BRIEF: EVIDENCE-INFORMED RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SUPPORTING YOUNG PEOPLE WITH FEELING LONELY, ISOLATED & DISCONNECTED

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Overview

COVID-19 restrictions have changed how young people have been able to interact with others. Many young people have been out of school for extended periods and there are restrictions on meeting people outside the immediate household, with some having to isolate even within the household due to a positive COVID test. Unsurprisingly, given this context, many young people have reported substantial increases in feelings of loneliness during the COVID-19 pandemic compared to before the pandemic (e.g. Barnado's; TeenCovidLife; OxWell School Survey).

Loneliness is a mismatch between the relationships people have, and those they would like to have. This mismatch can relate to the number of friends a person has and/or whether they have people around them that they feel they can really rely on. trust, and feel connected with. Therefore, loneliness may reflect the perceived *quantity* and/or the *quality* of social relationships. It is normal to feel lonely at times. Most people experience loneliness at some point in their lives, often when going through a change or transition. Loneliness is associated with a range of painful feelings and emotions, such as sadness, anger, pain, and frustration. During national lockdown, not all young people have found it easy to use phones and technology to maintain relationships with others. Some reported that, although it could help, it just wasn't the same as being face-to-face (TELL study). This lack of touch and proximity resulted in a sense of disconnect.

This document has been developed in collaboration with researchers and clinicians who have expertise in loneliness and social isolation in young people. It highlights key strategies and recommendations to support young people who are struggling with the uncomfortable feelings that come with loneliness, isolation, and feeling disconnected from others. Evidence to demonstrate what helps adolescents overcome problems with loneliness is limited, so this guidance draws on both existing research and recent discussions with young people. This information has been written to apply in a general context, with some specific considerations made for the COVID-19 context.

Summary of the key recommendations for young people who are feeling lonely, isolated or disconnected:

1. **Be kind to yourself**
2. **Reach out to others where you can**
3. **Feel more connected by helping others**
4. **Focus on building the social relationships you want**
5. **Take part in different activities, try different things to see what works best for you**
6. **Look out for what helps you to feel more connected in online interactions & do more of it**
7. **Have realistic expectations - friendships and relationships can be hard work & take time to develop**
8. **Seek help when it is needed**

Recommendations

1. Be kind to yourself

Remember lots of people have been feeling less connected during the pandemic. Most people are having to adapt to not see many people face to face, and many young people have reported feeling lonely- if you are feeling this way, you are not the only one. This is a totally new situation for most people, with no 'right' answers for managing social engagement. i.e. interacting with people differently, typically with more interaction online and less face to face.

2. Reach out to others where you can

It is not always easy or comfortable to be open and honest with others, but rather than viewing opening up as something awkward or embarrassing, see it as an opportunity to feel closer to others. Tell someone what you've done with your day – pick out something you are comfortable to share, this could be something you did or something you saw online (for example). If it is someone you trust, tell them if you found something quite hard or challenging.

Arrange regular times to talk with family members or friends. Checking in with friends or family (virtually or in person where possible) on a regular basis provides an opportunity to talk about how you are feeling and to see how others are coping. Knowing that other people (e.g., friends, parents and other adults) are also struggling with loneliness during lockdown may help with normalising feelings of loneliness.

3. Helping others can increase feelings of connectedness

Looking out for others not only helps them, but can also help the "helper" to feel more connected. Young people have said they value being connected to their community by helping others e.g. friends, family, neighbours. Start small, think about what you can do to help a member of your household or someone you are already connected with? For example, make them a cup of tea, be a listening ear, help them with homework. Doing things as part of a community (for example, exploring volunteering or peer support opportunities) can also help with feelings of loneliness. Think about what could be done to help others more generally i.e., go shopping for an elderly neighbour, send someone a card in the post, raise money for charity.

4. Focus on building the social relationships you want

Avoid comparison with others. Focus on building the social relationships you want, rather than focusing on other people, who might look like they have great relationships or lots of friends. That may or may not be true, but the most important thing is about having the social relationships that *you* want.

Recognise existing social connections where you have them. Identify who you have in your life that you might be able to connect with (either in-person where possible or online), for example family members, friends, sports teams/ activity groups, youth clubs etc.

Recognise that now might be a difficult time to make new social relationships, so if this feels too difficult right now, give yourself a break and instead make a plan for the future. For example, where might you go to find people that share your interests, views and/or passions?

5. **Take part in different activities, try different things to see what works best for you**

Consider meeting up with others who enjoy the same sorts of activities as you. Get involved in activities that you might enjoy with other 'like-minded' people or people who have had similar experiences. For example, by volunteering, checking whether a sports/art club at school/youth club/online is having regular online meet ups. These activities need to be personalised, because what might help really depends on what each individual needs and enjoys (see point 6).

In certain situations (e.g. at school or home) it is difficult to change the people that you have to spend time with, but there may still be ways to expand social networks now or in the future. Even if this isn't possible face to face at the moment, think ahead about what networks could be joined once social restrictions are reduced and make some plans. There might also be local online groups or activities that you could join now, before attending face to face in the future.

6. **Look out for what seems to help you to feel more connected in online interactions - and do more of it**

Communicating online is important, particularly during the pandemic, but feeling connected is about the quality of the interaction for you. It can be tricky but it is possible to feel quality connection online. For some people, using videos can help maintain that connection - seeing other people's body language and facial expressions can be important so do try to use video if you can. Some young people feel connected using the chat function, but this is usually with someone they already had a connection with face-to-face.

What helps with feeling connected won't be the same for everyone. Although there can be benefits to video calls (e.g. being able to see body language), this might not feel comfortable for everyone, or for a long period of time. Some people will feel more connected when *doing* things with others, not just chatting. Think about some alternatives to video calls, for example, playing online games with others, text conversations, or guided online workshops. The most important thing is to pay attention to what works for you – what you find most enjoyable and/or makes you feel most connected – and to do more of that.

7. **Have <u>realistic</u> expectations - friendships and relationships can be hard work and take time to develop**

Keep working at relationships. It is important to know that friendships and social relationships can be hard work. Sometimes they don't work out and that's okay. Sometimes we expect too much from others, and sometimes they expect too much from us. It is important not to give up on relationships completely just because there are some challenges if you feel that you can tolerate them alongside the positives that come from the relationship.

Accept that everyone is interacting with others in new and different ways- and it isn't always easy. How people have been able to interact which each other has changed during the pandemic. Interacting in various ways online is new to lots of people. And when it comes to interacting face to face again, everyone will be out of practice. It is important to accept that everyone is likely to make some mistakes at first, and that we should be kind to ourselves and each other about this.

8. **Seek help when it is needed**

This briefing has identified specific ways to manage feelings of loneliness. If difficulties are causing distress and/or interfering in daily life, it is important to seek help. Just because other people might also be struggling with loneliness right now, it doesn't mean that any single person's struggles aren't valid or important. If anyone is struggling at a level where it is getting in the way of daily life (e.g., causing distress, interfering with sleep, schoolwork, concentrating in lessons, socialising with friends), it is important to seek help. This could be talking to a trusted friend or family member, or accessing support from a telephone, text, or online helpline. If you feel you might benefit from more help, often a good starting point is to speak to someone at school (a school nurse, school mental health champion); this information can typically be found on the school website or by asking a form tutor. Another option is to speak to a health professional, e.g., GP.

More information on sources of support (and other useful resources) can be found here: https://www.nhs.uk/oneyou/every-mind-matters/youth-mental-health/

Key References:

- **Loades, M. E., Chatburn, E., Higson-Sweeney, N., Reynolds, S., Shafran, R., Brigden, A., ... & Crawley, E. (2020). Rapid Systematic Review: The Impact of Social Isolation and Loneliness on the Mental Health of Children and Adolescents in the Context of COVID-19.** *Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry*. **DOI: 10.1016/j.jaac.2020.05.009**

A rapid systematic review reporting on the impact of social isolation and loneliness on children and young people's mental health. The main finding was that social isolation and loneliness increase the risk of depression, and possibly anxiety in children and young people. *Duration* of loneliness was more strongly related to poor mental health than *intensity* of loneliness. On this basis, the authors suggest that children and young people are likely to experience high rates of depression and anxiety during and after enforced isolation due to the pandemic.

- **Active Ingredients Review: Reducing loneliness to alleviate and prevent anxiety and depression Dr Eiluned Pearce**

A research team from the Loneliness & Social Isolation in Mental Health Research Network reviewed *academic research*, *consulted* with young people, and looked at what different *charities* suggest help 14-24-year-olds who are feeling lonely. A key message from the research was that strategies to address loneliness need to be co-designed with young people and need to be personalized, because what might help really depends on what each individual needs and enjoys. Strategies the research suggested could help (recommended in this briefing) were: a) get to know and like yourself, b) talk to a trusted friend or grown up, c) get involved in activities with others who have similar experiences.

- **Eccles, A.M. and Qualter, P. (2020), Review: Alleviating loneliness in young people – a meta-analysis of interventions. Child Adolesc Ment Health. https://doi.org/10.1111/camh.12389**

A meta-analysis evaluating the effectiveness of interventions for reducing youth loneliness (up to 25 years). Existing interventions were moderately effective at reducing youth loneliness, showing that interventions can have a positive effect in reducing loneliness in this age group. However, there is a need for interventions with the primary focus to be reducing loneliness, rather than reducing loneliness as a secondary objective. Different interventions may be needed to support young people with transient versus prolonged loneliness. Interventions for transient loneliness may include emotion and social skills management; for prolonged loneliness, interventions should focus on challenging negative cognitive biases and anxiety.

- **Qualter P, Vanhalst J, Harris R, et al. Loneliness across the life span. Perspect Psychol Sci. 2015;10(2):250-264. https://doi.org/10.1177%2F1745691615568999**

A review article reporting on loneliness across the life span. For children and young people, one of the first sources of loneliness relates to peer friendships. In adolescence, friendship quality is more important than quantity. Young people's standing in a social group is also important. Adolescents want to be liked by close friends, but they also want to be liked by the peer group as a whole. This article suggests that age-appropriate interventions are needed to support people with feelings of loneliness.

- **Demkowicz O, et al. Teenager's Experiences of Life in Lockdown (TELL study). https://www.seed.manchester.ac.uk/education/research/impact/teenagers-experiences-of-life-in-lockdown/**

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TELL is a research project led by The University of Manchester and Liverpool John Moores University. TELL aims to understand 16- to 19-year-olds' experiences of the UK lockdown during the COVID-19 pandemic. Teenagers aged 16-19 in the UK were asked to provide a written account of their experiences of lockdown. They were asked to tell researchers what lockdown looked like for them, what it felt like, and how they managed it. More than 100 young people shared their experiences. In relation to loneliness, feelings of isolation and disconnect, many participants described missing people outside of their home, missing physical contact and feeling lonely and isolated. Some participants described struggling to feel connected to those outside their household. This included feeling unable to reach out, finding it hard to use virtual communication, or just slowly stopping talking to those outside their household. Participants often explained that although using technology did allow virtual connections outside their household, it didn't feel the same as face-to-face time.

- **Qualter, P., Verity, L., Jeffersen, R.,Barreto, M. et al. (2020; Fit2Belong). https://fit2belong.eu**

Fit to Belong was initiated following publication in the UK of the results of a large-scale survey – the BBC Loneliness Experiment - that explored the role of belongingness in different cultures. In the publication, it was clear that a lack of belonging was a common, but often confusing, experience for adolescents. Based on those data, the project partners decided to look for common solutions to help young people manage their loneliness experiences to feel more connected in their communities and schools.

The project consortium combines the research capacity of academics and the educational expertise of teachers and youth workers related to this issue of belongingness among adolescents, specifically among those in transition years. As project outputs, the partners will develop both formal and informal learning and teaching materials. These outputs will aim at supporting adolescents to create a sense of value and belonging within their environments and communities.

- **Verity, L., Qualter, P., Schellekens, T., & Maes, M., (2020; Tell me about loneliness project). https://spark.adobe.com/page/kvIOBgG8SKZOv/**

The 'Tell Us About Loneliness' project is focused on what loneliness means to young people aged 8-12 years. Interviews were conducted with young people from Belgium and Italy to ask them about what they thought loneliness was and what coping strategies they could suggest that would help young people, and those around them, cope with loneliness. The main findings were that someone could feel lonely even in the presence of friends and that people might feel lonely when they were excluded by their peers or when they did not have close relationships with others. Suggested coping strategies were reaching out to others and making an effort to join in with their friends, expressing their feelings (to a person or in a journal); peers could also help by approaching the person feeling lonely and including them in games; teachers can help encourage socialisation during school times and parents or close family members can help by acting as a confidant and providing comfort.

- **Branquinho C, Kelly C, Arevalo LC, Santos A, Gaspar de Matos M. "Hey, we also have something to say": A qualitative study of Portuguese adolescents' and young people's experiences under COVID-19. Journal of Community Psychology. 2020;48(8):2740-2752. DOI: https://dx.doi.org/10.1002%2Fjcop.22453**

Branquinho et al. (2020) explored the experiences of young people aged 16-24 during April- May 2020. Questionnaires were completed by 617 young people in Portugal. In relation to loneliness, young people reported feeling lonelier during lockdown than prior to lockdown, as well as a loss of contacts and decreased social skills. Young people reported coping strategies for dealing with feelings of loneliness such as communicating regularly with family and friends via video calls and carrying out

pleasurable activities (e.g. exercise, reading, watching TV series, playing an instrument, playing games etc.)

- **Ellis WE, Dumas TM, Forbes LM. Physically isolated but socially connected: Psychological adjustment and stress among adolescents during the initial COVID-19 crisis. Canadian Journal of Behavioural Science/Revue canadienne des sciences du comportement. 2020;52(3):177.** http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/cbs0000215

Ellis et al. (2020) studied the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on young people's stress surrounding the COVID-19 crisis, feelings of loneliness and depression as well as time spent with family, virtually with friends, doing schoolwork, using social media, and engaging in physical activity. Online surveys were completed by over 1000 Canadian adolescents. Results of the survey suggested that adolescents are very concerned about the COVID-19 crisis and are particularly worried about schooling and peer relationships. COVID-19 stress was significantly related to poorer adjustment, including more loneliness and more depression. Time with family, time connecting to friends, and physical activity were related to lower loneliness, beyond COVID-19 stress and might be promising ways to reduce loneliness.

General guidelines for developing resources to support young people:

<u>Content</u>

- Keep the tone **informal, conversational** and **direct**
- Content needs to be **accessible**, so not too academic or long
- Include **authentic youth voice** – incorporate young people's experiences and real-life stories
- Include **practical** and **tangible** advice
- Include onward **signposting** from reliable sources

<u>Format</u>

- Video resources should be a) **short and snappy**, and b) on topics that can be shared on social media
- Written resources should be **600-800 words maximum** with headers and sub headers to **break up the text** into theme
- Consider having **social media** content prepared to share alongside any resources that sit on specific websites as an effective way to steer young people towards the resources
- Resource needs to reach young people through **existing networks**

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