

TITLE: All the lonely people

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If you felt lonely sometime in the past decade you were not alone. Loneliness – the disconnect we feel when our desire for interpersonal relationships is not met by those we perceive we currently have – was experienced by three out of ten Australians between 2001 and 2009. Although the subjective nature of this experience makes measuring loneliness difficult, understanding it is important for the development of a range of social policies.

A recent paper by The Australia Institute found that an episode of loneliness was most likely to last for less than a year; however, for those whose experience extended beyond 12 months, it was more likely to last for three or more years, with 13 per cent of respondents also identifying repeat episodes. The proportion of Australians experiencing loneliness in any given year was fairly consistent at around one in ten people (9 per cent).

The paper also considered risk indicators associated with loneliness and the use of online social networking sites. Research into the relationship between using sites such as *Facebook* and loneliness is a relatively new field of study. The Institute conducted an online poll into the relationship between social media and loneliness in Australia.

Facebook users who were identified as experiencing loneliness tended to have fewer online "friends" and were also less likely to consider these friends as real friends. However, users of social networking sites who are lonely were more likely to report increased communication with family and friends. This finding suggests that some people experiencing loneliness may be endeavouring to access social support through online social networking sites. In contrast, users of social networking sites who were not experiencing loneliness were more likely to be utilising social media to further expand what is already a solid foundation of social support.

If you lived on your own or were a single parent you were, on average, almost twice as likely to experience loneliness, as people living in couple households. The risk of experiencing loneliness was greater for adults living with children. Couples with children were lonelier than couples without children. Although household type was found to be a key determinant of loneliness, there was no real difference between the levels of loneliness recorded in urban, regional or rural areas of a state.

Men and women also experience loneliness differently. In the period studied, more men (36 per cent) recorded episodes of loneliness compared with women (29 per cent). The intensity of loneliness increases for men up to the age of 60 years before reducing again. Whereas for women the level of loneliness experienced was greater in their younger years and decreased in later life. Amongst younger people (aged 25-44), men were four times as likely to live alone and were more than twice as likely to be lonely.

Having children also influences the level of loneliness experienced by men and women differently. Women are more likely to be lonely if they are living in a couple household with children, but in couple households without children men are proportionally more likely to be lonely.

The gender difference is also affected by the amount of income earned. Low income earners accounted for two thirds (65 per cent) of people who became more dissatisfied with their financial situation in the same year as they became lonely. Young women on low incomes are most likely to experience loneliness. It is not surprising, then, that an increased dissatisfaction with one's financial situation is a risk factor for experiencing loneliness. People feeling disconnected from their community and experiencing loneliness are less likely to volunteer, and are also more likely to feel dissatisfied with the neighbourhood in which they live.

Community disconnection and the associated drop in volunteerism amongst lonely people have implications for the Federal Government's Social Inclusion Agenda. It is not hard to imagine that people who are experiencing loneliness are less likely to feel a part of the community in which they live. The new findings about loneliness and social networking sites pose some interesting questions about the benefits and shortcomings of utilising such sites to increase access to social support, especially amongst younger people. There is a risk that social networking sites may be over promoted at the expense of other forms of engagement. All levels of government need to recognise the risk that online social connections may in fact mask real social disconnection.

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