# **A picture containing text, vector graphics  Description automatically generatedManaging Loneliness in the Covid-19 pandemic**

Loneliness is something that a lot of us are feeling right now, with the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic. While socially distancing protects us from the virus, it has kept us apart from other people. This can have a significant impact on our wellbeing, as it is well-documented in **psychological research** that in-person social connections contribute to positive mental health. At a time where we cannot see our loved ones, it is important to be mindful of how isolation impacts the way we feel, and what we can do to combat loneliness.

Several studies have looked at the effect of the Covid-19 pandemic on feelings of loneliness. A UK study, using over 38,000 participants, found that **loneliness levels increased** during the first lockdown for people who had already described themselves as being lonely. This included people with mental health conditions and those with emotional regulation difficulties. Furthermore, an analysis of **Google searches** showed increased instances of googling ‘loneliness’ in the month leading up to lockdown, and the subsequent first few weeks. Research has also looked at the **‘risk factors’** for loneliness (things that can make you more likely to feel lonely): these include living by yourself and being in a younger age group (18-24). See the reference list below.

**RESEARCH**

What can we do to manage our loneliness?

While it is difficult to meet our loved ones at this time, there are ways in which we can stay connected while physically distancing:

***Reach out to people you know.*** We all need to lean on our social support network sometimes, now more than ever. Starting a chat about how you are feeling can show that there are others willing to support you, and you can support them too. In fact, **research** has found that a good sense of a support network is linked to reduced feelings of loneliness. Reaching out to mental health professionals or support lines can also provide a supportive space to speak about your feelings.

It has been argued that the phrase **‘physical distancing’** is more appropriate than ‘social distancing’!

***Planning activities.*** A **recent study** looked at the coping strategies used by older adults to manage loneliness (see references). They found that purposefully planning activities was helpful, as it gives you something to look forward to. Planning activities can help bring a structure to your day, distract yourself if you’re feeling low, and help give you a sense of control. One activity could be a socially distanced walk with a friend, boosting the feeling of social connection. You can also plan activities that you find enjoyable alone, such as focusing on an art project or doing a home workout.

***Use technologies*** such as Zoom to have face-to-face check-ins with loved ones. However, bear in mind that social media has its flaws: **scrolling through Facebook** has been shown (pre-pandemic) to negatively impact your wellbeing, instigating comparisons with others. If you are finding using technologies difficult, a friend or professional may be able to help you or direct you to further support. In Hope College, we can offer support with technology and occasionally host IT drop-in sessions. Please contact us on 01753 690950 or email Mailbox.HopeCollege@berkshire.nhs.uk.

Being kind to yourself

Loneliness is said to be an emotion with **stigma**: people don’t want to talk about it because they don’t want others to know they are lonely. One thing you can do is practise **self-compassion** to help ease these feelings. A **recent study** found that adolescents with high self-compassion had decreased feelings of loneliness, which was impacted by their worry about what others would think of them. Another **study**, conducted with students from Turkey, found a direct link between increased self-compassion and decreased feelings of loneliness. Being kind to yourself can help you cope with these feelings of loneliness.

*What steps can we take?*

Start off by trying to **recognise** the emotion of loneliness: what does it *look like* when you are lonely? What sort of *thoughts* are associated with loneliness? You might find that you are having quite negative thoughts surrounding feeling lonely. Try coming up with some **positive alternatives** that you can have to hand. These could be:

This pandemic won’t last forever: while it’s difficult now, in 10 years’ time it will look very different

If a friend was feeling like this, what would I say to them?

If I knew my friend was lonely, I would pick up the phone and call them. Who can I call that I could have a chat with?

I am allowed to feel lonely sometimes and I will not be angry at myself for having very natural emotions

What enjoyable activities could I distract myself with? I could watch my favourite TV show, go for a walk, do some cleaning…

Remember that feeling lonely is **very normal** during these difficult times! You are not alone: you can reach out to your healthcare professional, or access support through organisations such as the Samaritans ([www.samaritans.org/branches/slough](http://www.samaritans.org/branches/slough)).

Hope College is also here to support you if you’re feeling lonely during these difficult times. You might enjoy our Ways to Wellbeing workshop; please [click here](https://www.enablingtownslough.com/courses/ways-to-wellbeing/) to learn more. Our supportive material on Managing Emotions During COVID, which you can see by [clicking here](https://www.enablingtownslough.com/educational-material/managing-emotions-during-covid/), might also give you some useful tips. Finally, you can always ring CMHT and the Recovery Team on 01753 690950. We can get through this together!

References (referencing the work summarised above)

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Useful links

<https://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/tips-for-everyday-living/loneliness/tips-to-manage-loneliness/>

https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/coronavirus/loneliness-during-coronavirus

https://www.nhs.uk/oneyou/every-mind-matters/coping-loneliness-during-coronavirus-outbreak/