

A Pill for Loneliness?

It's recently been announced that researchers are trying to develop a pill to cure loneliness. What is loneliness and do we need medication for it?

What is loneliness?

- Loneliness is an emotional response to isolation or lack of companionship. It often includes anxiety about being disconnected from other people or not having anyone to turn to in times of distress or depression.
- Loneliness occurs when the brain perceives there is a threat from being cut off or alone and pushes us to find companionship. It has nothing to do with whether you are a good person or a good friend.

Who is most likely to feel lonely?

- Elderly people or people experiencing a relationship break down often feel unwanted or uncared for which can trigger loneliness.
- Grief is a common cause of loneliness as the person may feel deserted by a loved one.
- People who have difficulty communicating, who don't speak the language or are from a different culture may be lonely as they feel cut off from others.
- People who are veterans, have chronic pain, illness or a disability may become lonely as they may believe they are different, unlikeable or others avoid them.
- Carers, solo parents or new mothers may they become are isolated by their responsibilities to care for others which can cause loneliness.

Why is loneliness a bad thing?

- Chronic loneliness causes stress contributing to inflammation which is related to heart disease, stroke, increased blood pressure and depression.
- Loneliness has also been associated with higher cholesterol, a decline in cognitive abilities, anxiety and Alzheimer's.

What can you do to change loneliness?

- Try expanding your mind rather than your social circle! You can't experience two emotions at once so concentration of positive aspects of an interaction – a joke, a smile, a useful bit of information – this reminds us of how we're connected to others!
- Each day write down at least one good thing that happened that involved another person – a compliment, laughter, a shared experience - have a diary of happy events you can look back on.
- Experience gratitude – when somebody unexpectedly does something to help you acknowledge it! It may be as small as letting you jump the line in the supermarket!
- Rediscover a sense of purpose or meaning in life – learn something new, develop a skill, find a new interest. Passion and enthusiasm will swamp loneliness!

What if this loneliness is overwhelming?

- If you are feeling overwhelmed by loneliness, feel you can't leave the house or speak to others you may need help from a health care professional – a doctor or psychologist.

Do we need a pill to cure loneliness?

- If someone is feeling overwhelmed by anxiety or fear it is useful to have medication to act as a "circuit breaker". But any medication should be used in conjunction with other interventions such as psychological therapy or improving communication or socialisation skills.