

# Unveiling A Silent Struggle:

Australian-First  
Research Into The  
Stigma of Loneliness.

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# Foreward

## **Loneliness is top of mind in Australia; a concern brought to the fore by years of pandemic-related results and restrictions.<sup>1</sup>**

Alerting us to the extent of the problem, Friends for Good have unveiled the experience of loneliness in Australia.

This report reveals a troubling picture – everyone is thinking about loneliness, but no one wants to talk about it. Loneliness is stigmatised in Australia, to the extent that people would be more likely to disclose a mental illness diagnosis than loneliness. The irony is that everyone feels lonely sometimes – loneliness is as common as it is costly.

A common barrier to discussing loneliness is fear of burdening or being judged by others. But as this report shows, the vast majority of Australians have felt lonely at some point in their lives. Normalising this experience as relatable and manageable is key to addressing it, particularly for those who struggle to open up to others about personal challenges.

Mental health literacy is on the rise, and a similar revolution is needed in the social domain. It's time that tackling loneliness – a health issue as deadly as smoking<sup>2</sup> — became a national priority. The antidote to silence is speech, and Friends for Good have given us the tools to begin the dialogue.

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<sup>1</sup> Tran, A., Bianchi, V., Moeck, E.K., Clarke, B., Moore, I., Burney, S., Koval, P., Kalokerinos, E.K., & Greenaway, K.H. (2023). Dynamics of social experiences in the context of extended lockdown. *Social Psychological and Personality Science*.

<sup>2</sup> Holt, L. J., Smith, T. B., & Layton, B. (2010). Social relationships and mortality risk: a meta-analytic review. *PLoS medicine*, 7(7), e1000316



# Executive Summary

## **Friends for Good is pleased to present our groundbreaking research conducted in collaboration with PureProfile and Nature Unveiling a Silent Struggle: The Stigma of Loneliness in Australia.**

We spoke to 1004 people across Australia and found that loneliness is highly stigmatised; it is hard for people to talk about and we urgently need to address this in order to help people overcome experiences of loneliness.

Some key findings from our research include:

1. 9 in 10 Australians have experienced loneliness at some point in their lives.
2. Approximately 1.7 million Australian adults often or always experience loneliness.
3. 84% of people think that others would feel ashamed or embarrassed to admit to feeling lonely.
4. 53% say that they themselves would be embarrassed to tell others that they felt lonely and only 29% of people have actually opened up to others if they themselves felt lonely.
5. Men are more likely than women to view loneliness as a weakness.
6. People are more likely to disclose a mental illness diagnosis than an experience of loneliness.

We would like to thank the participants for sharing their voices and stories to help us understand the stigma of loneliness in Australia. We hope that this new research inspires work to address the stigma of loneliness, encourages people to feel open to share their experiences when they feel the ache of loneliness and get the support they need to overcome it.

**ELEISHA CASAÑAS**

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# Background

Loneliness, an emotional experience related to a mismatch between desired and actual social relationships<sup>1</sup>, negatively impacts both mental and physical health.

Specifically, loneliness has been related to depression<sup>2</sup>, suicidality<sup>3</sup>, heart disease<sup>4</sup> and immune dysregulation<sup>5</sup> as well as the likelihood of early mortality<sup>6</sup>. Loneliness is subjective and associated with the quality not just the quantity of social connections<sup>7</sup>.

Many Australians experience loneliness every day. A number of studies have estimated the prevalence of loneliness in Australia; estimates vary as different methodology has been used<sup>8</sup>. In a previous study by Friends for Good using a nationally representative sample, a conservative estimate was that 3 million Australian adults experience high levels of loneliness<sup>9</sup>. It has been suggested that the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated experiences of loneliness, with as many as 41% of the population experiencing loneliness at some point<sup>10</sup>.

Loneliness is complex, there is no 'one size fits all' solution and people experience loneliness for a variety of reasons<sup>11</sup>. A challenge in addressing loneliness is the stigma that surrounds it.

*"I think there is stigma around being lonely.*

*You can be in a room full of people but still feel lonely and some people don't understand that."*

*Male, 32, NSW*

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<sup>1</sup> Perlman & Peplau, 1981

<sup>2</sup> Hagerty and Williams, 1999

<sup>3</sup> Goldsmith, Pellmar, Kleinman & Bunney, 2002

<sup>4</sup> Thurston & Kubzansky, 2009

<sup>5</sup> Steptoe, Owen, Kunz-Ebrecht & Brydon, 2004

<sup>6</sup> Holt-Lunsted, Smith, Baker, Harris and Stephenson, 2015

<sup>7</sup> Cacioppo & Hawkley, 2009

<sup>8</sup> Badcock, Reese & Badcock, 2023

<sup>9</sup> Friends for Good, 2019

<sup>10</sup> Biddle, Edwards, Gray & Sollis, 2020

<sup>11</sup> Cacioppo & Patrick, 2008



# The stigma of loneliness: what does the research say?

## The concept of stigma comes from sociology.

It refers to a person's identity being impacted by public reactions to some attribute they hold, which is rejected by society<sup>12</sup>. Stigma can arise both from external sources, such as people and institutions, and internal processes, in which individuals adopt the public status quo of stereotypes and prejudice and self-stigmatise<sup>13</sup>. Research has been conducted exploring stigmatised social issues, such as financial problems, family and relationship issues, crime, sexual orientation and gambling. Mental health issues have also been a key focus of stigma research<sup>14</sup>.

There is a body of research (largely conducted in North America), which suggests that loneliness is stigmatised. Stigma has typically been measured by presenting written descriptions of fictional "lonely" and "non-lonely" individuals and having participants evaluate them. For example, Lau and Gruen<sup>15</sup> obtained US college students impressions of hypothetical people and found that targets described as lonely were rated as less psychologically adjusted, competent and likeable. Similar findings have been reported by several studies<sup>16</sup>. So ingrained is the stigmatisation of loneliness it has been found in children with attributes of chronic loneliness, leading to rejection by peers<sup>17</sup>.

Some studies suggest there is an effect of gender on stigma-related perceptions of loneliness. For instance, women have been found to make harsher judgements about lonely targets compared to men<sup>18</sup>. In addition, men have been found to be less willing to disclose feelings of loneliness and male targets depicted as lonely tend to be judged more negatively compared to lonely female targets<sup>19</sup>. A recent study spanning 237 countries found that men were more likely to view loneliness as controllable and perceive a stigma around loneliness<sup>20</sup>. In order to design effective public education campaigns more research is needed to understand demographic differences in the stigmatisation of loneliness.

Beyond the published peer-reviewed literature exploring the stigma of loneliness, there are a number of other papers that provide insight into this topic. In the UK, The Campaign to End Loneliness<sup>21</sup> reported that 92% of participants think people are scared to admit to feeling lonely and that there are negative judgements related to experiences of loneliness. In a more recent study also conducted in the UK<sup>22</sup> researchers reported that in a large representative sample (N = 6000) 76% of respondents thought 'people often feel ashamed or embarrassed about feeling lonely'. Only a minority of respondents (29%) agree that people are likely to talk about feelings of loneliness. Interestingly, participants in this study who experienced high levels of loneliness were more likely to agree that people often feel ashamed or embarrassed about loneliness, indicating the self-stigmatising impact of loneliness.

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<sup>12</sup> Goffman, 1963

<sup>13</sup> Goffman, 1963

<sup>14</sup> Sickel, Seacat & Nabors, 2014

<sup>15</sup> Lau & Gruen, 1992

<sup>16</sup> Borys & Perlman, 1985; Lau & Kong, 1999; Rotenberg, 1998; Rotenberg & Kmill, 1992

<sup>17</sup> Rotenburg, Bartley & Toivonen, 1997

<sup>18</sup> Borys & Perlman, 1985; Lau & Gruen, 1992; Rotenberg & Kmill, 1992

<sup>19</sup> Borys & Perlman, 1985; Lau & Gruen, 1992; Lau & Kong, 1999

<sup>20</sup> Barreto at al., 2022

<sup>21</sup> Campaign to End Loneliness, 2016

<sup>22</sup> Mental Health Foundation, 2022

## The stigma of loneliness in Australia

In Australia there is limited research into the stigma of loneliness.

Some qualitative data suggests that loneliness is stigmatised. For example, Stanley and colleagues<sup>23</sup> conducted in-depth interviews and focus groups with older people in South Australia and Queensland. They found that the stigma of loneliness was a key theme that emerged. Participants described loneliness as being personal, private, negative and associate it with shame, failure and defeat. Other qualitative studies have explored how marginalised groups experience stigma related to other aspects of their life and self which increases loneliness. For example, discrimination and stigma related to homelessness<sup>24</sup> and dementia<sup>25</sup> were shown to be associated with increased loneliness and social isolation. There is a complex interplay between stigmatisation and other issues, especially for those that are at the intersection of various groups.

Despite the lack of research into the stigma of loneliness in Australia, it remains a significant concern with researchers and service providers providing anecdotal reports of the impact of loneliness, stigmatisation and the challenges this causes. The Consumers Health Forum of Australia Roundtable Report<sup>26</sup> suggests reducing the stigma of loneliness is one of four priority actions needed to address loneliness in Australia. This has been echoed by other organisations such as Friends for Good, The Friendship Alliance and Ending Loneliness Together. As part of the National Mental Health Reform Agenda, a National Stigma and Discrimination Reduction Strategy was launched in 2022<sup>27</sup> with a focus on reducing mental health stigma more generally, showing the significant need for action in this area. Tim Heffernan, Co-Chair of the Steering Committee describes stigma as the “...dry wind that strips us of our humanity”<sup>28</sup>. Indeed, addressing the broad stigma of mental health and the more specific stigma of loneliness is imperative to see significant community-level change.

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<sup>23</sup> Stanley et al., 2010

<sup>24</sup> Bower et al., 2018

<sup>25</sup> Moyle et al., 2011

<sup>26</sup> Consumer Health Forum of Australia, 2021

<sup>27</sup> National Mental Health Commission, 2022

<sup>28</sup> National Mental Health Commission, 2022

## Impacts of the stigma of loneliness

The stigma associated with loneliness has far-reaching consequences, including limiting access to services and influencing behaviour, which can intensify feelings of loneliness and isolation.

Researchers have reported that there is a negative stereotype associated with loneliness and importantly that, when participants are given cues indicating a conversation partner is lonely, they act less sociable towards them, thereby confirming their existing stereotype<sup>29</sup>. The actual outcomes of the stereotypes and stigma of loneliness therefore impact the way people act towards those experiencing loneliness, which would presumably perpetuate a state of feeling alienated and alone. Studies investigating help-seeking for mental health concerns have identified stigma, both from society and self-stigma, as significant barriers to people accessing services and adhering to treatments<sup>30</sup>. It is clear that understanding and addressing the stigma of loneliness has real-world implications and the potential to create significant change.

## The present research project

Friends for Good is an Australian charity that focuses specifically on loneliness and social isolation.

The organisation provides services to assist people experiencing loneliness and also works to raise awareness about the issue. In talking directly with people experiencing chronic loneliness through the FriendLine phone service, as well as working with other organisations in the community sector, it became evident that the stigma of loneliness presents a significant barrier to individuals and service providers. This research project was undertaken to provide insights into the stigma of loneliness in Australia that would have direct applications to inform public policy and the creation of public education campaigns.

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<sup>29</sup> Rotenburg, Grumen and Ariganello, 2002

<sup>30</sup> Salaheddin & Mason, 2016

Nature and PureProfile offered their services and expertise pro bono to assist Friends for Good. This research project is a collaborative partnership between these organisations.

The research has four main aims:

1. Obtain an estimate of the number of Australians who are currently experiencing a high level of loneliness.
2. Determine whether loneliness is stigmatised in an Australian sample and the reasons for this.
3. Identify any demographic differences in loneliness stigmatisation particularly in relation to age, gender and location.
4. Identify the thoughts and feelings that are related to experiences of loneliness.

# Methodology

An online self-report survey was developed by Friends for Good and Nature to explore the research aims.

Loneliness was measured using the UCLA-Loneliness Scale<sup>31</sup> and also a single-item measure of loneliness. The questionnaire included a range of demographic and quantitative questions as well as open-ended qualitative questions to gain a greater depth of understanding.

The questionnaire was completed by 1004 respondents and was administered by PureProfile via their survey panel during March 2023. The sample was nationally representative of Australia in terms of age, gender and location. See Appendix 1 for a breakdown of the sample demographics.

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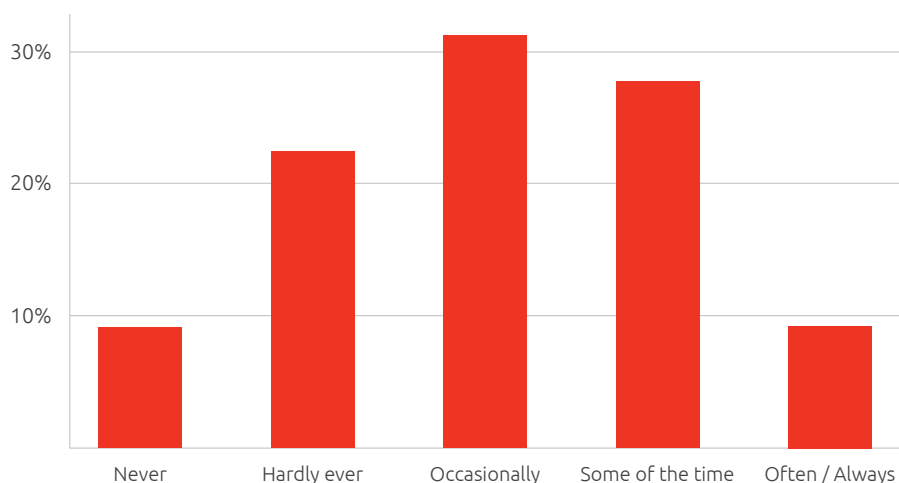
<sup>31</sup> Russell, 1996

# Key Findings

## Are people feeling lonely?

Overall, we found that loneliness is a significant issue for Australians. Our data suggests that 9 in 10 Australians have experienced loneliness at some point in their lives.

The graph below shows the results from the single-item measure of loneliness. We can see that 37% of people experience loneliness some of the time or more often. This equates to 7.4 million Australian adults for whom loneliness is a part of their lives.

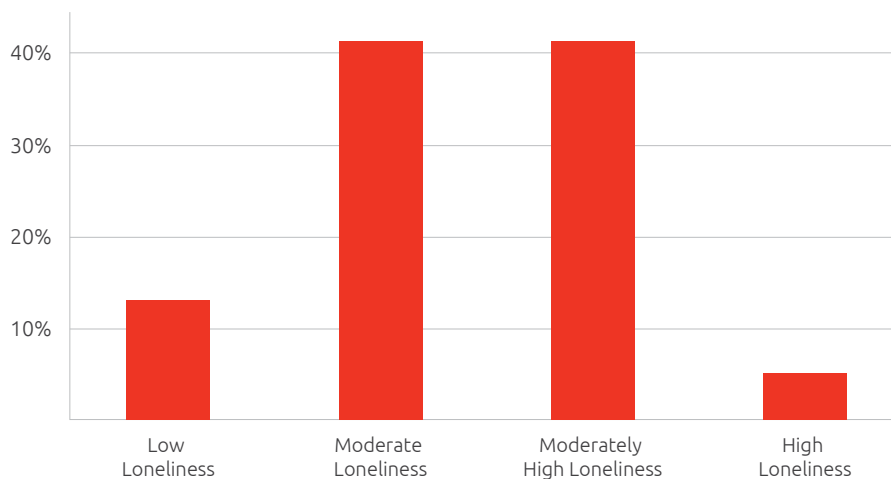


A staggering 9% of Australians are experiencing loneliness often or always. This equates to approximately 1.7 million Australian adults for whom loneliness is impacting their lives constantly and, perhaps, chronically.

Using the UCLA-Loneliness Scale, as shown in the graph below, many people experience moderate or moderately high loneliness.

The UCLA-Loneliness Scale was also used to measure loneliness. Although there are no specific cut-off points, this measure helps us see the distribution of scores of loneliness and is useful for comparison to other studies that also apply the same measure. Using a conservative method of estimation<sup>32</sup> around 14.2% of the sample would be considered to have high scores of loneliness, this finding is similar to previous research that has used the same method<sup>33</sup>. Another common way to look at the results using the UCLA measure is to use categories, the graph below shows the groupings of people based on commonly used categories. Using this method it is evident that many people experience moderate or moderately high levels of loneliness<sup>34</sup>.

### UCLA-LS Scores



Regardless of the method used to analyse loneliness scores, what remains clear is that loneliness impacts many people and that a high percentage of Australians are experiencing concerning levels of loneliness.

Young people were more likely to say they felt lonely some or all the time as can be seen in the graph below. This finding is similar to other recent reports that have also shown higher scores for loneliness in younger generations. There are a number of reasons that have been proposed for this difference. Young people may be more likely to experience loneliness because of having less opportunities for interaction as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, or an overreliance on online rather than in-person connections. Alternatively, this difference could reflect the tendency of young people to be more open to admit or acknowledge feelings of loneliness which will be explored in more detail below.

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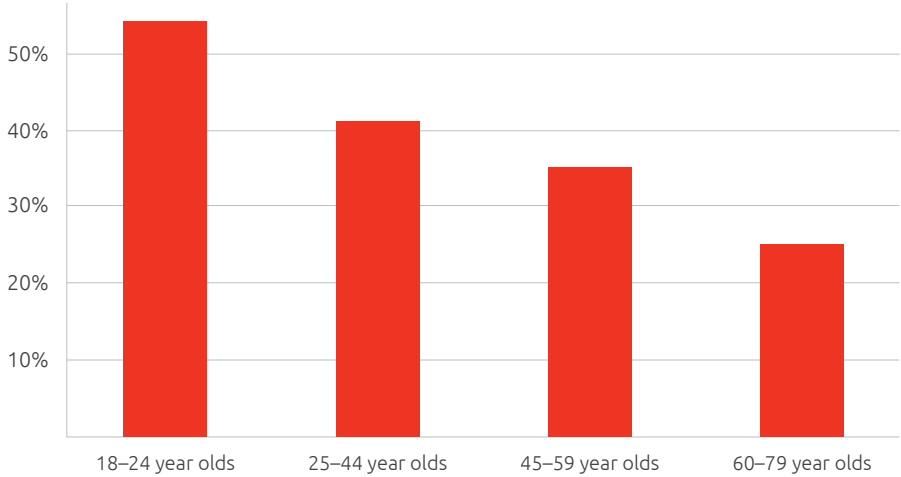
<sup>32</sup> One standard deviation about the mean.

<sup>33</sup> Friends for Good, 2019

<sup>34</sup> NOTE: there are no specific cut-offs for the UCLA-Loneliness Scale. Scores used to determine this distribution were commonly used categories of 20 - 34= low, 35 - 49 = moderate, 50 - 64= moderately high, 65 - 80= high.

It is important to note that older Australians (70+) may be less likely to engage with online surveys such as this due to a range of barriers such as access to, or familiarity with, the use of technology. It is possible that people in this older age range experience more chronic loneliness which cannot be captured using online survey tools.

### I Feel Lonely Some of the Time / Always



There were no significant differences found between experiences of loneliness when comparing men and women, those in different states of Australia or regional vs. metropolitan areas. Similar to previous research findings in Australia<sup>35</sup>, evidence suggests that loneliness does not discriminate and impacts people from all walks of life.

<sup>35</sup> Friends for Good, 2019

*“Shared my feelings and thoughts on loneliness I feel occasionally to my friends, especially during COVID.”*

*Female, 25, SA*

*“During the pandemic, I spoke to a friend about feeling lonely.*

*They were supportive and empathetic and I felt better for sharing how I was feeling.”*

*Female, 40, VIC*



# Is there a stigma surrounding loneliness?

Using a range of questions, we explored whether there was a stigma surrounding loneliness in Australia.

We asked people to tell us what words come to mind when thinking about someone experiencing loneliness. The responses were predominately negative, with a focus on depression, anxiety, sadness, mental health struggles and low self-esteem. We found that 84% of people think that others would feel ashamed or embarrassed to admit to feeling lonely.



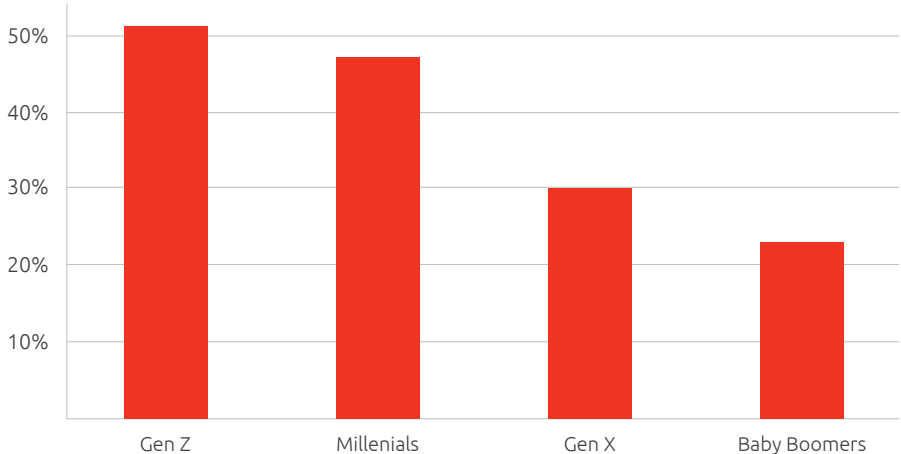
*Based on level of agreement to statements (from strongly agree to strongly disagree). Results calculated from n=912 participants who have experienced loneliness.*

53% say that they would be embarrassed to tell others if they feel lonely and only 29% of people have actually opened up to others if they felt lonely. Positively, many people felt that loneliness has become easier to talk about since the COVID-19 pandemic, suggesting that the normalisation of the loneliness experience is powerful. It is important to note that, although the pandemic has made it easier for people to talk about loneliness, our data suggests the stigma of loneliness remains a major issue and there is much more work that needs to be done to address this.

Amongst those who have experienced loneliness, more than 8 in 10 (87%) do not find it easy to talk about.

Young people were more likely to talk to others about experiences of loneliness, this may reflect changing attitudes and openness to discuss mental health. Longitudinal research that aims to track trends over time will be useful to understand these differences in more depth.

### Have You Ever Told Someone You Were Experiencing Loneliness?



We explored the reasons that people find loneliness difficult to talk about. Many people felt a sense of discomfort talking about loneliness (58%) and others felt it would place a burden on people (40%). We also included a qualitative question so that people could describe in their own words the reasons loneliness is challenging to talk about. Six key themes emerged<sup>36</sup>, these were:

#### 1. Fear of being a burden

*“Most people don’t want to burden others or bring down their mood.”*

Participants suggested that people may be reluctant to confess their loneliness as the disclosure may worry, annoy, or bother people in whom they had confided.

#### 2. Shame and embarrassment

*“People feel ashamed, like it’s their fault.”*

Pride, feelings of inadequacy about lack of relationships, feelings of being at fault and believing that something is wrong with them for being alone were all raised as reasons why people may be too embarrassed or ashamed to talk about loneliness.

<sup>36</sup> Researchers conducted a thematic analysis on qualitative responses to derive the key themes.

### 3. Belief that people won't understand

*"Most people don't understand what it's like, unless they are going through it themselves."*

The uniqueness of the feeling of loneliness was noted by many participants, leading to comments that people may not want to discuss it because they do not think other people would understand. Participants suggested that people may be unable to comprehend how people could feel lonely when surrounded by others, that other people lack personal experience of loneliness, and that those feeling lonely appear to be happy.

### 4. Fear of judgement

*"People don't want to be judged or looked down upon."*

Fear of judgement encompassed a variety of concerns, such as being looked down upon, being blamed for lack of social contact, being perceived as anti-social or having failed socially, appearing weak, being mocked and being seen as unworthy or boring if loneliness is disclosed.

### 5. Feeling that loneliness is hard or uncomfortable to talk about

*"It might be difficult to find the right person and words to express the feelings of loneliness."*

Loneliness was described as hard or uncomfortable to speak about, from not knowing where to start, to the difficulty of talking about negative things, to the trouble in finding the words to describe the feeling, or to not having the courage to raise the topic when it might feel awkward.

### 6. Lack of people to confide in

*"If you feel isolated, you may not feel like you have anyone you can speak to."*

Not knowing who to talk to about loneliness, lack of people in your life willing to sit and listen and the difficulty of relating to strangers or trusting people enough to be confident to open up all featured in this theme.

Interestingly, men are significantly more likely to refrain from talking about loneliness because they feel it shows weakness (39% compared to 23% of females). This finding reflects that of other research which has found men may be more hesitant to talk about loneliness and other mental health concerns that show vulnerability<sup>37</sup>.

Finally, we compared the likelihood of people disclosing an experience of loneliness to other stigmatised issues. We found that people were more likely to talk to others about a mental illness than loneliness (45% compared to 34%).

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<sup>37</sup> Barreto et al., 2022



# Conclusion

**It is clear that loneliness remains a significant concern for many Australians from all walks of life.**

This Australian-first research has shown that the stigma of loneliness is deeply embedded in Australian culture. The voices of our respondents shine a light on the reasons that loneliness is difficult to talk about and the pain that this can cause. Our data shows that loneliness has impacted 9 out of 10 people and remains a constant in many people's lives. It does not discriminate and can affect people at any stage of life.

In order to address both the loneliness experienced by individuals and the accompanying stigma that surrounds it, a comprehensive approach is needed. There should be significant attention given to public education campaigns that directly address the stigma of loneliness. This research has provided a number of underlying aspects of loneliness stigmatisation that could be the focus of a community-wide approach. Prevention of loneliness is also imperative and will reduce the physical and mental health impacts that are experienced by so many. It is important to note that there are a range of services and supports that are currently offered to people experiencing loneliness and continued development of person-centred, evidence-based services is essential. These services offer vital grassroots support precisely when it's most needed, either in-person within their neighbourhoods, or, for those experiencing social isolation, through phone or online channels. Some evidence-based programs in operation across the country are self-funded and there is an urgent need for increased government and philanthropic support for them.

**Given that the stigma of loneliness is so prevalent in Australia, there is much work to be done to increase understanding and acceptance of experiences of loneliness.**

It is hoped this research will inspire national campaigns to address this, as well as encouraging individuals, service providers and researchers to consider the impact of the stigma of loneliness.

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# Appendices

## Appendix 1- Sample demographics

DEMOGRAPHICS	<i>n</i>	% OF SAMPLE
<b>Gender</b>		
Male	493	49%
Female	510	51%
Prefer not to disclose	1	0%
<b>Age</b>		
18–24	114	11%
25–29	102	10%
30–34	98	10%
35–39	106	11%
40–44	82	8%
45–49	84	8%
50–54	80	8%
55–59	80	8%
60–64	79	8%
65–69	58	6%
70–74	60	6%
75+	61	6%
<b>Generation</b>		
Gen Z (18–24)	114	11%
Millennials (25–44)	388	39%
Gen X (45–59)	244	24%
Baby Boomers (60+)	258	26%



DEMOGRAPHICS	<i>n</i>	% OF SAMPLE
<b>Zone</b>		
Metropolitan	685	68%
Regional	319	32%
<b>Location</b>		
Sydney	215	21%
Other NSW	109	11%
Melbourne	198	20%
Other VIC	55	5%
Brisbane	98	10%
Other QLD	107	11%
Adelaide	53	5%
Other SA	13	1%
Perth	85	8%
Other WA	21	2%
Canberra	18	2%
Hobart	12	1%
Other TAS	11	1%
Darwin	6	1%
Other NT	3	0%

## Appendix 2: UCLA-Loneliness Scale

LONELINESS SCALE	SCORING			
Statement	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Always
1. How often do you feel that you are “in tune” with the people around you?	4	3	2	1
2. How often do you feel that you lack companionship?	1	2	3	4
3. How often do you feel that there is no one you can turn to?	1	2	3	4
4. How often do you feel alone?	1	2	3	4
5. How often do you feel part of a group of friends?	4	3	2	1
6. How often do you feel that you have a lot in common with the people around you?	4	3	2	1
7. How often do you feel that you are no longer close to anyone?	1	2	3	4
8. How often do you feel that your interests and ideas are not shared by those around you?	1	2	3	4
9. How often do you feel outgoing and friendly?	4	3	2	1
10. How often do you feel close to people?	4	3	2	1
11. How often do you feel left out?	1	2	3	4
12. How often do you feel that your relationships with others are not meaningful?	1	2	3	4
13. How often do you feel that no one really knows you well?	1	2	3	4
14. How often do you feel isolated from others?	1	2	3	4
15. How often do you feel you can find companionship when you want it?	4	3	2	1
16. How often do you feel that there are people who really understand you?	4	3	2	1
17. How often do you feel shy?	1	2	3	4
18. How often do you feel that people are around you but not with you?	1	2	3	4
19. How often do you feel that there are people you can talk to?	4	3	2	1
20. How often do you feel that there are people you can turn to?	4	3	2	1

Source: Russell, D. (1996). UCLA Loneliness Scale (Version 3): Reliability, validity, and factor structure. *Journal of Personality Assessment*, 66, 20-40.



## For more information

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