

# Tackling loneliness

The start of a new year can be tough if you're lonely, and it can even affect your health. We look at the epidemic of loneliness in the UK – and what you can do to beat it

BY JANE YETTRAM

IT'S HARD ADMITTING TO BEING LONELY, but loneliness is a condition that more and more of us are facing. When the Campaign to End Loneliness (CEL) analysed government statistics gathered between March 2020 and January 2023, they discovered that it is now affecting over half a million more people in the UK than during the first year of the pandemic when we were frequently in lockdown.

"For some, life went back to normal after the pandemic but for others it did not," says Dr Helen MacIntyre, CEL's Head of Evidence. "Reasons include a loss of social confidence, increased poor health and high inflation making it difficult for people to afford to socialise."

CEL's report, *The State of Loneliness 2023*, discovered that those under 30 were twice as likely to be chronically lonely than the over-70s. However, it also revealed that there were "hundreds of thousands of



chronically lonely older people living lives in severe social isolation often linked to bereavement, disability and frailty".

Other factors include unemployment, poverty and life changes such as retirement or leaving home for university. But anyone can feel lonely – and tackling it is vital because of its effect on our health. ➔

**Shared hobbies can bring much-needed social contact**



Playing a group sport, such as cricket, may help stave off loneliness

## Man with a Pan

How a social enterprise is helping men learn new cooking skills and find new friends

GATHERING together over food has always been about human connection, and cooking and eating with others is at the heart of Man with a Pan – an award-winning cookery course run by social enterprise Community Chef.

Over five weeks, men who live alone or are isolated meet to learn how to cook simple, tasty, healthy food. Each week, after preparing a meal, they eat together. They gain cooking skills, nutrition knowledge, confidence – and new friends.

"Man with a Pan brings together mostly older men who otherwise might not engage with positive social activities," says Community Chef founder Robin van Creveld. "At the same time, we promote

healthy eating, being active and mindfulness."

The project focuses on men because, Robin says, "Men rarely ask for help for emotional issues. However, with light-touch wellbeing activities like this, men share what's going on in their lives – and they are happier doing this in a single-sex group."

It's partly social conditioning that prevents men revealing any vulnerability but, says Robin, "Research shows that men of a certain generation subcontracted all social activities to their partners. They stopped having buddies and keeping up with their own social group and went where their partners led them."

Cliff Marchant lost his wife two-and-a-half years ago after

caring for her for three years. "The first course was spot on for me," says Cliff. "I'd hardly left the house for three months after my wife died. It coincided with the first lockdown and I was very lonely. Even though my neighbours checked in on me, I'd go days without seeing or speaking to anyone."

"I could already cook some basic dishes, but the course gave me the confidence to try

new things. I enjoyed meeting other men in a similar position to me, including Ron. He and I have remained friends and it's great to see him again on the follow-up course I'm doing now. I'm very grateful to Robin and his team for putting on an amazing programme."

Find out more at [communitychef.org.uk/man-with-a-pan](https://communitychef.org.uk/man-with-a-pan)

**'With activities like this, men share what's going on in their lives'**



Friends Cliff and Ron

## HEALTH CHECK

“A growing body of research has shown that loneliness is associated with a range of negative physical health outcomes, including a 29% increase in the risk of heart disease, a 32% increased risk of stroke and a 26% increase in risk of early mortality,” says Dr MacIntyre.

Mental health can suffer too. Dr MacIntyre says: “The psychological effects of loneliness can include a loss of self-confidence and self-esteem, increased sensitivity to social rejection, and an increased risk of stress, depression and anxiety.”

The truth is that loneliness matters. As US Surgeon General and loneliness expert Dr Vivek Murthy points out: “Loneliness is similar to hunger or thirst. It’s a warning sign that we need something to survive.”

### HELP IS AT HAND

**If you're feeling anxious or down, you can call our 24/7 Mental Health Helpline on 0800 414 8247 to book an appointment for support and advice.**



Group exercise has the added bonus of social interaction

## 5 ways to beat loneliness

Feeling down and isolated makes it harder to reach out to others, which in turn makes us even lonelier. But if you are lonely, there are ways to break that cycle



**1 VOLUNTEER REGULARLY**  
Since the 1980s, studies have confirmed that the ‘helper’s high’ – the release of mood-boosting hormones – is a key benefit of volunteering. Plus volunteering brings you into contact with others, adds structure and activity to your life, and gives you a sense of achievement and belonging.

**2 FIND A CREATIVE HOBBY**  
“Creative activities can help someone process and express their own feelings of loneliness freely, without

fear of judgement,” says Dr MacIntyre. Creative group activities such as singing in a choir, joining a book group or trying out a pottery course also bring much-needed social contact.

**3 TRY MINDFULNESS**  
Mindfulness – focusing on the present moment – stops us ruminating on our worries and allows us to notice the things we are grateful for. Recognising these things – a favourite meal, the kindness of a neighbour – or focusing on something in nature, such as the appearance of the first snowdrop, fosters wellbeing and empathy and makes building relationships easier.



**4 GET MOVING**  
Physical activity is a great reason to get out of the house. You don’t need to run a marathon – just go for a walk or a bike ride. Group exercise – joining a fitness class or a walking group – has the added benefit of social interaction.

**5 TALK...**  
Your doctor or a counsellor can help you with strategies for coping with feelings of loneliness, so do seek help. Even

talking to a friend or family member can help you break out of the isolation that loneliness brings.

● For more ideas and support, see [campaigntoendloneliness.org/feeling-lonely](http://campaigntoendloneliness.org/feeling-lonely)

