

IMPACTING THE LONELINESS EPIDEMIC IN OUR SOCIETY (MAY 2024)

How can BUV churches / congregations have an impact on the loneliness epidemic in our local communities?

Background – a global issue

One of the issues that is becoming increasingly relevant in our communities is the issue of loneliness.

"With loneliness now defined as a public health problem, tackling it requires public health approaches. Considering that some well established risk factors of loneliness, such as depression and chronic disease, are increasing, and that triggering events are part of life (eg, the covid-19 pandemic), it is likely that these risk factors would impact the prevalence of loneliness. Accordingly, loneliness is increasingly recognised as an important health and social issue, with some health professionals, including former US surgeon general Vivek Murthy, labelling it as an epidemic".¹

Loneliness has serious consequences for individuals and wider society. On an individual level, it has been found by many studies to be associated with mental health problems such as depression, anxiety, and thoughts of suicide. A UK survey in 2022 conducted for Mental Health Awareness Week, found that 62% of people who reported being 'often or always' lonely said that feelings of loneliness had a negative effect on their mental health, including 75% who said that loneliness made them feel low mood; 55% who said that loneliness made them feel 'socially anxious'; and 44% who reported that loneliness led them to have suicidal thoughts and feelings. One research review suggests that social isolation and loneliness increase the risk of depression up to nine years later.²

Worldwide, initiatives have been launched to address "the epidemic of loneliness." Countries are recognising the need to contend with this issue and are making advocacy, policy and programme investments to try to alleviate loneliness and social isolation, along with the associated public health consequences. The World Health Organization have developed Social Isolation and Loneliness initiatives, launching the [Global Initiative on Loneliness and Connection](#), the United Kingdom appointed the world's first minister for loneliness in 2018 and have launched the [Campaign to End Loneliness in the United Kingdom](#) and the US have a [Foundation for Social Connection in the United States](#). Japan, Sweden and Denmark have also established peak bodies to tackle loneliness.

1 The prevalence of loneliness across 113 countries – systematic review and meta-analysis, Pub. Feb 9, 2022 <https://www.bmj.com/content/376/bmj-2021-067068>

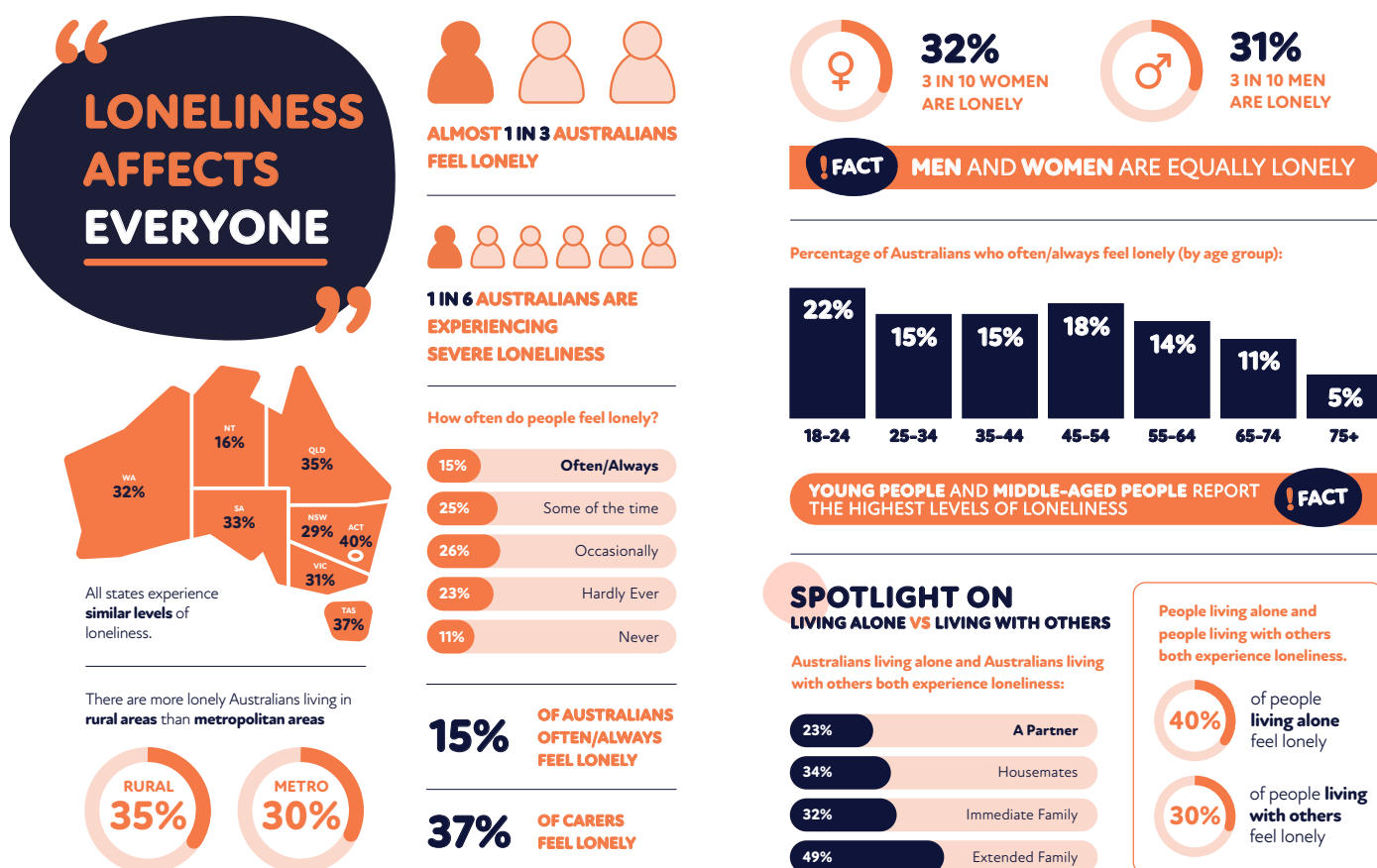
2 https://tacklinglonelinesshub.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/MHAW22_Loneliness_England_Policy_Briefing.pdf

Australia

[Ending Loneliness Together](#) (ELT) is Australia's national organisation working to raise awareness and reduce the negative effects of chronic loneliness and social isolation in our communities through evidence-based interventions and advocacy. Inspired by the work of the UK Campaign to End Loneliness and the growing research evidence of the role of social connection in the prevention of poor health and wellbeing, Ending Loneliness Together draws together knowledge from national and international researchers, along with service delivery expertise from community groups, professional organisations, government agencies, and skilled volunteers, to effectively address loneliness in Australia.

In the foreword to Australia's first [State of the Nation Report on Social Connection](#), (launched in June 2023), Chair, Dr Michelle H Lim states "While many Australians believe they are one and the same, there is a significant difference. Loneliness is a distressing feeling we get when we feel disconnected from other people, and desire more (or more satisfying) social relationships. Social isolation (or being alone) is a physical state where you have fewer interactions with others."

As shown in the infographics below, loneliness affects everyone, but for some, loneliness can be debilitating. One in 3 Australians feel lonely and one in 6, are experiencing severe loneliness, which has the potential to lead to many other health issues. As shown, loneliness does not discriminate across genders or age groups but can be more prevalent in different circumstances. See link above for full report.



THE IMPACTS OF LONELINESS

Australians who feel lonely are:



Less engaged in
Physical activity



More likely to have
Social media addiction



Less productive
At work

2x

More likely to have
Chronic disease

4.6x

More likely to have
Depression

4.1x

More likely to have
Social anxiety

5.2x

More likely to have
Poorer wellbeing

LONELINESS IS A **RISK FACTOR** FOR POOR HEALTH,
WELLBEING AND LOWER WORKPLACE PRODUCTIVITY

! FACT

PERCEPTIONS (AND MISCONCEPTIONS) OF LONELINESS

46%

Nearly 1 in 2 Australians **describe**
people who are lonely as having
negative traits

47%

Nearly 1 in 2 Australians **believe**
people would feel less lonely if
they just knew more people

25%

1 in 4 Australians **think that**
people who are lonely are less
worthy than others

42%

2 in 5 Australians **believe**
loneliness only affects people
65 years or older

12%

More than 1 in 10 Australians **believe**
there is “something wrong” with
people who are lonely

27%

More than 1 in 4 Australians
think making new friends
should always be easy

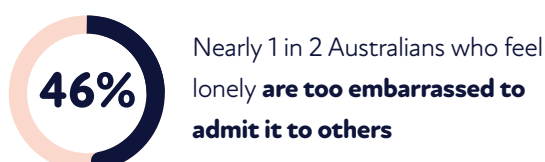
29%

More than 1 in 4 Australians **think**
their community believes being
lonely is a sign of weakness

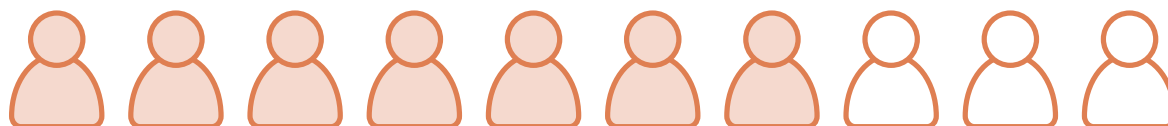
TALKING ABOUT LONELINESS

THE **STIGMA** ASSOCIATED WITH LONELINESS IS PREVENTING PEOPLE FROM TALKING ABOUT IT AND SEEKING THE CONNECTIONS THEY WANT.

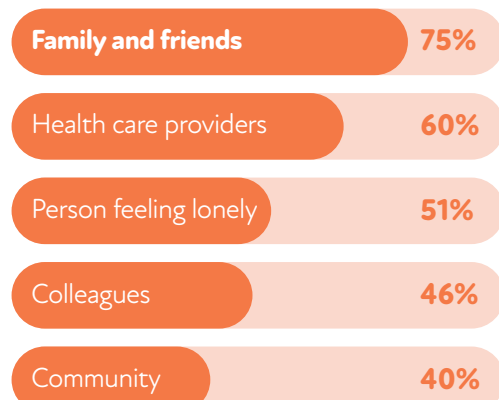
! FACT



TACKLING LONELINESS



Who do we believe should help someone feeling lonely?



TACKLING LONELINESS IS EVERYONE'S RESPONSIBILITY

Stigma and shame are preventing us from talking about feeling lonely. In turn, this reduces opportunities for people feeling lonely to find connection and seek/ receive the support they need.

It also places Australians at a greater risk of persistent loneliness.

One of the recommendations for the way forward from the [State of the Nation Report on Social](#)

[Connection](#) is to empower communities to help each other. *“It’s up to all Australians to address loneliness and encourage meaningful social connections. We can create safe environments in our homes, workplaces, and communities by equipping the community (individuals, workplaces, schools, and neighbourhoods) with the skills to recognise the signs of loneliness and to respond appropriately and safely. This will allow Australians to get the help they need.”*

Establishing Australia’s inaugural [Loneliness Awareness Week](#) in 2023 was a step towards normalising conversations about loneliness. In 2024, [Loneliness Awareness Week](#) will be held from 5-11 August 2024.

BUV

The vision of the BUV is to be a union of flourishing churches filled with Christlike followers who join with God in his redemptive work in society.



With mission at the centre, we aim to encourage, equip and empower our local churches to be outward looking and engaged with the community surrounding the church, as well as serving the needs of those who form our congregations. We are committed to making a positive impact on communities across Victoria, and advocating on issues that affect community members.

Many BUV churches are undertaking or intentionally exploring some wonderful initiatives already, some of which are aimed at alleviating loneliness / social isolation, or an associated social issue (eg Homelessness, Food Security) for specific segments of the community – for eg, community meals, food programmes and pantries, partnering with community organisations, community hubs / spaces (eg [Whitehorse Churches Care](#)), Senior Hopes, Gaming Get togethers (the Big LAN), Winter Shelter, and as a result of the Bushfire Recovery work (and the loneliness that was discovered as part of that), the churches in these regions are intentionally/consciously exploring new initiatives to combat/tackle this.

However, with the statistics continuing to increase, the need seems greater than ever.

Links

- Australian Government, Australian Institute of Health and Welfare - Australia Welfare 2023 data insights: Social isolation, loneliness and wellbeing <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/australias-welfare/australias-welfare-2023-data-insights/contents/social-isolation-loneliness-and-wellbeing>
- The prevalence of loneliness across 113 countries – systematic review and meta-analysis, Published Feb 9, 2022 <https://www.bmj.com/content/376/bmj-2021-067068>
- Ending Loneliness Together - <https://endingloneliness.com.au/>
 - » Resources <https://endingloneliness.com.au/resources/>
 - » Add your church, community centre or counselling centre to the Ending Loneliness Services Directory <https://endingloneliness.com.au/search/>
 - » Loneliness Awareness Week - <https://lonelinessawarenessweek.com.au/>
- Global Initiative on Loneliness and Connection <https://www.gilc.global/>
- Building Connections – Exploring what works <https://thecaresfamily.org.uk/>
- Take the #KINDChallenge <https://go.nextdoor.com/kind-challenge-us>
- England Policy Briefing paper on loneliness, Mental Health Foundation 2022 <https://tacklinglonelinesshub.org/resources/england-policy-briefing-on-loneliness/>
- Tackling Loneliness - Building Connections: Exploring what works https://tacklinglonelinesshub.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/MHAW22_Loneliness_England_Policy_Briefing.pdf
- Reducing loneliness among migrant and ethnic minority people, University of Sheffield, 2021 <https://tacklinglonelinesshub.org/resources/reducing-loneliness-among-migrant-and-ethnic-minority-people/>