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SAFE NEW FUTURES

MODERN DAY ISSUES WE LOVE TO IGNORE – ISSUE THREE

Combating loneliness in and out of relationships



ISSUE 3

Foreword



Hello, I'm Nina Kelly and I'm the CEO of the training charity, Safe New Futures. This is the third in the series of *Modern Day Problems We Love to Ignore*. In this series we continue with the topic of loneliness but focus on loneliness in and out of relationships and how to combat it.

In his book 1984, George Orwell wrote. "*The most terrible loneliness is not the kind that comes from being alone, but the kind that comes from being misunderstood. It is the loneliness of standing in a crowded room, surrounded by people who do not see you, who do not hear you, who do not know the true essence of who you are. And in that loneliness, you feel as though you are fading, disappearing into the background, until you are nothing more than a ghost, a shadow of your former self.*"

How many of us have been in family situations, or with a group of friends, or even sharing an intimate meal with a partner and yet, we feel so alone. We speak but we are not heard, we reveal our inmost selves, but we are not seen, we listen with a view to understanding the other yet we ourselves are not understood.

Children should be seen and not heard was an often-used phrase in my childhood, and although we now know better, how many of us adults feel uncomfortable about using our voice, of voicing our wants, our desires, our needs for fear of rejection or misplaced desire to put the other person first.

As George Orwell wrote in 1949 (in his book 1984), "Perhaps one did not want to be loved so much as to be understood". That is the challenge that faces us all as we navigate the relationships in our lives and the need that most of us have, to feel loved.

As we have explored in previous podcasts around loneliness in the workplace, and loneliness and its wider mental and physical effects, loneliness is not about the state of being alone. According to the research of J.E. Young in 1982 (i), "loneliness" is a negative emotional experience that arises when there is a discrepancy between the quality or quantity of social relationships a person desires and the ones they actually have, essentially feeling a lack of meaningful connections despite being surrounded by people.

Lack of meaningful connection can happen when you are physically alone as many of us were during the pandemic lockdowns, but it can also happen when in a relationship or surrounded by friends and family.

In this White Paper, we are going to look this problem and find a way through to some solutions.

Nina Kelly, CEO, Safe New Futures
February 2025

Introduction

In this third white paper in the series of Modern-day issue we love to ignore, we are going to explore the topic of loneliness on our emotional state.

Previously we have explored the loss of productivity and teamwork in the workplace that arises as a result of loneliness and how to increase connection in the workplace.

We have also explored loneliness and its impact on both mortality and morbidity, considering the detrimental physical effect on the body and the mental health repercussions of loneliness, and how to improve our physical and mental health.

In this series we will look at the effect of loneliness whether in or out of relationships, on our emotions, state of mind and self-esteem.

Lack of significant connections in our social networks can have significant psychological effects such as:

Increased Anxiety and Depression: Loneliness can lead to heightened feelings of anxiety and depression. Individuals may feel a persistent sense of sadness or hopelessness, which can be exacerbated in both romantic and platonic relationships. For example, A person in a romantic relationship may feel lonely if their partner is emotionally unavailable, leading to feelings of worthlessness or despair.

Low Self-Esteem: Loneliness often correlates with low self-esteem. Individuals may question their worthiness of connection and become overly critical of themselves. For example, someone who feels lonely might avoid social situations, fearing rejection, which further isolates them.

In contrast:

Hope has been shown to have a strong correlation on countering loneliness and is linked to various positive outcomes including happiness, perseverance, achievement and overall health (Peterson 2000) (ii)

A strong sense of belonging leads to more positive social relationships, better academic and occupational success, and improved physical and mental health (Allen et al., 2018; Goodenow & Grady, 1993; Hagerty et al., 1992). (iii)

Being actively integrated into social networks with regular and meaningful social contact leads to feeling well-integrated and not lonely. A study by Klinenberg (2013) (iv) demonstrated that many solo-dweller reported high life satisfaction due to active social lives, complete with events and frequent close contact.

Understanding these problems and its effects is crucial for recognising the signs of loneliness in oneself and others. Addressing loneliness through social engagement, self-development and self-care strategies can help mitigate these cognitive and psychological challenges, ultimately leading to improved mental health and well-being.

Background

We will look at just three effects of a sense of loneliness on our wellbeing and mental health – Anxiety and depression, Low self-esteem and Emotional dysregulation.

Before we delve into these areas, let's take a quick look at what kind of person we think of as lonely.

Immediately, we might think of the older person living on their own, or single young people who have moved away from home to forge a new life away from their childhood network group and immediate family. And indeed, there is some truth in this.

The Office for National Statistics identifies three profiles of single people at particular risk from loneliness (v):

- Widowed older homeowners living alone with long-term health conditions.
- Unmarried, middle-agers with long-term health conditions.
- Younger renters with little trust and sense of belonging to their area.

However, singleness and loneliness cannot be automatically equated as demonstrated by Kersten, Mund and Neyer's (2024) (vi) study. Their research reported high life satisfaction amongst people aged 35-60 and living alone, the reasons being that they were actively integrated into social networks with regular and meaningful social contact.

By the same token, Aziz, Chaudhary, & Ali's (vii) study in 2021 of married people, revealed that 80% of respondents reported having poor relationship status with well over half (68%) feeling a high degree of loneliness. Although this was a small sample size (50) it does suggest that it is equally possible to be lonely within a relationship as when single.

Overwhelmingly, loneliness comes back to the original definition that we have used in previous White Papers which is that; loneliness is the feeling we have when our need for social contact and relationships isn't met. It isn't the same as being alone and is more about the satisfaction we have with the quality of our relationships.

People have very personal reasons at one end of the spectrum to dedicate themselves primarily to one person within a marriage relationship or at the other end to pursue and protect a sense of autonomy and self-development. Clearly there are various states in-between all involving balance, compromise and individuals knowing what brings them joy and is right for them.

With that in mind, we will go on to explore the psychological effects of loneliness which involve increased anxiety and depression, Low self-esteem and Emotional dysregulation.

1. Increased Anxiety and Depression

Heightened Emotional Distress:
Loneliness is strongly correlated with increased anxiety and depressive symptoms, creating a vicious cycle. In Henrick and Gullone's study (2006) (viii) more than half of the participants who reported feeling the loneliest were also depressed, compared to only 5% in those who did not feel lonely.

There is also a significant association between loneliness and generalised anxiety, panic attacks, and suicidal thoughts. Suicidal ideation increased dramatically from 6% among those not feeling lonely to 42% among the loneliest participants (Beutel et al., 2017) (ix). Even when accounting for demographic factors and other mental health issues, loneliness remained a clear predictor of depression, Cacioppo et al., 2006) (x), anxiety and suicidal ideation.

This was probably the most obviously exemplified during the pandemic when both people who were in and out of relationships struggled with feeling alone and a lack of meaningful connection.

Feelings of Hopelessness:
Chronic loneliness can also foster a sense of hopelessness about the future, leading to withdrawal from activities once enjoyed. Page, R. M. (1991) (xi) has found a strong relationship between loneliness and hopelessness among adolescents. For young people who scored high on the hopelessness scale, they were more likely to also score high on the loneliness scale compared to those with lower hopelessness scores.

It also shows that adolescents experiencing hopelessness, tend to view their problems and distressing situations as unsolvable, believing that things are unlikely to improve. While the study shows a significant connection, it also suggests that loneliness may serve as an important indicator or risk factor for hopelessness in adolescents.

This can lead to depression and Ratcliffe (2011) (xii) found that 'loss of hope' in individuals with extreme depression went beyond a lack of specific hope and became the absence of an ability to hope.



2. Low Self-Esteem

Self-Criticism:
Loneliness often leads to negative self-assessment, where individuals may blame themselves for their isolation.

Chronic loneliness often causes individuals to internalise feelings of worthlessness, attributing their social difficulties to personal failings (hols-Lunstad et., 2010). This internalisation creates a feedback look where low self-esteem reinforces helplessness, leading to withdrawal from social interactions and a decline in mental health (Joiner 2000) (xiii).

Fear of Rejection:
Low self-esteem can lead to an intense fear of rejection, causing individuals to avoid social situations altogether.

A lack of belonging is one of the primary sources of anxiety, second only to fear of physical harm, and can lead to significant emotional distress (Baumeister & Tice, 1990: Baumeister, Twenge, & Nuss, 2002 (xiv); Cacioppo et al., 2006; Twenge et al., 2007 (xv))

3. Emotional Dysregulation

Difficulty Managing Emotions:
Loneliness can impair emotional regulation, leading to heightened emotional responses.

Research by Gross (2002) (xvi) suggests that individuals who experience chronic loneliness often struggle with emotional regulation leading to heightened emotional sensitivity, increased anxiety and depressive symptoms.

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Let us look then at what we can do to counteract some of these negative influences.

1. Reduced Anxiety and Depression

Increase Social Connections:

Social connection refers to a person's subjective sense of having close and positively experienced relationships with others in their social environment. It plays a crucial role in buffering against life stressors as suggested by Cohen and Wills (1985) and Thoits (1986) (xvii).

Creating social connections is unique to each individual but it will involve joining groups that feed our own interests and self-development. It might be a community café or a book group, a rave or photography group.

Building strong social connections is essential for mental well-being. Here are some practical ways to do it:

- **Join Local Groups & Clubs:** Look for community groups like book clubs, sports teams, or art classes that align with your interests.
- **Volunteer:** Giving back to the community through charities, food banks, or mentoring programs can foster connections and a sense of purpose.
- **Attend Social Events:** Engage in local events, professional networking meetups, or hobby-based gatherings.
- **Leverage Technology:** Platforms like Meetup, Facebook groups, or even online gaming communities can help build friendships.
- **Reconnect with Old Friends:** Reaching out to past friends and colleagues can reignite valuable relationships.
- **Get a Pet:** Owning a pet can reduce loneliness and even encourage social interactions with other pet owners.



Cultivate Hope:

A higher level of hope is associated with reduced psychological distress, which is crucial for successful psychotherapy (Yalon, 1995).

Intervention studies targeting post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD have indicated that enhancing hope can also alleviate symptoms of anxiety (Dutton 2009) (xviii).

Religion has harnessed the power of hope and will exhort their followers to never give up hope in the ability and desire of the divine force to make things better if they cooperate with their higher power.

Perhaps the reason why the song 'Tomorrow' performed by the orphan Annie is such a big hit, because it helps people to believe in a brighter future where the sun will come out.

At Safe New Futures, we have run thousands of courses over the years with people who have lost hope in themselves. One of the most consistent and positive feedback to have come back from course participants is that having done the course, they realise that their situations are not hopeless.

Their future can be different to their past as they take control of their situations and make decisions about their futures.

Hope is a key factor in mental resilience. Here are some ways to cultivate it:

- **Set Small, Achievable Goals:** Breaking big goals into smaller steps creates a sense of progress and accomplishment.
- **Practice Gratitude:** Keeping a gratitude journal helps shift focus to positive aspects of life.
- **Surround Yourself with Positive Influences:** Spend time with supportive people who uplift and encourage you.
- **Find Meaning in Hardships:** Reflect on past struggles and how they led to growth and resilience.
- **Use Visualisation Techniques:** Imagine positive outcomes and visualise yourself overcoming challenges.
- **Engage in Acts of Kindness:** Helping others often reinforces a sense of purpose and hope.
- **Explore Spirituality or Faith:** Many find comfort in religious or spiritual practices that emphasise hope and resilience.

2. Improved Self-Esteem

Engage in positive self-talk:

Self-talk refers to the internal dialogue we have with ourselves, which can be either positive or negative. It plays a significant role in shaping our emotions, behaviours, and overall mental well-being. Understanding the importance of self-talk can help individuals improve their self-esteem, resilience, and motivation.

1. Self-Talk Influences Mental Health
The way we speak to ourselves affects our emotional state. Negative self-talk, such as thoughts of self-doubt or self-criticism, can lead to anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem. Conversely, positive self-talk fosters confidence, reduces stress, and promotes emotional stability.

2. It Affects Motivation and Performance
Studies show that individuals who engage in positive self-talk perform better in challenging situations. Encouraging inner dialogue helps in problem-solving, overcoming obstacles, and staying persistent in achieving goals. Athletes, for instance, use self-talk to enhance focus and endurance.

3. It Builds Resilience
Life is full of challenges, but self-talk can help individuals cope with setbacks. When people frame difficulties as opportunities for growth rather than failures, they develop resilience. Statements like “I can handle this” or “I’ve been through worse and succeeded” can make a significant difference in how one deals with adversity.

4. Self-Talk Shapes Self-Perception
The way we speak to ourselves defines how we see ourselves. If someone constantly tells themselves they are unworthy or incapable, they start believing it. On the other hand, affirmations like “I am competent” or “I deserve happiness” reinforce a positive self-image.

5. It Reduces Stress and Anxiety
Self-talk can be a tool for calming anxiety. When facing a stressful situation, reassuring oneself with words like “I am in control” or “This will pass” can help regulate emotions and prevent panic. Cognitive-behavioural therapy (CBT) often incorporates positive self-talk as a technique to manage anxiety disorders.

6. It Encourages Self-Compassion
Many people are harsher on themselves than they would be on a friend. Positive self-talk fosters self-compassion by allowing individuals to treat themselves with kindness rather than excessive criticism. This leads to better mental health, higher self-worth, and improved relationships with others.

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Shifting negative self-talk to positive affirmations can improve self-confidence:



- **Challenge Negative Thoughts:** When self-doubt creeps in, ask yourself, "*Is this thought factual or based on emotion?*" Replace negative thoughts with more realistic and positive ones**.**
- **Use Affirmations:** Repeating affirmations like "*I am capable*," "*I am enough*," or "*I am worthy of happiness*" helps rewire thought patterns.
- **Celebrate Small Wins:** Acknowledge and appreciate small achievements throughout the day.
- **Avoid Self-Comparison:** Focus on personal growth rather than measuring success against others.
- **Practice Self-Compassion:** Be kind to yourself and treat yourself with the same patience you would offer a friend.

Embrace belonging

Why is belonging important?

Belonging is a fundamental human need that affects our mental, emotional, and even physical well-being. Feeling connected to a group, community, or purpose gives people a sense of identity, security, and fulfilment. Research shows that individuals who experience a strong sense of belonging are happier, healthier, and more resilient in facing life's challenges.

1. Belonging Promotes Mental and Emotional Well-being

When people feel like they belong, they experience lower levels of stress, anxiety, and depression. Human beings are inherently social creatures, and meaningful relationships contribute to emotional stability. Studies show that social exclusion and isolation can lead to serious mental health issues, while a strong support system enhances emotional resilience.

2. It Increases Self-Esteem and Confidence

Belonging reinforces a positive self-image. When individuals feel accepted by their peers, family, or workplace, they develop greater self-confidence. This is because external validation — such as recognition and support — encourages individuals to see their own worth.

3. It Strengthens Resilience and Coping Skills

A strong sense of belonging helps individuals cope with life's difficulties. When people feel supported, they are more likely to persevere through hardships. Having a reliable social network provides emotional and practical support during times of crisis, making challenges easier to navigate.

4. It Encourages Personal Growth and Motivation

Being part of a group with shared goals or values encourages motivation and personal development. Whether it's a workplace, sports team, religious group, or cultural community, being surrounded by like-minded individuals fosters learning and growth.

5. It Reduces Loneliness and Social Isolation

Loneliness is one of the biggest contributors to poor mental health. A strong sense of belonging helps prevent social isolation by providing a network of people who offer companionship, conversation, and emotional support.

6. It Improves Physical Health

Studies have found that social connection and belonging positively impact physical health. People who feel socially connected tend to have lower blood pressure, better immune function, and even longer lifespans. The lack of belonging, on the other hand, has been linked to higher risks of heart disease and chronic stress.

Feeling a sense of belonging is crucial for emotional well-being:

- **Engage in Group Activities:** Find activities where teamwork and shared experiences foster a sense of inclusion**.**
- **Find a Support System:** Surround yourself with friends, family, or mentors who support and uplift you.
- **Participate in Cultural or Faith-Based Gatherings:** Engaging in spiritual or cultural communities can provide a deep sense of connection.
- **Express Yourself:** Whether through writing, art, or storytelling, sharing experiences helps reinforce identity and belonging.
- **Be Open to New Friendships:** Sometimes, belonging starts with making the first move — initiate conversations and invite people to connect.



3. Emotional Regulation

Meditation:

Equanimity is a state of balance and composure that can be cultivated through meditation. Meditation practices can help us develop equanimity by training your mind to be calm and accepting.

Equanimity is the state of being mentally calm and composed, especially in times of conflict. It is being able to monitor your immediate judgement or reaction towards others by taking a moment to pause, notice and reflect. It is not disengaging from reality or embracing neutrality but being able to stay present without losing a sense of mental clarity. Breaking apart its Latin roots, Equanimity means “evenness of mind, spirit, or feelings”.

Breath work:

Bessel Van Der Kolk (xix) in The Body Keeps the Score explains how important breath work is in emotional regulation.

The autonomic nervous system is our brain’s most elementary survival system, its two branches regulating arousal throughout the body. Roughly speaking, the sympathetic nervous system (SNS) uses chemicals like adrenaline to fuel the body and brain to take action, while the parasympathetic nervous system (PNS) uses acetylcholine to help regulate basic body functions like digestion, would healing and sleep and dream cycles.

When we’re at our best, these two systems work closely together to keep us in an optimal state of engagement with our environment and with ourselves.

Heart rate variability measure the relative balance between the sympathetic and the parasympathetic systems. When we inhale, we stimulate the SNS, which results in an increase in the heart rate. Exhalations stimulate the PNS which decreases how fast the heart beats. In healthy individuals inhalations and exhalations produce steady, rhythmical fluctuations in heart rate: Good heart rate variability is a measure of basic well-being.

When our autonomic nervous system is well balanced, we have a reasonable degree of control over our response to minor frustrations and disappointment, enabling us to calmly assess what is going on and when we feel insulted or left out. As long as we manage to stay calm, we can choose how we want to respond. Individuals with poorly modulated autonomic nervous systems are easily thrown off balance, both mentally and physically.

Bessel concludes that scientific methods have confirmed that changing the way one breathes can improve problem with anger, depression, and anxiety.

Yoga practice:

Yoga can help us reconnect with one's body which helps us alleviate feelings of loneliness by promoting self-compassion and self-acceptance.

Bessel Van Der Kolk also talks about the ability of yoga practice to develop self-regulation.

Bessel talks about a patient who self-harmed whose life was transformed by taking up yoga. The patient realised; '*your body has things to say. I will try and listen*'.

Bessel goes on to say, "If you are not aware of what your body needs, you can't take care of it. If you don't feel hunger, you can't nourish yourself. If you mistake anxiety for hunger, you may eat too much.

In yoga you focus your attention on your breathing and on your sensations, moment to moment. You begin to notice the connection between your emotions and your body – perhaps how anxiety about doing a post actually throws you off balance.

Simply noticing what you feel fosters emotional regulation, and it help you to stop trying to ignore what is going on indie you. The two most important phrases in therapy, as in yoga, are "notice that" and "What happens next?" Once you start approaching your body with curiosity rather than with fear, everything shifts.

The end result was that his patient was able to say "*I slowly learned to just have my feelings, without being hijacked by them. Life is more manageable: I am more attuned to my day and more present in the moment.*"



Conclusion

Loneliness is a profound emotional experience that affects individuals regardless of their relationship status. Whether one is in a relationship, surrounded by friends and family, or living alone, the key determinant of loneliness is the quality of social connections rather than their quantity. As explored in this paper, loneliness can have significant psychological consequences, including increased anxiety and depression, low self-esteem, and difficulties in emotional regulation.

However, loneliness is not an inescapable condition. By actively working on increasing social connections, cultivating hope, and fostering a sense of belonging, individuals can build meaningful relationships that support emotional and mental well-being. Engaging in positive self-talk, practicing mindfulness, and embracing activities that encourage personal growth and connection with others are essential steps toward reducing feelings of isolation.

At Safe New Futures, we believe in the transformative power of community, personal development, and emotional resilience. Our programs have helped thousands of individuals regain hope, rebuild self-esteem, and foster meaningful relationships. Loneliness may be a growing issue in modern society, but with intentional effort, compassion, and support, it is possible to counteract its negative effects and create a life filled with purpose, connection, and fulfilment.

For further insights and strategies on combating loneliness, visit our resource centre and explore our video series on loneliness and its wider effects: Safe New Futures.

They also form the foundation of the New Futures programmes that we run that have had a life-transforming experience for thousands of people.

Watch our series of videos on loneliness at https://www.safe.org.uk/2024/02/01/loneliness-and-its-wider-effects/

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Safe New Futures is a transformative organisation that has been serving the community for over 20 years. Originating as Southampton Action for Employment, our mission has always been to address poverty and unemployment in the most deprived areas of Southampton. Our primary focus is on young people and the long-term unemployed in Hampshire and the Isle of Wight.

Our unique programmes combine group cognitive behavioural therapy (GCBT) with vocational training and pre-employment support. This holistic approach helps individuals struggling with mental health issues to improve their confidence, reduce depression/anxiety, and transition into education, employment, or training opportunities.



Our CEO, Nina Kelly, has a natural leadership style that is both marketing-led and people-centred. An engaging and passionate communicator, Nina has worked in both the international and UK charity sector for more than 20 years.

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