

a brief
guide to
measuring

Loneliness

FOR CHARITIES
AND SOCIAL ENTERPRISES



In October 2018 the UK government announced a [strategy](#) to tackle loneliness in England, along with dedicated funding to help communities build stronger connections and alleviate loneliness.

At the same time the Office for National Statistics (ONS) worked with a panel of experts to recommend [a set of questions to help measure loneliness](#).

This guidance will help you use these measures in your evaluations.



who is this guidance for?

If you work in a charity or social enterprise and want to understand if your activities help people feel less lonely, then this guide is for you. You may be responsible for evaluating the overall impact of your organisation, or interested in how to think about alleviating loneliness in the context of your other aims.

In order to get the most of this guidance we expect you to know a little bit about evaluation and how to gather and analyse data about your project. If you'd like more help with planning your evaluation can find some advice and guidance at [KnowHow Nonprofit](#) and [Better Evaluation](#).

Because loneliness is related to many aspects of our life, you may also want to know how your activities can improve the overall wellbeing of the people you work with. We'll cover some recommended wellbeing measures briefly in this guide, and you can find more detail about these in our online guide on [Measuring your Wellbeing Impact](#).

This guide provides a brief introduction to measuring loneliness – for more evidence and resources, including a downloadable questionnaire to use in your evaluation, see our [website](#).

This guidance will help you use the national loneliness measures in your evaluations



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what is loneliness?

Loneliness is 'a subjective, unwelcome feeling of lack or loss of companionship. It happens when we have a mismatch between the quantity and quality of social relationships that we have, and those that we want'.¹

In other words, loneliness is the negative feeling we experience when the relationships we have do not match up to those we would like to have. This may be because we would like more people to talk to, or because our relationships are not as meaningful as we would like.

Although they can be closely linked, being lonely is not the same as being isolated. Isolation is about the number and type of social connections we have, not about how we feel those relationships are going. Being socially isolated could mean having few or infrequent social relationships, while loneliness reflects our feelings about those relationships. A person could be isolated but not lonely, or could feel lonely while being surrounded by other people.

We shouldn't try to assess how someone feels about their relationships just by counting how many friends or connections they have. Instead we should ask them to tell us directly how satisfied they are with those connections. The questions in this guide are designed to capture how people feel themselves - their subjective experience of loneliness.

These questions are about how often people experience loneliness rather than how strong those feelings are or how long they last. All of us are lonely at some point in our lives, so some loneliness is normal and unavoidable. We think it's important to understand and address chronic and persistent loneliness.

A subjective, unwelcome feeling of lack or loss of companionship. It happens when we have a mismatch between the quantity and quality of social relationships that we have, and those that we want.

1. Perlman, D. & Peplau, L. A. (1981) Toward a Social Psychology of Loneliness. In R.Gilmour & S. Duck (Eds.), Personal Relationships: 3. Relationships in Disorder (pp. 31-56). London: Academic Press

What do we know about loneliness?

Although feeling lonely sometimes is a normal part of life, being lonely all or most of the time can cause harm and affect our wellbeing. Feeling lonely has been linked to a number of negative outcomes in life - including increased risk of heart disease and stroke², depression, stress, low self-esteem³, and cognitive decline⁴.

Loneliness can be part of a cycle of negative outcomes, since experiencing mental and physical health problems can also lead to feelings of loneliness. Feeling lonely can also affect how we perceive others and view our place in society, causing us to withdraw even more⁵.

There's no single reason for feeling lonely, and the causes can vary between people or over the course of someone's life. Loneliness occurs not just after a decline in social contact, or a change in the quality of those relationships, but is also related to someone's sense of self and whether they feel they belong.

Loneliness is likely to occur due to a combination of underlying factors (including social and cultural expectations, external circumstances, and our own personality traits); triggers or life events (such as moving home or bereavement); and our personal attitudes and feelings about our situation at different time.



2. Valtorta et al. (2017) Loneliness and social isolation as risk factors for coronary heart disease and stroke: systematic review and meta-analysis of longitudinal observational studies. Heart. Jul 1;102(13):1009-16.

3. Steptoe, A. et al. (2004) Loneliness and neuroendocrine, cardiovascular, and inflammatory stress responses in middle-aged men and women. Psychoneuroendocrinology. Jun;29(5):593-611.

4. Cacioppo, J. T., & Hawkley, L. C. (2009) Perceived Social Isolation and Cognition. Trends in Cognitive Sciences, 13, 447-454.

5. Hawkley, L., & Cacioppo, J. (2010) Loneliness Matters: A Theoretical and Empirical Review of Consequences and Mechanisms. Annals of behavioral medicine: a publication of the Society of Behavioral Medicine. 40. 218-227.

If your organisation is working to alleviate loneliness, it's useful to know which events or triggers could push someone into feeling lonely at different points in life. Knowing about these could help you target your efforts where they could have the biggest impact, or understand how your activities fit into the context of people's lives:

STARTING SCHOOL



SOME EVENTS WHICH COULD TRIGGER

Loneliness

ACROSS OUR LIVES



TEENAGE PRESSURES



LEAVING UNIVERSITY



LEAVING SCHOOL



BULLYING

MOVING TO ANOTHER COUNTRY OR CITY
MOVING HOME



UNCERTAINTY ABOUT THE FUTURE
REFUGEES AWAITING ASYLUM TRIALS



BECOME DIAGNOSED AND LIVING WITH A HEALTH CONDITION OR DISABILITY



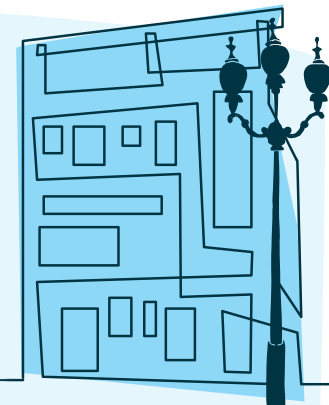
CHILDREN LEAVING CARE



OLDER PEOPLE MOVING INTO CARE



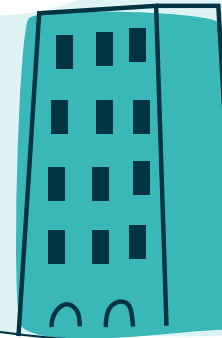
HOMELESSNESS



UNEMPLOYMENT



RETIREMENT



CHANGING JOBS



GETTING DIVORCED



BECOMING A PARENT
CARING FOR FAMILY MEMBERS



BEREAVEMENT



FAMILY BREAKDOWN



CHILDREN MOVING AWAY FROM HOME



What does the evidence tell us about tackling loneliness?

When we reviewed the research on what works to alleviate loneliness we found a number of things about the state of the evidence⁶.

The first thing we found is that researchers and evaluators were not using the term 'loneliness' consistently across studies, and often used it interchangeably with 'social isolation'. This makes it difficult to single out the activities that work to reduce those subjective feelings inherent in loneliness. Different studies also made different assumptions of when someone could be considered lonely based on these different measures, making it difficult to compare how effective different activities were.

Another finding was that most of the high-quality evidence we have for activities that alleviate loneliness is in studies about older people. This is because until fairly recently we have thought of loneliness as something that particularly affects us in old age. We need studies and evaluation that look at the experience of loneliness in children, young people and people of working age so that we can understand if different activities help people at different stages in their lives.

The studies we found were vary varied, and tested the effectiveness of all kinds of different activities. This reflects the state of the sector too - as many different projects take different approaches to alleviate loneliness. However, we don't necessarily know which settings or processes work best to deliver an activity.

We need more studies that look at loneliness in young people and people of working age

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The evidence suggests that three key mechanisms are involved in projects that help reduce loneliness:

Building meaningful connections between people

Reducing the stigma around loneliness

Tailoring approaches to individuals or groups

6. Victor, C. and (2018). An overview of reviews: the effectiveness of interventions to address loneliness at all stages of the life-course. What Works Centre for Wellbeing.



recommended measures for loneliness

The following 4 questions, identified by the ONS through a process of scoping and consultation, make up our national measures of loneliness. They are comprised of three indirect questions and one direct question to cover a comprehensive picture of loneliness. These questions are suitable for people over 16 years old.

The first three questions are based on the UCLA 3-item loneliness scale, which asks people indirectly about emotions associated with loneliness (they don't mention the word 'lonely'). The fourth question asks people directly about their feelings of loneliness. These questions are widely used across the world in studies of people of all ages, and can be asked in person or as part of a self-completed questionnaire.



Watch out for the order of possible responses:

The first three questions have response scales that go from positive to negative, while the fourth question reverses this.

The number of possible responses are also different between the first three and the fourth questions.

		Hardly ever or never	Some of the time	Often
Q1	How often do you feel that you lack companionship?	1	2	3
Q2	How often do you feel left out?	1	2	3
Q3	How often do you feel isolated from others?	1	2	3

		Often / always	Some of the time	Occasionally	Hardly ever	Never
Q4	How often do you feel lonely?	1	2	3	4	5



Why do we need four questions?

There are good reasons for asking all four questions, rather than just the stand-alone fourth question. The first is that the stigma of loneliness could cause people to under-report their feelings if just asked directly, and secondly the direct question might not tell us about the different aspects that contribute to a person's feelings of loneliness.

However, if you only have space for one question in your survey, you should use the fourth question: "How often do you feel lonely?"

Other loneliness measures

These are not the only questions that are used to measure loneliness, and you may already be familiar with some others. Some common and widely-used measures include: other versions of the UCLA Loneliness Scale, the The De Jong Gierveld Loneliness Scale or The Campaign to End Loneliness Measurement Tool.

If you are already using different measures that work for your project you shouldn't necessarily stop. This is especially important if you've been using this measure for a long time, or across a number of different groups and activities. Having consistent measures that are telling you something useful about your project over time may be more important than changing to a new measure.

However, the benefit of having a national set of questions is that if more projects are evaluated using these shared measures, researchers could have a better understanding of which activities are particularly effective. We could compare between different evaluations that use the same measure.

Even if you are using and are happy with other measures, we still recommend that you include Question 4: "How often do you feel lonely?"

By adding this question (and if possible the other 3 in the national set) to your existing survey you'll be able to benchmark against a national picture, compare your project against others and join us to build the evidence base on this simple direct measure.



When should you ask these questions?

These questions can be used to measure change over time, so ideally you would ask them at several points in your project. It's good practice to ask the questions as close to the start of your project as possible so you can establish your 'baseline'. You can then repeat the survey at a later date (usually 3 or 6 months) and compare the results.

Having a national set of questions will help us compare different projects to see what really works

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recommended loneliness measures for children

What do we know about loneliness in children and young people?

We know relatively little about what activities help reduce loneliness in children and young people – partly because the research has focused on older groups, but also because children may interpret loneliness slightly differently from adults.

When we talk to children about loneliness, they tell us about their relationships with friends and family, and they are keen to point out that you can feel lonely even if you are surrounded by people. Social isolation – as described above – is rare amongst children by virtue of their age: the vast majority of children attend school every day and have a parent or guardian who is responsible for looking after them. However, this does not mean that children don't experience loneliness. For some, loneliness is related to problems with friends, or because they feel different from others their age - for example they might have a disability, they might lack the toys, gadgets or clothes that their peers have, or they might struggle to make friendships for some other reason. For others, loneliness arises from an absence of supportive relationships in their family.

Research by The Children's Society found that among children aged 10-15, some were more likely than others to experience loneliness often. These include children who receive free school meals, live in cities (rather than towns or the countryside), and those who feel 'low' satisfaction with their health.

For young adults (aged 16-24) the research showed that girls are more likely to feel lonely than boys, that those reporting a long-term illness or disability were more likely to be lonely, as well as those who are living alone.

The combination of multiple issues or triggers to loneliness, or of more damaging experiences (such as bereavement, bullying, mental health problems or disability) may make it more difficult for children and young people to stop feeling lonely without help. It's particularly important to reduce the stigma of loneliness among young people by making it more acceptable to talk about, and to prepare children to understand and address loneliness in themselves and others. The research also recommended creating opportunities for social connection and encouraging positive uses of social media.

When we talk to children about loneliness, they tell us about their relationships with friends and family, and they are keen to point out that you can feel lonely even if you are surrounded by people

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Recommended questions for children

As part of the recommended national measures for loneliness, the ONS and The Children's Society carried out testing to find the best questions to ask children about this topic.

The questions are broadly similar to those suitable for adults, but the language is simpler. If you evaluate your projects and activities using these questions you'll be helping to build much needed evidence on this topic. These questions are suitable for children aged 10-15 years old.

The Children's Society and the ONS have created additional tips and resources - including topic guides and consent forms - for having conversations with children about loneliness. You can find them [here](#).



A measure across ages

You'll notice that the fourth question is the same whether you talk to children or adults. This makes it a valuable question to find out how your project is affecting people across different age groups.

		Hardly ever or never	Some of the time	Often
Q1	How often do you feel that you have no one to talk to?	1	2	3
Q2	How often do you feel left out?	1	2	3
Q3	How often do you feel alone?	1	2	3

		Often / always	Some of the time	Occasionally	Hardly ever	Never
Q4	How often do you feel lonely?	1	2	3	4	5

Other measures of children's wellbeing

As with adults, the experience of loneliness in children is closely related to their overall wellbeing, and linked with how they experience different aspects of their lives.

If you're interested in measuring children's overall wellbeing, we recommend looking at the [Good Childhood Index](#), developed by The Children's Society. This is a short questionnaire that can be completed by children themselves and is used to measure wellbeing overall and in relation to ten aspects of children's lives.



what else to measure in a loneliness evaluation

Although this guidance is about using the new national measures of loneliness, your project is probably trying to improve other aspects of people's lives as well.

We still don't know enough about how different aspects of people's lives are related to their experience of loneliness, so asking about these related factors could really help the improve our understanding of loneliness.

Here are some recommended questions to measure people's overall wellbeing, their experience of social relationships and support, and their feelings about the area they live in.



Questionnaire template:

You can find all these questions with their answer scales in our editable loneliness questionnaire template. Find it on our [website](#)

1. National Personal Wellbeing Measures (ONS4):

These are the questions we ask in the UK to measure people's subjective sense of wellbeing. They can be benchmarked against national data (to local authority level) from the [Office for National Statistics](#). You can ask all of them or just some, but if you only ask one question, we recommend that it's the first one on the list.

Overall, how satisfied are you with your life nowadays?

Overall, to what extent do you feel that the things you do in your life are worthwhile?

Overall, how happy did you feel yesterday?

Overall, how anxious did you feel yesterday?



2. Social relationships and support:

These are good questions to find out what kinds of relationships people have in their communities. They can be benchmarked against national data in England using the [Community Life Survey \(DCMS\)](#). There are lots of other questions about our social lives in this survey, and you may want to check if any others are relevant to your work.

If I needed help, there are people who would be there for me

If I wanted company or to socialise, there are people I can call on

How often do you chat to your neighbours, more than to just say hello?

Asking about these related factors could help improve our understanding of loneliness

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3. Trust, belonging, and feelings about the area:

We know that our sense that people can be trusted, and that we belong and are happy with where we live are important to our wellbeing and to the wellbeing of our communities. People who feel that they belong and who trust others are also less likely to experience chronic loneliness, so these are good questions to ask to check if people are at risk of becoming lonely. You may also be trying to improve the local area as a place for people to live, so these questions could help you understand how people feel about their neighbourhood. The questions can be benchmarked against national data in England using the Community Life Survey (DCMS).

How strongly do you feel you belong to your immediate neighbourhood?

Generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted, or that you can't be too careful in dealing with people?

Overall, how satisfied or dissatisfied are you with your local area as a place to live?

4. Demographics:

You'll want to ask some questions to find out more about the people who take the survey, their personal background and their households. We know some groups of people are more likely to experience chronic loneliness, so you may want to add some of these options to your demographic questions if you don't have them already. You could include: age; gender; number of people living in the household; marital status/living as a couple; rented or owned accommodation, poor health, disability or limiting conditions.





having conversations about loneliness

Dealing with difficult topics

Asking these questions may make some people uncomfortable. Loneliness can be a difficult subject for people to talk about, and also carries a stigma in our society.

This is the case both for the people asking the question (who may be volunteers or people leading activities) and for those being asked. However, when researchers tested these questions, people were generally not upset by being asked, and people of all ages felt that loneliness was an important topic to talk about and measure.

Qualitative evidence about loneliness

As well as asking people about loneliness through questionnaires, you may also decide to have more open-ended conversations with people about their experiences. These kinds of conversations can generate qualitative evidence - stories, feedback and opinions, photographs, videos, and so on - which can give you important insights into the value that your project has for people's lives.

This qualitative evidence is useful in exploring questions more fully, and understanding in a more nuanced way the factors that are associated with someone's loneliness. Qualitative research usually involves smaller samples in comparison to quantitative research, but the information is much richer and detailed. You can gather qualitative data through a range of methods, most commonly through focus groups and interviews.

You can think of qualitative interviews as "guided conversations" in which you ask more open-ended questions, in order to encourage people to talk about their own experiences in their own words without being influenced by you or limited in what they can express by a closed question. Your role as interviewer is to listen, observe, build rapport and ask questions sensitively.

You can find more advice and tips on carrying out and using qualitative research in [this guide by NPC](#).

Whether you are carrying out a survey, focus group or informal interview, it's important to set the scene so people know what you want to ask them about. It's best not to use the word loneliness when you begin these conversations because it may affect how people respond to the questions.



Staff and volunteers should be prepared and supported in having these conversations with people. If you're asking these questions of people who may be at particular risk of feeling lonely (such as those living alone, with health conditions, carers or unemployed people) you should make sure that you prepare to provide them with support or signpost to external support services if needed. You should also make sure they understand that answering the questions will not result in them being excluded from your project or activity.



Conversations with children and vulnerable adults

Loneliness can be a sensitive topic for many people, so conversations about loneliness should be handled with the care - especially when involving children and vulnerable adults in your evaluation.

Children think that loneliness is an important topic to ask about, but they also recognise that it could be upsetting for some to talk about. If you are a charity or social enterprise that works with children, you are also likely to be working with those who face difficulties in their relationships with family or friends. It will be important to make sure that you have the right type of support in place for children during and after asking them questions about loneliness so that they can process their feelings and access support if they want to.

In relation to privacy, children say that where they answer questions on loneliness matters less than whether their responses can be seen by others. If you're feeling lonely, you might not want others to know until you're ready to tell them. Confidentiality and anonymity are (almost always) assured in surveys of children, but they are especially important to consider when asking about sensitive topics such as loneliness. Similarly, you need to consider where and when you ask these questions - of children or adults - to make sure people feel comfortable in answering them.



Introducing the topic:

We suggest you start the conversation by saying something like "The next few questions are about your relationships with others. There are no right or wrong answers - we want to know what you think, and we won't tell anyone about the answers you give. If any of these questions make you uncomfortable you don't have to answer them."





making sense of the results

Analysing your findings to look for patterns or changes is an essential part of your loneliness evaluation, and how you go about it will depend on a number of things. These might include your approach to other evaluations, your confidence and skills in analysing data, and the audience of the evaluation.

For the purposes of this guide we've assumed that you have experience in making sense of evaluation findings more generally, so the guidance will mainly cover those aspects of analysis that are specific to these loneliness measures.



You can find more information and tips on analysing and using your data on our [online guidance for measuring wellbeing impact](#), and on the [Better Evaluation](#) website.

Scoring

The responses for the first three questions can be combined to calculate a 'loneliness score' from 3 to 9 for each respondent. The lowest possible combined score on the loneliness scale is 3 (indicating less frequent loneliness) and the highest is 9 (indicating more frequent loneliness). However, there is no agreed threshold above which someone would be considered lonely - and it's more helpful to look at the average scores across your sample to see what has changed over time, and how different people score relative to the average.

The fourth question should be treated separately in terms of scoring, and the results shouldn't be added to the aggregate score for the first three - it's a stand alone score.

Benchmarking your results to other surveys

As well as comparing your results over time - by asking the questions at the start and end of your project or at other intervals - you may also want to compare your results against a national picture.

The first three questions are asked as a set as part of a large survey of older people in England, the [English Longitudinal Study of Ageing \(ELSA\)](#), so they are a good choice if you work with over 50s and want to compare your results to a national picture.

The fourth question is also asked in a number of surveys and studies across the world, including ELSA and the annual Community Life Survey ([CLS](#)) in England, so it's a good choice for looking at loneliness across all age groups. It tells us how common chronic loneliness is in a population, so it's useful for determining the size of the problem in different groups.



The CLS also covers other aspects of local life such as belonging, social cohesion, volunteering and participation, so it tells us how loneliness is related to these other factors. You may want to look at this CLS [factsheet on loneliness](#) for inspiration on how to communicate your results.

As part of its strategy for tackling loneliness, the UK government has committed to including these measures in other national surveys. In the future you will be able to use data from these surveys to benchmark your results. Some of the surveys that will adopt the measures in coming years are: [National Travel Survey](#), [Active Lives Adult Survey](#), [English Housing Survey](#), [Taking Part Survey](#) and [Tri-service families continuous attitude survey](#).



The more organisations and projects use these national measures of loneliness in their evaluations, the better we will be able to understand what works and compare across different kinds of activities.

For a full list of resources and further reading, including a downloadable loneliness questionnaire to use in your evaluation, visit our [loneliness webpage](#).

If you're measuring the impact of your activities on people's loneliness we'd love to hear from you!

You can send your evaluation reports or get in touch with any questions about this guide at info@whatworkwellbeing.org

Key sources

[A connected society: a strategy for tackling loneliness](#). Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (2018)

[National Measurement of Loneliness: Compendium](#). Office for National Statistics (2018)

[Children's and young people's experiences of loneliness](#). Office for National Statistics (2018)

[What do we know about tackling loneliness?](#) What Works Centre for Wellbeing (2018). This briefing was translated from Victor, C. and (2018). An overview of reviews: the effectiveness of interventions to address loneliness at all stages of the life-course. What Works Centre for Wellbeing.

This guide was developed by Ingrid Abreu Scherer, Wellbeing and Civil Society Lead at the What Works Centre for Wellbeing.

We are an independent organisation set up to produce robust, relevant and accessible evidence on wellbeing. We work with individuals, communities, businesses and government, to enable them to use this evidence make decisions and take action to improve wellbeing.

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