



The Uniting Church in Australia
QUEENSLAND SYNOD



Transforming Communities - Taking action locally

A Community Engagement Toolkit –
Social Isolation and Loneliness

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This guide is designed to assist and support local social action, as people from across the Synod work together to transform communities.

The Uniting Church's advocacy for social justice issues is grounded in the affirmation that all people are of equal worth and dignity in Christ. God intends for the whole of creation to flourish, and it is part of our mission as the church to identify and work against the inequalities and injustices that result from flawed humanity and broken systems.

Through (project) Plenty we echoed this commitment to Transforming Communities and to supporting: Wellbeing and Mental Health, Environment and Sustainability, and First Peoples.

The foundational document for the Uniting Church in Australia, the Basis of Union, highlights our call to be a fellowship of reconciliation, a foretaste of the new creation in Christ. We answer this call by loving and serving our communities, particularly those among us who are most vulnerable.

If you are planning a meeting, or have held a meeting, the Uniting Church Queensland Synod would love to hear from you. If we can support you to engage in these priority issues, please contact us on 07 3377 9777 or at projectplenty@ucaqld.com.au

Understanding Social Isolation and Loneliness

Definitions of social isolation and loneliness

Loneliness is an unwelcome experience of feeling alone (Gardiner, Geldenhuys & Gott, 2018). Social isolation is when a person has minimal contact and interaction with others and a low level of involvement with community life (Commissioner for Senior Victorians, 2016). Social isolation and loneliness are similar as they are both experienced when there is a lack of social connection (Holt-Lunstad, 2017).

The extent to which someone is connected to their community and the quality of these connections directly impacts their quality of life, their sense of belonging and their participation in their community (Clear Horizon, 2019).

Recent research on social isolation and loneliness in Australia

Is Australia experiencing an epidemic of loneliness? (2018) Relationships Australia.

- One in 10 people lack social support, and one in six people are experiencing emotional loneliness.
- Overall levels of loneliness for men are higher than women. However, women report higher rates of emotional loneliness than men. People living in more remote areas have an increased risk of loneliness, with older age (over 65 years) reducing the risk for men living in regional areas.
- There are decreasing levels of loneliness observed in the years leading up to the age of 65 years. After the age of 65 years, the number of people experiencing a lack of social support continues to decline, but the rate of emotional loneliness increases to reach a peak at ages over 74 years.
- Lack of employment and/or receipt of income support was associated with higher risk for loneliness for both men and women, with the highest rates observed for younger men in receipt of income support. Similar trends were also observed for low income, with almost one-third of men and women reporting loneliness.
- Single parents were most likely to experience a lack of social support. This was particularly the case for single fathers, with almost 40% of younger fathers reporting a lack of social support and more than 40% reporting emotional loneliness.

- Where men and women were younger than 65 years and widowed, high rates of loneliness were also observed. Older age impacted positively on the loneliness rates of widows but negatively for men and women in defacto relationships.
- Poorer health was associated with higher rates of emotional loneliness and a lack of social support, with the association between poor health and men and women's loneliness more significant for the younger cohort, particularly men.

Impacts of loneliness

The Australian Loneliness Report (2018) outlines the following impacts of loneliness.

- Lonely Australians have significantly worse health status (both physical and mental) than socially connected Australians. Higher levels of loneliness are associated with higher levels of social interaction anxiety, less social interaction, poorer psychological wellbeing and poorer quality of life.
- One in two Australians feel lonely for at least one day in a week, while one in four feel lonely for three or more days. One in four Australians also experience high levels of social interaction anxiety.
- Australians who are married and Australians in a de facto relationship are the least lonely, compared to those who are single or divorced.
- Australians aged over 65 years are the least lonely; other age groups experience similar levels of loneliness. Australians aged over 65 years also report better physical and mental health, lower levels of social interaction anxiety, fewer depression symptoms and greater social interaction than younger Australians.
- Younger adults (18-35 years) compared to adults over 35 report more social interaction anxiety and more depression symptoms. Younger adults (18-35 years) report significantly more social interaction anxiety than older Australians (over 65 years).

Do these facts resonate with your experiences in your local community?

What surprised you?

Are there any of these groups that you have identifies as high need in your community?

Social action on loneliness and social isolation

Hints for developing a response (from Ageing is everyone's business: a report on isolation and loneliness among senior Victorians (2016) Commissioner for Senior Victorians).

- **Placed Based:** It is important to develop capacity-building initiatives for those at highest risk of exclusion and disadvantage, by building-on services or programs that already exist locally.
- **Existing Groups:** Local organisations such as senior citizens clubs, sporting clubs, neighbourhood houses and community groups have an important role to play in providing opportunities for people to be socially active and thus protect against isolation and loneliness. A key feature of successful groups is that they provide innovative and creative opportunities for social interaction targeted at what people actually want to do. Building on and expanding the work of existing groups can be a great way to connect with people in your community.
- **Communication:** There is a need for better communication to people about the range of programs, activities and supports available to them in the community. Information could be provided through local community information hubs in places where older people frequent, such as shopping centres, pharmacies or libraries supplemented by online information.
- **Community Connections and Intergenerational:** Isolation and loneliness could be addressed by improving community connections. This could be achieved by connecting different groups of people in the community. Many older people enjoy being around younger generations and that intergenerational interaction is an important element of social connectedness for older people. Examples of successful intergenerational programs included linking older people with mothers and babies groups and school-based programs where children either learnt from or taught older people. The concept of 'good neighbouring' can be a protective

factor for isolation and loneliness. The Neighbourhood Watch program is an example of a program that achieves 'good neighbouring' by establishing connections and fostering community spirit.

- **Transportation:** Personal mobility and access to transport were acknowledged as barriers to social participation and participation in community programs, particularly in rural areas. Participants felt that isolation and loneliness could be assisted by improving the availability of public, community and volunteer transport.
- **Meaningful Volunteering:** Volunteering is an important part of addressing isolation and loneliness, both for volunteers and those people receiving support from volunteers. A number of actions to increase rates of volunteering include: increasing the awareness of volunteering opportunities; linking volunteers to opportunities that make use of their professional skills; and actively seeking out volunteers, noting that some people want to be asked, rather than offer, to volunteer. When thinking about volunteering opportunities, think about ways of creating meaningful opportunities to volunteer.

Do any of these areas surprise you?

As you think about responding to social isolation and loneliness, what factors stand out for you and your local context?

Can you identify any significant gaps and challenges for your community based on the above information?

References and further reading

Ageing is everyone's business: a report on isolation and loneliness among senior Victorians (2016) Commissioner for Senior Victorians. <https://www.seniorsonline.vic.gov.au/services-information/commissioner-for-senior-victorians/ageing-is-everyones-business>

Combating Loneliness A guide for local authorities Campaign to End Loneliness (2012) Local Government Association. <https://www.local.gov.uk/publications/combating-loneliness>

Gardiner, C., Geldenhuys, G., & Gott, M. (2018) Interventions to reduce social isolation and loneliness among older people: an integrative review. *Health and Social Care in the Community* (2018) 26(2), 147–157.

Holt-Lunstad, J. (2017) The Potential Public Health Relevance of Social Isolation and Loneliness: Prevalence, Epidemiology, and Risk Factors. *Public Policy & Aging Report*, Vol. 27, No. 4, pp 127–130.

Is Australia experiencing an epidemic of loneliness? (2018) Relationships Australia. <https://www.relationships.org.au/what-we-do/research/is-australia-experiencing-an-epidemic-of-loneliness>

Social isolation and loneliness project report (2019) Prepared for Inner South-east Metropolitan Partnership Working Group by Clear Horizon. https://www.suburbandevlopment.vic.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0021/62652/Social-Isolation-and-Loneliness-Project-Report-Final-2019.pdf

The Australian Loneliness Report (2018) The Australian Psychological Society and Swinburne University. <https://psychweek.org.au/2018-archive/loneliness-study/>

Case study - Ways to Wellness

GATHER: Faith communities, churches, union members and the Mt Gravatt Community Centre came together and decided they wanted to make change in the local community through community organising with the QLD Community Alliance. **[PLACE-BASED]**

LISTEN/RESEARCH/ IDENTIFY: Together they listened to over a hundred stories of issues that their community faces. In April 2018 a meeting was held at St Mark's Uniting Church and the community members voted to act on loneliness and social isolation. They then started a process of "research-action" and spoke to a wide range of community groups and academics .

EXPERIMENT: In August of 2018 a working group was set up with local Councillors, local MPs and the University of Queensland to develop solutions. A world-leading pilot program for a social prescribing network in Queensland was developed, called Ways to Wellness. Social prescribing is a way of linking people with sources of group support within the community **[EXISTING GROUPS]**. Ways to Wellness is a free service provided by the Mt Gravatt Community Centre to members of their community aged sixteen and above.

The Mt Gravatt Community Centre has a Community Link Worker, whose role is to connect socially isolated members of the community to meaningful group programs and activities through social prescribing **[COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS]**. The Link Worker helps identify activities a person might be interested in and connect them with local classes, social groups and clubs within the community to help a person reach their well-being goals **[COMMUNICATION]**. They also have a Health Care Link Worker who receives referrals from GPs and local primary health care providers and links patients with sources of group support within the community.

REFLECT/RESET: Groups across Mt Gravatt and surrounding suburbs have committed to welcoming new people as part of the network of local organisations working to help combat loneliness. Carolyn Coombes set up a weekly activities group through the Southside Uniting Church after social isolation was identified as a key problem locally. "It has a huge impact on people ... I think it's only in recent years that we've started to realise how severe and how devastating and debilitating that can be," Ms Coombes said. "There's a lot of healing for some people in these groups. People will accept them. "



A weekly activities group operates through Brisbane's Southside Uniting Church. (ABC News: Emilie Gramenz)

Examples of other groups involved with Ways to Wellness include:

Mt Gravatt Community Centre Activities and groups include painting, crochet and knitting group, card making, English conversation, computer lessons, sewing group, music groups and senior's social group.

St Marks Uniting Church (Mt Gravatt) - SAGE Group Social Activities Group for Everyone (SAGE) is held at St Marks Uniting Church Hall. There are a variety of activities on offer and include a variety of arts & crafts, painting, chat, board games, book appreciation, and technology assistance – all free of charge. There is also English immersion, tennis, table tennis, mahjong, cards, sewing, table games, mosaics and tatting. Morning tea is provided, and all ages are welcome.

Mt Gravatt Men's Shed The Mt Gravatt's Men's Shed promotes a strong interest in woodworking, woodturning, carpentry and welding. Interest groups also exist in the shed for members such as darts, guitar, cooking, computing, card playing, gardening, leatherwork, photography, art and travel. Open to men 18 years and over, their main objective is to improve the health & wellbeing of men who are at risk from preventable health issues that may originate from isolation.

Mansfield Melody Makers Non-auditioned community choir. Anyone who wishes to share the love of music and singing is most welcome.

Mt Gravatt Environment Group Join a local Bushcare group for a relaxing time in the bush and help bring birds, butterflies and koalas back to our mountain. Exercise in healthy fresh air venues. Meet interesting people and wildlife.

References

<https://waystowellness.org.au/> <https://waystowellness.org.au/about/>
<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-11-26/loneliness-queensland-to-be-addressed-by-parliamentary-inquiry/12911318>