

# Helping people to manage isolation



Whether feeling ill, detached or having moved to a new country, we all know what it feels like to feel alone.



But for some, loneliness is a constant companion. If you or someone you know is dealing with isolation, this guide explores practical ways to help.

## Understanding isolation

Isolation refers to the state of being separated or set apart from others, physically, socially, or emotionally. Life circumstances, health factors, and cultural barriers can all contribute to feeling isolated, with recent increases in remote working making this an increasingly relevant issue.

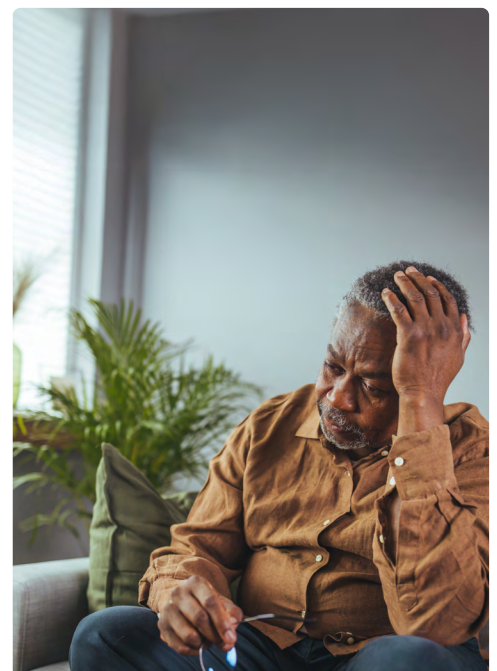
Remote workers, the elderly, and people with disabilities are often the groups most affected by isolation, but it can affect anyone.

Isolation usually involves:

**Physical separation** – being alone or removed from others geographically or spatially.

**Emotional disconnection** – feeling detached or unable to connect with others emotionally, even if physically present and surrounded by other people.

**Social withdrawal** – the lack of interaction or engagement with friends, family, or community.



## The effects of isolation

Isolation can have significant effects on a person's physical and mental wellbeing. These include:

### ■ Mental health effects

Isolation often leads to feelings of loneliness, sadness, and a lack of purpose, which can increase the risk of developing clinical depression. A lack of social activity can also heighten feelings of anxiety and lead to stress from feeling disconnected or excluded. Isolation is associated with memory loss and a higher risk of conditions like dementia or Alzheimer's disease, particularly in older adults.

### ■ Emotional effects

People may feel unworthy, unloved, or invisible due to prolonged disconnection from others. This lack of self-esteem can then cause individuals to feel emotionally detached, making it harder to connect with others when opportunities arise.

### ■ Physical health effects

Chronic isolation and loneliness have been linked to increased inflammation, reduced immunity, and higher risks of heart disease and diabetes.

### ■ Behavioural effects

Isolated individuals may find it increasingly difficult to maintain relationships and become socially withdrawn. This can lead to unhealthy behaviours such as overeating, substance abuse, or a sedentary lifestyle as coping mechanisms.

## How you can help someone experiencing isolation

Isolation can be especially tough when a person doesn't have anyone to connect with or share their experiences.

If you know someone who feels isolated, here are a few ways to help them feel supported:

- 1 Ask how they feel**  
Try asking open-ended questions to show you want to understand their perspective, such as: "What do you find is the most difficult thing about being isolated?". This may reveal fears or concerns that you weren't aware of and puts you in a better position to help.
- 2 Validate their feelings**  
The feeling of being heard can be very powerful. Help them feel at ease by showing that you're listening and validating their feelings; try not to minimise or dismiss their feelings by telling them not to worry. Making it clear you understand their situation can provide them with great comfort.
- 3 Ask what you can do to help**  
Once you've understood what their specific fears, worries or concerns are, offer help by asking how you can best support them. If they're unsure, try suggesting different options, such as asking what time is best to call them or if they'd like to arrange a call or meet up with friends or family. Avoid making assumptions about what kind of help they need, and don't force them to accept your suggestions.
- 4 Encourage them to reach out**  
People who are isolated are more likely to feel lonely, anxious or down, making them less likely to initiate contact. Reassure them that you want to hear from them. You can also offer to check in with them regularly. This can help them feel more comfortable reaching out to you in future.
- 5 Plan something fun**  
Give them something to look forward to by coming up with ideas they might enjoy. Try to be flexible and make suggestions instead of demands so that they don't feel pressured into committing to something they might not enjoy.

Isolation affects everyone differently, so it's essential to allow them to express their feelings and actively listen to their perspective. Understanding their needs and offering thoughtful suggestions will help them feel cared for and supported.

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### About WPA

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