Escaping the bubble

Working together to tackle loneliness and social isolation across the UK

Photo (c) Chris Bull/UNP

Supporting

co op | British Red Cross

Working together to tackle loneliness in communities across the UK

Our common commitment to strengthening communities makes the Co-op and the British Red Cross perfect partners.

We worked together over 70 years ago, to raise funds to help vulnerable people at home and overseas cope in the aftermath of World War II. And in 2015 we announced we were uniting once more to tackle two of the most important issues of our current age – loneliness and social isolation.

Photo (c) Alex Rumsford

Richard Pennycook, Chief Executive, Co-op Group:

"We already know that ageing can be a risk factor for loneliness our research identifies how ordinary events in life have the potential to disrupt our social connections and can lead to individuals becoming lonely.

This rich insight shows that there is a role for businesses, individuals and community groups to play in preventing and responding to loneliness. Having identified the trigger groups we can act much earlier to prevent loneliness potentially becoming a chronic issue for many. It is clear that a lack of community groups can leave those experiencing loneliness with limited options to re-establish social connections.

Our 70,000 colleagues, supported by members in the 1,500 communities in which we operate, have already shown their support for this important issue by enthusiastically raising money to fund British Red Cross services and that support will continue.

In addition we will introduce new business approaches to support those either experiencing loneliness or at risk to the triggers of loneliness.

Mike Adamson, Chief Executive, British Red Cross:

"The British Red Cross supports thousands of people each year who are vulnerable and isolated. Every day our staff and volunteers see first-hand the damaging effects loneliness and social isolation have on people, many of whom are already in crisis.

Loneliness is not only hurting individuals by making them feel disconnected from themselves and their communities - it's hurting our public services too.

When left ignored loneliness can contribute to poor health, ultimately leading to an unnecessary loss in independence and the need for more formal support. This is a crisis we cannot ignore, but if we come together it's also a problem we can solve.

Our research shows that life transitions are key triggers for loneliness. We need to focus on these moments and work together to prevent loneliness from taking hold in the first place, by responding quickly and helping people to recover once they've hit crisis point."

Our review of existing knowledge

We began our partnership by looking thoroughly into the issues and building detailed evidence on what it is like to feel isolated and lonely.

To build on the British Red Cross' insight from decades of supporting socially isolated people in communities across the UK, we reviewed more than 100 pieces of research from the past 40 years.

We found plenty of evidence showing how loneliness impacts health and affects people in later life, but there were gaps in knowledge across wider age groups.

Photo (c) Simon Rawles

Our literature review is available on the British Red Cross website at **redcross.org.uk/lonely**

Our review of existing literature found

Loneliness and social isolation affects people's health, wellbeing and behaviour.

A lack of social connections can be linked to cardiovascular health risks and increased death rates, blood pressure, signs of ageing, symptoms of depression[1] and risk of dementia[2].

It could be as damaging to health as smoking[3] and as strong a risk as obesity[4].

Lack of social networks can be linked to poor diet, heavy drinking[5] and increased risk of re-hospitalisation after an illness[6].

Increased service usage by older people experiencing loneliness could cost up to £12,000 per older person over the next 15 years[7].

Changes to circumstances make people particularly susceptible to loneliness. When left ignored, loneliness can escalate from a temporary situation to a chronic issue.

What is loneliness?

Loneliness is a feeling that occurs when there is something missing or lacking in a person's social relationships, or when the quality or frequency of their relationships with other people is less satisfying than they would like.

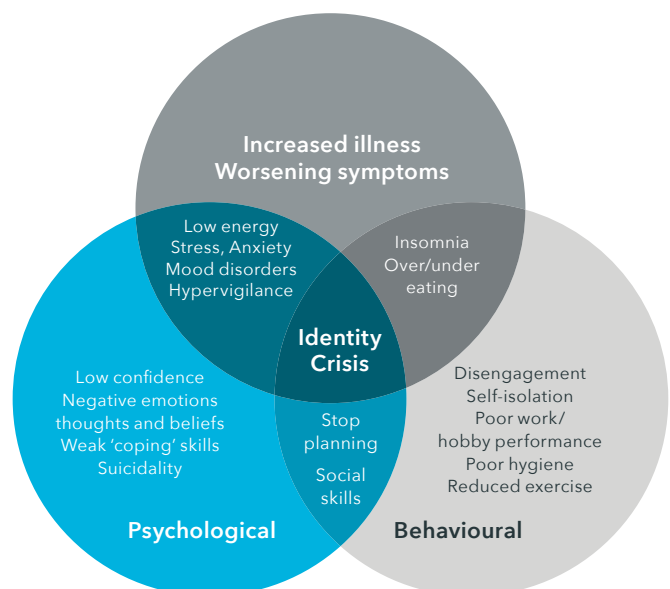You can still feel lonely even when surrounded by lots of people.

What is social isolation?

Social isolation is when someone lacks social ties, social integration or a sense of belonging to a community.

People can also experience emotional isolation – where a personal, intimate relationship is missing.

Social and emotional isolation can result in loneliness – but you can be isolated without feeling lonely or lonely without being isolated.

Summary of biological, psychological and behavioural impacts of loneliness

Increased illness / Worsening symptoms

Low energy
Stress, Anxiety
Mood disorders
Hypervigilance

Insomnia
Over/under eating

Identity Crisis

Low confidence
Negative emotions thoughts and beliefs
Weak 'coping' skills
Suicidality

Stop planning

Social skills

Disengagement
Self-isolation
Poor work/ hobby performance
Poor hygiene
Reduced exercise

Psychological

Behavioural

Trapped in a bubble: Our research into triggers for loneliness

We commissioned leading social researchers Kantar Public to help fill some of the gaps in existing knowledge on loneliness, looking into potential trigger points that can affect people of all ages. They worked alongside 45 experts and over 2,500 members of the public, including conducting in-depth interviews, group sessions and online forums with more than 100 people with experience of loneliness.

You can find out more about our research on the British Red Cross and Co-op websites. coop.co.uk/loneliness and redcross.org.uk/lonely

Trapped in a bubble

"What does it feel like to be lonely? I can tell you exactly, it's like being in a bubble and you want to get out but you just can't, you try and you can't do it, you just can't get out."

Male research participant Wales 55-74

An identity crisis

Loneliness and social isolation can create a spiral which people find difficult to escape.

Its impacts make connecting with other people even more difficult.

People describe feeling 'alone', 'trapped', 'without purpose', 'angry' and 'frustrated'. They may feel more tired, stressed and anxious.

They report behaving differently, shutting themselves off from others, talking less and taking less care of their appearance and hygiene.
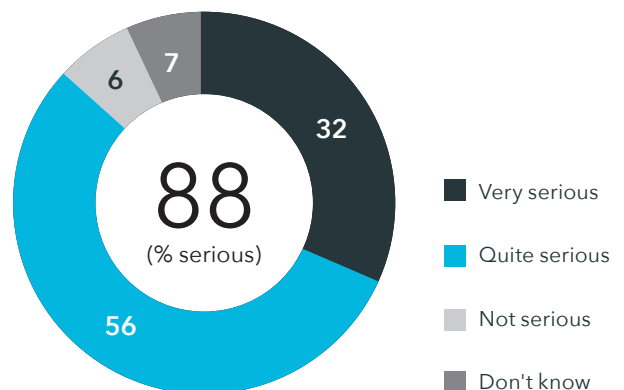
In more serious cases, loneliness triggered thoughts of self-harm and suicide.

A serious issue

88% of people agree that loneliness is a serious problem in the UK.

32% think it is very serious

How serious a problem do you think loneliness is in the UK today?

88
(% serious)

- Very serious
- Quite serious
- Not serious
- Don't know

An issue for everyone

- 80% of people have experienced loneliness

- only one in five have not

- 18% of people are always or often lonely

- 30% think older people are most likely to be lonely – but only 10% of over 65s say they are always or often lonely.

- Similar levels of loneliness were found in urban and rural areas

The complex causes of loneliness

Loneliness does not have one simple cause – it often results from a combination of complex and multi-layered factors.

These include:

- An individual (eg, their health, income, confidence, energy, emotions)

- Their connections (eg, friends and family, colleagues)

- Their community (eg, social activities and services available, transport)

- Wider society (eg, social and cultural norms, work/life balance)

Just as there is no simple cause, there is no single solution.

Not knowing where to turn for support

· 75% of people who are regularly lonely say they do not know where to turn for support. Relevant services are often unavailable – and where less formal support exists many people are reluctant to ask for help. A Co-op survey found two-thirds of people would be uncomfortable confiding in friends or family that they feel lonely.

The risks of big life changes

Although loneliness can affect anyone and has no single cause, the link to identity is common and crucial. It means major life events which change someone's sense of self and their ability to connect with other people should be seen as moments of particular risk.

Our research has therefore focused on six groups of people whose identity has been disrupted. In our public survey, 73% of people who said they were always or often lonely fell within one of these groups.

People with mobility limitations

"I no longer have the freedom of jumping on and off buses or driving my own car"

30% of people with mobility limitations said they always or often feel lonely

29% of people with limited access to transport said they always or often feel lonely

People with health issues

"Before I got ill I had a life. There are so many things that I can't even do"

32% of people with long-term health conditions said they always or often feel lonely

Photos: top left (c) Phil Smyth/BRC; others (c) Simon Rawles

Young new mums

"As a young mum with most friends not also having children a lot of friendships fell apart"

32% of young parents said they always or often feel lonely

People recently bereaved

"When I could feel more up to talking or going out, most people had moved on with their own lives"

54% of people who are recently bereaved and are regularly lonely said they wouldn't know where to turn for help

People recently divorced or separated

"I found it really hard being on my own again; you think going to a party and other occasions by yourself is a big thing"

33% of people who are recently divorced or separated said they always or often feel lonely

Retirees / people living without children at home

"I didn't expect routine to be as hard to set as it has been. I thought I'd be surrounded by more people"

46% of retirees who are regularly lonely said they wouldn't know where to turn for help

Photos: Simon Rawles

No single solution

Our research has shown that there is no one-size-fits-all solution to tackling loneliness. Different people need different kinds of support – and these needs can vary, depending on the level of their loneliness.

A mix of approaches are needed

- to **prevent** loneliness when people are at risk. e.g. encouraging small and easy gestures like saying hello to friends and asking colleagues how their day is going.

- to **respond** to people experiencing lower-levels of loneliness, including moments of transition in their lives. e.g. helping people forge new relationships, develop new interests, rediscover old skills and meet others going through similar experiences.

- to **restore** people's confidence and sense of connection when they have experienced loneliness over a longer period and their situation is at risk of becoming chronic. e.g. supporting people to rebuild their confidence and use their new-found self-assurance to build new, lasting connections.

Our partnership will provide all three forms of support.

In identifying triggers and groups of people at particular risk, we can target our interventions to prevent many people's situations becoming chronic. Providing timely and tailored support, we will bring the biggest benefits for individuals, communities, the NHS and other public services.

What does good look like?

Our research has identified eight principles of best practice for services that help people reconnect with their communities:

- Give a sense of purpose

- Be peer-led or co-designed with people in similar circumstances

- Be local and easy to access

- Be free or affordable

- Instil a positive sense of identity

- Provide clear goals and pathways to reconnection

- Provide benefits to others (such as through volunteering)

- Bring people together around shared interests

These principles provide the foundation of our responses to the serious issues we have identified.

The role of digital technology

Digital services and support can play an important role – but their value is in supplementing and facilitating face-to-face contact, not replacing it.

Photo (c) Simon Rawles

Escaping the bubble

British Red Cross - Responding to crisis

Thanks to the fundraising efforts of Co-op colleagues, members and customers, from 2017 and over the next two years we will be providing direct, personalised support for up to 12,500 people experiencing loneliness or social isolation of all ages across all four nations of the UK. We will recruit brand new teams of dedicated staff and volunteers to deliver new services in almost 40 locations, from the north of Scotland to the west of Cornwall. We'll provide a vital lifeline to people and their communities where we have identified low levels of current support and high levels of need.

Community connectors

Our highly skilled, professional community connectors – specialists in psychosocial support, safeguarding and supporting people experiencing social isolation and loneliness – and their teams of volunteers will provide up to 12 weeks of intensive, person-centred support to help thousands of people reconnect with their communities. Working closely with individuals to tailor the support they offer, our community connectors will identify relevant activities, interest groups and services in a local area and help develop confidence, resilience and independence so they are able to take part – and continue to enjoy the benefits of staying involved after our support has ended.

Support at home

These dedicated services will be targeted particularly at people with complex needs following life-changing events, identified as being at particular risk of chronic loneliness. They'll work with each person to agree goals towards regaining confidence and independence, and provide practical and emotional support to help them to achieve these goals. Working closely with other British Red Cross services and partner organisations across a local area, they'll provide immediate support and facilitate the building of lasting relationships for people who currently don't know where to turn.

Co-op - Pioneering a Business Response

We appreciate that strong communities which cater for a diverse range of individual needs can protect against or provide a way out of loneliness for many. As such, beyond our partnership with the British Red Cross, the Co-op can and will respond in a number of ways:-

Our Membership proposition will support thousands of community groups helping to build strong community connections.
We will also be calling on our members to volunteer with the British Red Cross to help deliver the new services to support those experiencing loneliness.

Our Funeralcare business will expand and develop its social groups for the bereaved, which will provide thousands of people across the country with ongoing care and social support at a crucial time in their lives.

Our Insurance business, is sponsoring Neighbourhood Watch to set up 30,000 new groups over four years to refresh and expand the network in order to help strengthen and bring communities and neighbours together, and will include communications and support around the issue of loneliness to new and existing groups.

Our colleagues - To help those colleagues who are experiencing loneliness, we are relaunching our Employee Assistance Programme which enables colleagues to confidentially seek less formal support as well as support for more serious issues such as psychological and trauma-related.

This will include signposting to relevant BRC services and other opportunities for colleagues experiencing loneliness. In addition we will also target pre-retirement communications to include planning for the impact of retirement on social connections.

A role for everyone

You don't have to be an expert to help someone experiencing loneliness or social isolation.
In our research, more than 80% of people agreed that 'there are lots of actions that everyone can take in their daily lives to help those feeling lonely to take these steps.'

Our partnership aims to support, empower and inspire everyone in communities across the UK to take these steps and tackle loneliness.

Only by working across the whole of our communities can we provide the long-term, sustainable solutions these serious and complex issues require. From charity and voluntary sector partners, community groups and leaders, trusted advisors such as GPs and housing associations, businesses, employers and members of the public – we can tackle loneliness together

Beyond direct services

Our ambition is to go above and beyond our target of supporting up to 12,500 people through British Red Cross services, and provide long-term sustainable support to help improve the lives of thousands more people.

We aim to do this through campaigning, advocacy and partnerships with other organisations.

Focus On: Advocacy

The Co-op and the British Red Cross will continue to engage with opinion formers and policymakers across the UK, at both the national and local level. We'll draw on our research findings to increase awareness of loneliness and to identify sustainable, collaborative solutions to tackle its causes and effects.

We will also seek to complement the work of other organisations on loneliness and social isolation to form a coalition of support and ensure even greater attention is given to the issues.

Resilient communities

We have a responsibility as a society to look out for each other in communities where we live and work. Small and simple actions can go a long way to making people feel included. Whether it's calling in on your neighbours more often, asking people how they are, giving a friend a lift to something they enjoy doing, or volunteering in your community – there are lots of things that you can do to help.

Volunteer with us

We're looking for a team of 500 volunteers to join with us in making a difference to the lives of socially isolated people the UK.

You'll play a key role in providing vital care and support in boosting people's confidence and helping them reconnect with their community, offering them positive encouragement, practical help and emotional support. The British Red Cross team will support you and ensure you are fully trained for the role.

To join us in tackling loneliness in your community, visit www.redcross.org.uk/tackleloneliness

Fundraising

The amazing efforts of Co-op colleagues, members and customers have seen the partnership smash its initial target and reach £4 million in just a year. We are now aiming to raise £5 million, enabling us to provide vital care and support to thousands more people. You can join in the effort by donating now in your local Co-op or British Red Cross store or at www.redcross.org.uk/lonely.

Photo (c) Alex Rumsford

And look out for how you can get involved in the next nationwide fundraising campaign with your local Co-op store, coming in March 2017.

The British Red Cross

The British Red Cross is a volunteer-led humanitarian organisation that helps people in crisis, whoever and wherever they are. As part of our humanitarian mission we have a long and proud record of supporting people experiencing social isolation in communities across the UK. We have been providing health and social care services in hospital and at home since the NHS was first established, almost seventy years ago.

We currently deliver more than 200 schemes, which every year support more than 175,000 people in crisis to live independently in their own homes and confidently in their communities.

The Co-op

The Co-op has 3,750 outlets, which serve 1,500 communities and 10 million people a week across the UK. Our long history of campaigning started when the Rochdale Pioneers formed the first customer owned co-op in 1844.

The pioneers gave their community safe food at a fair price and since then we've continued to make a stand on issues of importance to our members.

#tacklingloneliness
redcross.org.uk/lonely
coop.co.uk/loneliness

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