
- Becoming withdrawn or staying in their rooms for long periods of time
- Talking negatively about themselves

### Strategies for parents and caregivers:



- Keep lines of communication open
- Help teens build social and emotional skills
- Encourage new hobbies and interests to connect with other people
- Understand that social media and gaming may be important social connection points for teens when used in a healthy way
- Encourage them to talk to you about who their online friends are
- Avoid talking negatively about yourself so the teen in your life doesn't do the same
- If your teen is 2SLGBTQIA+ (including questioning), offer to take them to Pride, your local queer community center, groups, and events. If there aren't any in your area, you can still find welcoming options online
- Seek mental health support for teens when needed

### Strategies for schools and teachers:



- Provide social skills training
- Promote peer mentoring opportunities
- Create safe social spaces where youth can connect with each other
- Offer mental health counseling and suicide prevention training

### Strategies for communities:



- Create mentoring programs to connect caring adults with teens
- Involve teens in community service
- Offer a range of activities for youth, including sports, the arts, and other interests

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## Adults (Ages 18–64)



### Common causes:

Divorce, living alone, social anxiety, life transitions like going to college or moving to a new community, poor physical or mental health, financial struggles

### Signs

- Social isolation or no close friends
- Losing interest in activities that once brought joy
- Physical symptoms like fatigue or headaches
- Decreased productivity or motivation
- Feelings of worthlessness and self-doubt

### Strategies for individuals:



- Recognize that loneliness could be a sign you need to make a change
- Volunteer to help your community or engage in other acts of kindness
- Connect with others around hobbies, a shared faith, or other interests
- Strengthen existing relationships
- Get outdoors and stay active to boost your mood
- Work with a mental health professional to build social skills and reduce social anxiety
- If you're 2SLGBTQIA+, visit your local community center, join events like Pride and Trans Day of Visibility, or try participating in peer groups

### Strategies for workplaces:



- Create an environment that supports psychological safety
- Train managers on empathy
- Encourage team-building for long-term working relationships
- Bring employees together in person periodically to help form social connections
- Offer mental health resources to employees

### Strategies for communities:



- Offer community groups that provide opportunities to talk while doing other creative or recreational activities
- Organize community volunteer events for different age groups
- Create an online or telephone-based support network for isolated people to be connected with local volunteers or peers

## Seniors (Ages 65+)

### Signs

#### Common causes:

Living alone, isolation as a caregiver, changes in social activity due to retirement or mobility issues, death of loved ones or friends, memory problems, hearing loss, technology barriers to communicating with friends and family

- Reduced participation in social activities
- Becoming withdrawn or less communicative
- Frequent, vague health complaints
- Changes in daily routines like personal care, eating, or sleeping
- Depressive symptoms like sadness, lack of energy, or a sense of hopelessness

### Strategies for individuals:



- Find activities you enjoy to connect with others
- Join groups like the local senior center, a walking club, or a faith-based community
- Schedule time every day to stay in touch with family, friends, and neighbors
- Learn to use video chat and other tech to stay connected
- Consider adopting a pet for companionship
- If you're 2SLGBTQIA+, join events like Pride and Trans Day of Visibility, or visit your local community center, which might have groups and services dedicated to older adults over 50

### Strategies for families:



- Spend quality family time together, especially talking and reminiscing
- Reach out to local friends, neighbors, or faith communities to encourage drop-in visitors
- Suggest a roommate for your loved one if appropriate
- Hire an in-home caregiver to help with daily tasks or socializing
- Consider a senior living community to prevent isolation

### Strategies for health care providers:



- Screen older patients for loneliness and depression
- Share social and mental health resources
- Suggest support groups or group therapy
- Provide suicide prevention resources

### Strategies for communities:



- Support intergenerational relationships for mentoring and conversation
- Provide classes and social activities to bring seniors together
- Offer pet therapy programs
- Develop transportation services for seniors

Together, we can build an environment that uses love, community, and communication to overcome loneliness and foster feelings of inclusion and belonging for us all. We can help everyone feel valued and connected at every age.

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You can learn more about how to  
Take Action for Mental Health at

**TakeAction4MH.com**