

Those most vulnerable to virus also most at risk of loneliness in lockdown

31 March 2020, by Heidi Harrington-Johnson



We're going to have to find more ways to connect with one another as physical distancing continues. Credit: Shutterstock

It is our collective responsibility to protect the most vulnerable from loneliness in the COVID-19 pandemic, says a social researcher from UNSW.

Loneliness is fast becoming one of today's most pressing issues, both in Australia and globally, and with the impact of COVID-19, the situation will inevitably worsen, says Dr. Sophie Lewis, a social researcher within the Centre for Social Research in Health at UNSW.

With the current recommendations for physical distancing, [vulnerable populations](#), such as the elderly, the homeless, and people living with disability and chronic health conditions, are likely to be the most affected, says Dr. Lewis.

But this focus on [loneliness](#) does mean that we are going to see greater public awareness to this as a serious social issue that requires attention, both at the community and the government level, she says. "I think there's going to be a real push for

new solutions and approaches to this."

What is loneliness?

Dr. Lewis says loneliness is a complex thing to define because it carries a lot of different meanings for different people.

"The first thing to emphasize is [that] it's not only an emotion that is experienced by the individual, but it's a [social phenomenon](#)," she says. "And it's really linked to our patterns of living and working and how we care for and interact with others."

We often equate loneliness with [social isolation](#), she says, but loneliness is not just about the number of social ties we have, or how connected we are in a physical sense. "It's about the quality of our connections and our real sense of belonging to others, and our feeling of being connected—or belonging to our community."

While it might be harder to feel these connections at the moment given the effects of COVID-19, we are still able to foster them, she says.

How to combat loneliness in lockdown

As more and more of Australia goes into lockdown, we are going to have to find alternative ways to connect with each other while physically distancing, she says.

"I think we're already starting to see changes happen in the way we socially connect at the grassroots level—where we're really seeing some new opportunities and mechanisms for enhancing belonging arising organically in the community through some of these online social media platforms," she says.

Regular contact through phone and video calls, texting, sharing pictures, walk-and-talk calls or online learning and exercise workouts are all ways

in which people can foster connection and community at this time. There is also good evidence to suggest that pets combat feelings of loneliness, she says.

Yet it is important to remember that the most socially disadvantaged in our society, will not have these resources, and these are the groups who are most vulnerable to the loneliness and isolation during this time, she says.

Though people with good social capital may feel lonely during the time they must self-isolate, they are likely to have good mechanisms in place to cope. For those who are already the most socially isolated and marginalized in our society, they are much less able to stay connected, she says.

Reaching out to those more vulnerable

People housebound with serious illnesses or those living with disability are the most vulnerable to loneliness during times of crises. There are also people whose only interaction with others might be by talking to the bus driver or the cashier at the bank or the shopping center, Dr. Lewis says.

"If you take that away, then there is no other means of social connection for these people. I think this is going to become a real issue."

Dr. Lewis, who was recently awarded an Australian Research Council Discovery Project grant with colleagues Professor Karen Willis at La Trobe University and Professor Lorraine Smith at Sydney University. Their research to investigate the effects of loneliness on those with chronic conditions such as type-two diabetes and asthma, shows that social interactions and social context help people to manage these conditions.

People's ability to live well with their condition is very much tied to their ability to be socially connected, she says.

"Having social capital and strong social bonds or networks helps people to navigate systems, and get access to the support that they need, both within the healthcare system but also in the community."

This is why in the current context it is really important for all of us to look out for those who may be more vulnerable or disadvantaged. For instance, a neighbor might help by picking up the groceries for someone who is unable to leave their home, she says.

"The COVID-19 pandemic requires looking at loneliness as more than an issue of the individual or a [personal responsibility](#); that it really is something that needs a social solution," she says. "We need to think about the structures in place that can help support social connectedness and social integration."

Provided by University of New South Wales

APA citation: Those most vulnerable to virus also most at risk of loneliness in lockdown (2020, March 31) retrieved 30 August 2022 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2020-03-vulnerable-virus-loneliness-lockdown.html>

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