



# How not to be lonely

Emma Bowler looks at why we often feel alone – and what we can do about it





Princess Diana, Marilyn Monroe, Stephen Fry and Judy Garland: they have all at one time or another described themselves as lonely. Of course, some people are happy in their own company. Others, including celebrities, may have a lot of social contact, have a big family or be in a relationship, but still feel lonely. Loneliness isn't really about being on your own, it's about not feeling connected to others.

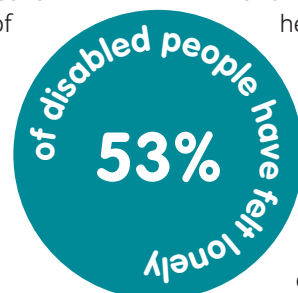
A recent survey by the deaf-blind charity Sense found that 53 per cent of disabled people said they felt lonely all,

some or most of the time, and 23 per cent of disabled respondents felt quite or very lonely on a typical day.

Sense's report, *A Right to Friendship? Challenging the Barriers to Friendship for People with Disabilities*, found that disabled people are at particular risk of experiencing loneliness. Reasons for disabled people's sense of disconnection from others might include inaccessible transport, a lack of access to personal assistance, or insufficient support with communication.



Other reasons might include lack of access to social places such as college, work or leisure facilities – as well as barriers caused by peoples' attitudes and perceptions. Indeed, research conducted last year by the disability charity Scope found that the majority of the British public (67 per cent) admitted to feeling uncomfortable talking to disabled people.



### Making friends

Being unable to make, or maintain, friendships or social connections can lead to that sense of isolation and loneliness. The Campaign to End Loneliness, a group of organisations aiming to combat loneliness and inspire people to get connected, says that loneliness can damage peoples' health to levels usually associated with well-known risk factors such as an unhealthy diet or lack of exercise.

The causes of loneliness might be clear, but what can be done to combat it? One solution, which might seem obvious but is not always easy, is to build those special friendships. "Many disabled people struggle to make and keep in touch with friends," says Richard Kramer at Sense. "There are many factors that contribute to this problem but a lack of opportunity is an overarching theme. Although there are examples of good practice for supporting disabled people though friendships there is still much more that can be done.

"We're calling for local authorities to commission more services such as 'buddying schemes' to support friendships," Kramer says, "and for care providers to place greater priority on supporting people to maximise their opportunities for friendship. We also want to see greater education to help inform the general public about disability and the challenges faced by people with disabilities. Disabled people need to be given the same opportunities to make friends as everyone else."

### Open up

Jessica Zaslav has a rare bone dysplasia. Over the years she has struggled with her feelings around her identity and hidden limitations, including chronic pain, as well as the resulting lack of understanding from those around her. Jessica found two things have helped with her feelings of loneliness:

"Probably the most useful thing for me

has been becoming more comfortable with myself and talking openly with people about my dysplasia," she says. "This has helped reduce the sense of shame I have sometimes felt. Secondly, joining a Facebook group for people with my, and similar, conditions, has been life changing. For the first time in my life I have connected with other folks with dysplasia."

Kathy Forbes-James's solution to loneliness was also found online. She experienced loneliness after being diagnosed with hypermobility syndrome and later with fibromyalgia after the birth of her son. Challenges in the workplace, altered levels of mobility and chronic pain all contributed to her feeling isolated. Although she tried to get involved with baby groups when her son was born, the inaccessible social activities – for example a ramble in the local woods – meant she soon became isolated from that group too.



It's about knowing that you are not alone

## Get connected...

### Begin with small changes

Think about yourself and what you would like more of. Start with small changes – eat a healthy meal, do a small amount of exercise, invite someone over for a cuppa, go to the park and strike up a conversation. These small, positive changes can help you feel better about yourself.



### Build online connections

If you have access to the internet there are a variety of ways you can connect to other people from your own home. You can call or message friends and family for free via Skype (skype.com). Or join an online forum for like-minded people where you can share thoughts and experiences.



### Buddy up with a pet

If you like animals, why not consider getting a pet? Dogs make great companions and are great for connecting with other people while you walk them. Cats and other small pets are also rewarding and it is well documented that pets can help to reduce stress and anxiety.



### Become a volunteer

To find your local volunteer centre, which can help you find opportunities to suit your needs, visit [volunteering.org.uk](http://volunteering.org.uk). To find out more about trying out online volunteering, see [volunteering.org.uk/component/gpb/virtual-volunteering](http://volunteering.org.uk/component/gpb/virtual-volunteering)



### Use your time well

There are always times when we have to be alone, so try to see these moments in a positive light. It could be that they are an opportunity to do something you can enjoy without interruption – for example, watching a film, reading a book or pottering in the kitchen.



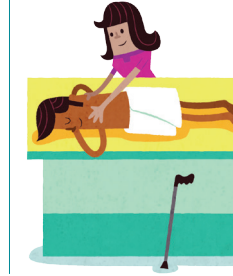
### Make time for hobbies

What are your hobbies and interests? Find out what's going on in your local area and meet people who share your passion. If you're a novice, they will be a great place to learn. To start, what about book, bridge and bowling clubs, knitting, wildlife and birdwatching groups?



### Find a forum

There are many online forums where disabled people come together to give each other support, advice and information on all sorts of issues – making friends, hobbies and more. Facebook groups also offer similar support. Some are 'closed' – you have to join them to see the page content.



### Enjoy a therapeutic treat

Massage isn't only about fancy spa retreats. A treatment can help reduce stress, tension and anxiety. At the heart of any session is human contact, which can help your general sense of wellbeing. Find out more at The Disability Foundation: [tdf.org.uk](http://tdf.org.uk)



“I couldn’t stop crying in the toilets at work,” she says. “I got some good advice, went home, quit my job and got a better one. Sometimes it’s not about being resilient or putting on a smile, it’s about changing your circumstances to something better.”

“Online communities are a good place to vent frustrations, exchange ideas and solutions, and to help feel a sense of belonging. It’s about being able to identify with someone else and knowing that you are not alone in the world.”

## Care for carers

Carers can also be prone to loneliness. Susan Kern cares for her eight-year-old grandson who has a form of short stature and developmental delay. Prior to that she cared for her father who had had a stroke.

“It is very difficult to maintain a sense of yourself as a separate individual to the person you are providing care to,” she says. “Your entire life can be about a condition rather than living.”

Susan realised that she had become totally isolated with no friends or life beyond being a carer. She decided to ask for help with caring for her grandson and joined a Bible group at her church, “It was a breath of fresh air to finally admit I needed help. Having a set day and time for me every week has been an enormous benefit – I feel more rested and am developing friendships.”

Another potential way of getting connected is through volunteering. “Volunteering is a fantastic way of pursuing an interest, meeting new people, and helping others,” says Justin Davis Smith at volunteering charity NCVO. “It improves mental and physical wellbeing and can boost self-confidence.

“Volunteering in the UK does not affect Disability Living Allowance or Attendance Allowance and there’s no limit on how much you can volunteer. There is also online or ‘micro’ volunteering, such as writing letters or mentoring young people, which can be done from home and on a flexible basis.



The flexibility of volunteering means that it’s suitable for anyone, regardless of how much time you can commit – whether that’s three days a week or one afternoon a month.”

## Get out and about

Oliver Griffiths is a regular volunteer ambassador with Can Do Yorkshire. Can Do is a Leonard Cheshire project offering opportunities to 16 to 35-year-old disabled people to volunteer in their own communities.

Oliver befriends, helps and supports others as well as doing fundraising and campaigning activities. “I have felt lonely and sometimes on an evening I can sit and feel very alone,” he says. “But volunteering gets me out and about and has helped me build up new friendships. I feel less rejected and downhearted nowadays. Volunteering for Can Do makes me feel like I am giving back and I know I am helping others. I volunteer for everything I can now.”

The message is clear: don’t suffer in silence. If you feel lonely, make changes to combat those emotions. Be honest with yourself and share your feelings with others. Find social settings where you can be yourself and incorporate

those opportunities into your weekly schedule. And, perhaps more than anything else, remember that although you might sometimes feel very alone, you don’t have to be. If you need some inspiration to get started, see our suggestions for combating loneliness on the previous page. ■

## Find out more

Sense  
[sense.org.uk](https://sense.org.uk)

Leonard Cheshire Can Do project:  
[leonardcheshire.org](https://leonardcheshire.org)

Mind’s online community:  
[elefriends.org.uk](https://elefriends.org.uk)

Campaign To End Loneliness  
[campaigntoendloneliness.org](https://campaigntoendloneliness.org)

For a list of helpful blogs and forums including Youreable, Disability Sanctuary and Pain Concern, visit:  
[disabilityrightsuk.org/blogs-and-forums](https://disabilityrightsuk.org/blogs-and-forums)