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Is modern life making us lonely?

By Vanessa Barford
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It can be hard to admit to feelings of loneliness, but one in 10 Britons is lonely. It's not just an issue for the elderly -

Loneliness is rising among the young. So are we all destined to be lonely?

"No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main," wrote the poet John Donne in the 17th Century.

Some people seek isolation, but few choose to be lonely.

Loneliness not only makes us unhappy, but it is bad for us. It can lead to a lack of confidence and mental health problems like depression, stress and anxiety.

Studies have consistently shown that one in 10 of us is lonely, but a **report by the Mental Health Foundation** suggests loneliness among young people is increasing.

At the same time, social changes such as the rise of the solo dweller and the surge in social networks, combined with an ageing population, are changing the way people interact with each other.

So is modern life making us lonely?

People feel lonely for different reasons, says Michelle Mitchell, charity director general of Age UK, but it tends to be triggered by a big life event.

Befriending services can transform lives

"It can be poor health, illness, money, children moving away, feeling cut off from family and friends and the community, friends dying, a lack of access to transport, redundancy or career problems or divorce. Often it's when people lose a sense of purpose and contribution.

"Bereavement is also a big issue - losing your husband or wife can have a really detrimental impact on how people feel about the world," she says.

It is a feeling that Pam, whose husband Peter died four years ago, identifies with.

"You meet other men, who are on their own. That's not what I'm looking for. What am I looking for? I'm looking for my husband aren't I, and I'm never going to find him," she says.

But while bereavement and ill health may be inevitable, there's a sense modern society is exacerbating other triggers of loneliness.

Dr Andrew McCulloch, chief executive of the Mental Health Foundation, argues although there is no hard historic data to show loneliness - which is arguably subjective - is getting worse, there is some sociological evidence.

"We have data that suggests people's social networks have got smaller and families are not providing the same level of social context they may have done 50 years ago.

"It's not because they are bad or uncaring families, but it's to do with geographical distance, marriage breakdown, multiple caring responsibilities and longer working hours," he says.

The lonely old lady is probably the most obvious stereotype. Fifty years ago, people tended to live closer to their elderly parents, but travel and work opportunities have led more people to move further afield.

Last year, **charity WRVS** warned more than 360,000 older people felt lonely

Find out more

- Solos On Loneliness is on BBC Radio 4 on Tuesday 9 April at 11.00 BST

BBC Radio 4

Europe's loneliness divide

There were 7.1 million single-person households in England and Wales in 2011, according to the **Office for National Statistics**. That's up from 6.5 million over the previous decade, although the proportion of all homes housing just one person remained at 30%.

EU figures suggest that, in the UK as a whole, 13% of the population lives alone. Denmark has the highest proportion of single-dwellers, at 24%. In Germany, Finland and

because their children were too far away and "too busy to see them".

It was a feeling Alice, 94, from Yorkshire, was familiar with until she joined a befriending service. She says her daughter and granddaughter are always "very busy working" and she felt incredibly isolated until Andrew, 44, started taking her out to the shops once a week.

"He makes me feel wanted and I don't just say that. He's worth a fortune, I would be lost without him, and I mean lost," she says.

The impact isn't just emotional. Studies suggest **social isolation is associated with a higher rate of death** in older people and **loneliness is the "hidden killer"** of the elderly.

Does social networking help people stay in touch - or just the opposite?

But McCulloch says loneliness transcends "all ages and all classes". It could just as easily affect a young person going from school to college struggling to make friends, isolated single parents or someone not in education or employment.

For Lucy, who is in her 30s and from Birmingham, divorce - which is four times the rate it was 50 years ago - was the catalyst.

"Even though I was surrounded by people, nobody I knew was going through the same experience," she says.

Going to a support group enabled her to rebuild her life, but she says she still feels empty when her daughter's father picks her up at the weekend.

"My life is very busy juggling work and having this lovely five-year-old around me. It's a big shock to the system when I'm

Sweden, that number is just below 20%.

The figures suggest that in southern Europe people are less inclined to live alone. In Greece, Spain, Portugal, Bulgaria and Romania, that amounts to fewer than 10% of people, with Malta having the lowest rate at about 7%.

More from the Magazine

suddenly on my own again. I find negative thoughts coming into my head and need to distract myself from becoming anxious and worrying about loneliness," she says.

The rise of the solo dweller is also thought to have had an impact.

The proportion of adults living alone in England and Wales almost doubled between 1973 and 2011, from 9% to 16%, according to the ONS.

Of the 16%, 28% are aged between 35-54 years old, but one **study suggests people of working age who live alone** increase their risk of depression by up to 80% compared with people living in families.

Social networking websites have also come under fire for reducing face-to-face contact and making people more isolated, although Mitchell says they can also help some people stay in touch.

But if modern society is making us more lonely, what can be done to counter it?

Mitchell says there needs to be more investment in social help such as befriending schemes - which relies on volunteers - and community outreach programmes, as being part of a social network such as a walking club or local church can help alleviate loneliness.

But she says we also have a responsibility to "think more openly and creatively about how to deal with one of the greatest social problems of our time".

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- After a study suggested an increasing number of people were feeling lonely, we explored the **difference between loneliness and being physically alone**
 - Author James Friel asked why **couples can be so mean to single people** and **readers responded** with their own experiences
 - In examining how the dream of home ownership created tiny flats for individuals, historian Lisa Jardine recalls **homes housing not just nuclear families but servants and lodgers** too

"In the Isle of Wight a community has set up a time bank which is working really well. People share skills and assets.

"There's a huge market in peer-to-peer marketing, on websites such as eBay, and people are swapping houses for a week as part of their holidays. There has got to be something along those lines we can do," she says.

McCulloch agrees innovation is key.

"Instead of living alone, people could club together to buy houses - a friend is doing that in his old age, it's mini commercial enterprise," he says.

But he says there needs to be a cultural shift so that people are more concerned about the welfare of those in their communities.

"There is a philosophical issue that arguably society is too materialistic and individualistic.

"Just a basic level of social behaviour, such as saying hello, or asking if people are OK, can have an impact," he says.

There is also still a stigma around loneliness which needs to be changed, and psychological therapy will help, he adds.

Mitchell believes a tipping point is around the corner.

"I think we'll look back and think 'how did we allow that to happen?' It's like looking back at the issue of children going to work at 12 - there's something so fundamentally wrong with what's happening," she says.

On volunteering

Jean Malcolm, 64, volunteers with Contact the Elderly, which hosts Sunday afternoon tea parties for people over 75

"I first heard about the charity from my mother-in-law, who hosted tea parties. When the charity came to Angus, on the east coast of Scotland, I started.

"Once a month volunteer drivers collect guests and a volunteer host has a tea party for about 8-12 people. It's always the same group, so people get to know each other and become friends. It gives them something to look forward to.

"Sunday can be a very lonely day. Quite a few people don't have family, so the tea parties make them feel like someone is interested in them.

Solos On Loneliness is on BBC Radio 4 on Tuesday 9 April at 11.00BST or listen to for seven days afterwards on the [BBC iPlayer](#).

"It also gives them an opportunity to put their good clothes on."

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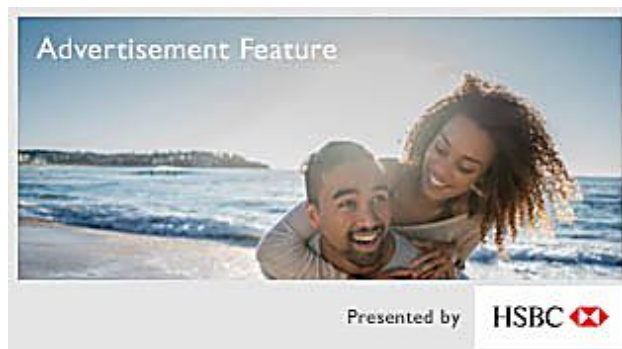
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A promotional poster for the play "On the Exhale". It features a black and white portrait of a woman with long blonde hair. The text includes a quote from Ben Brantley of The New York Times: "BRAVE & BOLD!". The title "ON THE EXHALE" is prominently displayed in white. Below the title, it says "BY MARTÍN ZIMMERMAN WITH MARIN IRELAND DIRECTED BY LEIGH SILVERMAN". At the bottom, it states "THROUGH APRIL 2 ONLY" and "ALL TICKETS \$25". The logo for "ROUNDABOUT UNDERGROUND" is in the bottom right corner.

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