

The Loneliness Project

An Australian perspective on the loneliness epidemic

We are, a lot of us, a great deal sadder, more anxious, more incomplete and more restless than we really need to be because of something very large that is missing from our lives. What's worse, we don't even know what this thing is and how much we crave it, because we don't have the right concepts, experience or encouragement to help us locate it. What we long for and are slowly dying without is: community.

Our forgotten craving for community. (6 September 2019). The Book of Life

The Loneliness Project is about reducing loneliness and social isolation in local communities across Australia.

We want to tell the stories, drive a narrative, and champion this cause that is literally killing Australians.

We should not be embarrassed to say 'I feel lonely today'.

thelonelinessproject.com.au

The problem

It has been predicted that loneliness will reach epidemic proportions by 2030, with the Australian Loneliness Report (2018), finding that one in four Australian adults experience loneliness.

For many Australians our family and community structures have changed dramatically over the last 40 years, most notably the trend of cohabiting with extended family to living alone. Modern Australia has a growing number of households of lone persons. In Australia that figure has increased to over 24% according to the latest census data.

What is loneliness and social isolation?

The Black Dog Institute offers the following definitions: **Loneliness** is that negative feeling that arises when our social needs are unmet by the quantity and quality of our current social relationships. As social beings, we rely on safe, secure social surroundings to survive and thrive. When we begin to feel lonely we experience heightened feelings of vulnerability, which can take a toll on both our bodies and our minds. Black Dog Institute .

Social isolation describes the absence of social contact and can lead to loneliness. It is a state of being cut off from normal social networks, which can be triggered by factors such as loss of mobility, unemployment, or health issues. Isolation can involve staying at home for lengthy periods of time, having no access to services or community involvement, and little or no communication with friends, family, and acquaintances.

Social isolation and loneliness seem to have distinct pathways to mortality and health. Numerous studies indicate that the risk exists along a

continuum, affecting not only those who experience extreme social isolation, but also those who suffer from mild to progressively increasing intensity of isolation .

Positive loneliness

Positive loneliness is distinct from loneliness experienced through forced social isolation. Often we welcome solitude. Being alone can be a chance to reflect and recharge, to get away from the many demands on our energy and attention.

Yet most people will also feel lonely at some times in their lives. This sense of missing human contact does not necessarily come from being alone. It's possible to feel isolated in a crowd, and to enjoy time to yourself.

Impact of loneliness and social isolation on health

Research points to the risks faced by adults experiencing social isolation and loneliness, including increased risk of premature mortality. Specific health medical conditions can include coronary heart disease, stroke and increased blood pressure, through to depression, sleeplessness and even early onset dementia.

Affluent nations also have the highest rates of individuals living alone since census data collection began and likely the highest rates in human history, with those rates projected to increase (e.g., Euromonitor International, 2014).

A recent report predicts that loneliness will reach epidemic proportions by 2030 unless action is taken . Although living alone can offer conveniences and advantages for an individual, this meta-analysis indicates that physical health is not among them, particularly for adults younger than 65 years.

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Is loneliness an issue in Australia?

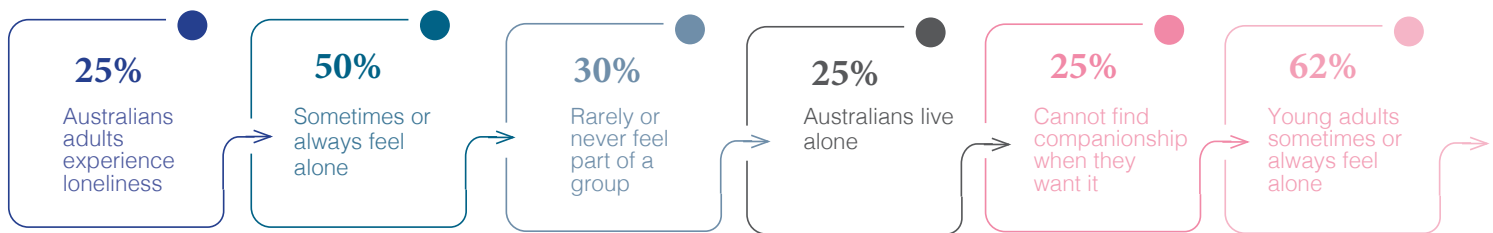
From the 2018 Australian Loneliness Report, produced by the Australian Psychological Society and Swinburne University of Technology, key overarching finding included:

- Australians who are married are the least lonely; there are no differences between other age categories in loneliness levels. Those Australians who are married are the least lonely compared to those who are single, separated or divorced. Australians in a de facto relationship are also less lonely than those who are not.
- Half of those surveyed (50%) sometimes or always feel alone. Nearly 55% of the population feel they lack companionship at least sometimes. This number is highest in young adults (62%) compared to seniors (46%).
- Nearly 30% of Australians rarely or never feel part of a group of friends. One in four (25.5%) do not feel they have a lot in common with the people around them. One in five (21.4%) rarely or never feel close to people, rarely or never feel they have someone to talk to (22.1%) and don't feel they have people they can turn to (21.4%). Nearly a quarter (24.5%) say they can't find companionship when they want it.
- Data from the 2016 Australian Census revealed that almost one household in four (24.4%) was a lone person household. This increased from one in five households in 1991 (20.0%). Of the 2 million people living alone on Census night, over half (55%) were female. Women living alone tended to be older than men who lived alone. The median age of females living on their own was 64 years, compared to 54 years for males.



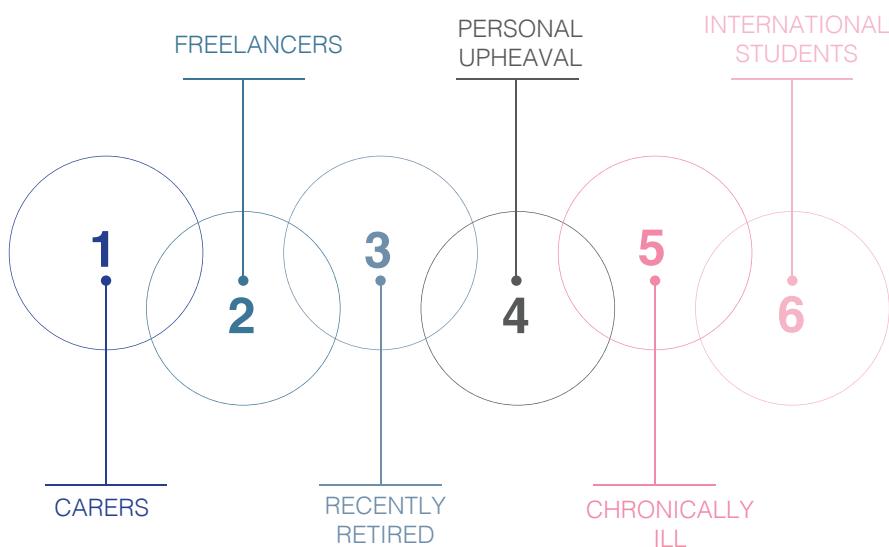
Photo by Priscilla Du Preez on Unsplash

The Australian story



Based on data from the Australian Psychology Association and results of the Australian Census 2016

Groups at risk of social isolation



Based on research by The Loneliness Project

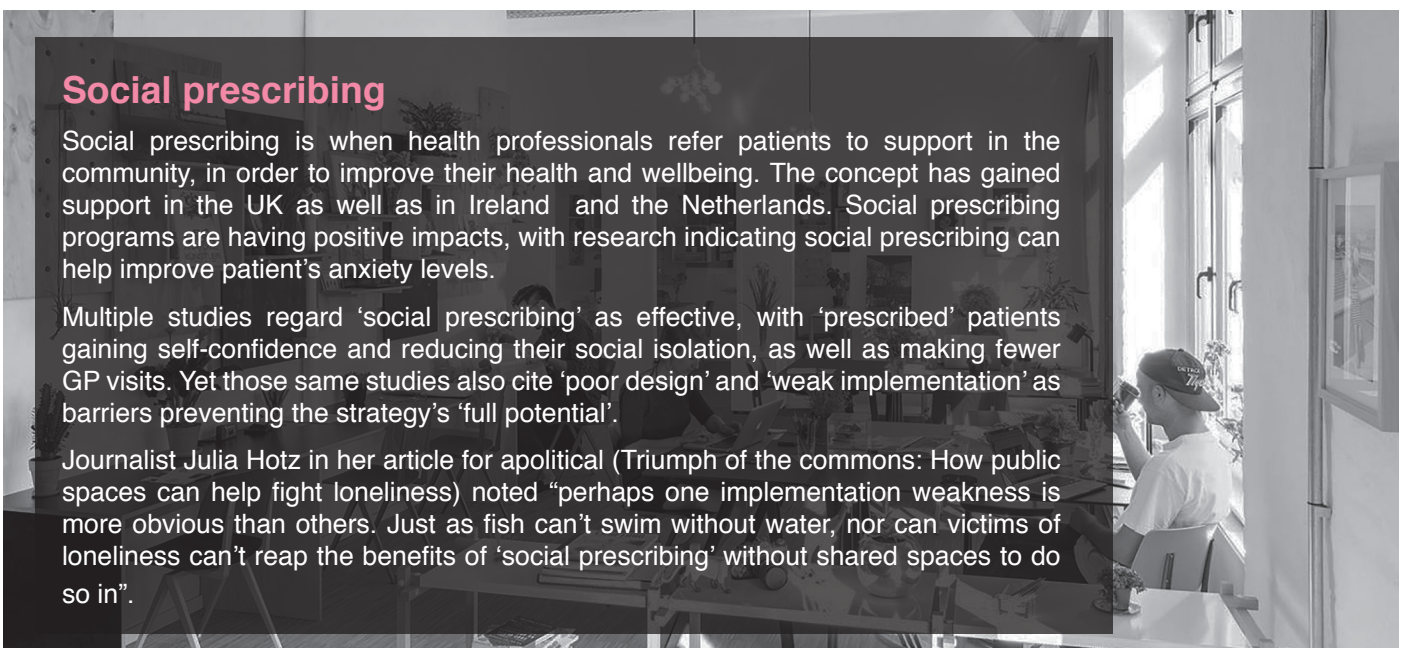
Loneliness affects all types of people in all kinds of situations, from those working alone, to carers carrying heavy responsibilities, to those who suddenly find themselves out of the workforce and removed from all their structures and rhythms.

Social prescribing

Social prescribing is when health professionals refer patients to support in the community, in order to improve their health and wellbeing. The concept has gained support in the UK as well as in Ireland and the Netherlands. Social prescribing programs are having positive impacts, with research indicating social prescribing can help improve patient's anxiety levels.

Multiple studies regard 'social prescribing' as effective, with 'prescribed' patients gaining self-confidence and reducing their social isolation, as well as making fewer GP visits. Yet those same studies also cite 'poor design' and 'weak implementation' as barriers preventing the strategy's 'full potential'.

Journalist Julia Hotz in her article for *apolitical* (Triumph of the commons: How public spaces can help fight loneliness) noted "perhaps one implementation weakness is more obvious than others. Just as fish can't swim without water, nor can victims of loneliness can't reap the benefits of 'social prescribing' without shared spaces to do so in".



Carers

Our tailored projects aim to provide a tool kit to carers feeling isolated and lonely in their role.

Australia's 2.65 million informal carers are helping members of their family and friends to continue living at home while they deal with chronic conditions, disability and age.

Social isolation and loneliness represent key challenges for carers. Carers Queensland found half of all carers are lonely and 54% socially isolated some or most of the time. Carers isolation stems from:

- missing time with family and friends, and work or social opportunities
- experiencing anger, frustration, guilt, loss, plus mental and psychological stress
- cutting back on work or giving up completely.

Work from home (WFH)

Community coworking spaces are an important avenue to support small home based businesses, freelancers and remote workers (WFH), and address workplace isolation

There is a cultural shift in how we work. More Australians than ever before are becoming their own boss, with the home becoming the workplace.

- Small business owners are often not part of a workplace community
- Skills and personal development training can be difficult
- There are reduced opportunities to maintain networks and find new clients
- They experience a lack of collaborative opportunities
- There are no places for micro and home-based businesses to meet

Lifestyle change

Through online services and information we can link people who are suddenly alone to the assistance they need.

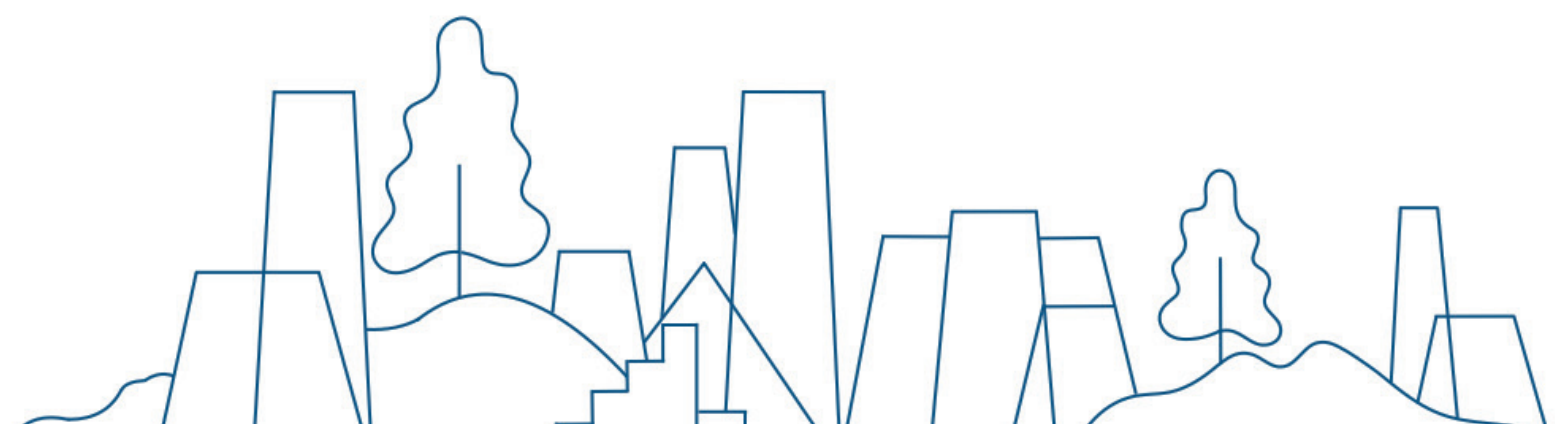
Many Australians experience periods of transition in their lives. During these times entrenched norms, support structures and connections are removed or change, leaving some feeling vulnerable, lonely and isolated.

- Lifestyle change can be a welcomed change or it can be sudden, traumatic and imposed.
- This sudden change in circumstances can create feelings of uncertainty and lack of purpose.
- Some people will move through their transitional period with minor bumps and bruises. For others, the transition will be hard and will impact deeply with financial, emotional and social ramifications.

Our concept

- Through partnerships with organisations that provide social work, physiology and counselling services, we seek to address social isolation and loneliness of carers by making available resources that connect people aligned by this common experience. These resources will help carers cope with the emotional position they find themselves.
- We will address workplace loneliness for freelancers through coworking communities in the suburbs - innovative and inspirational spaces for small business owners to meet, learn and share. With support from sponsors, our spaces will be welcoming and accessible to small home based businesses. Regular communal lunches, yoga/ wellness sessions, PD seminars and happy hours will facilitate the sense of workplace community
- For people who experience an abrupt change of circumstances, we will develop resources to connect people aligned by the common experience of upheaval to help alleviate some of the isolation and help people cope with the emotional position in which they find themselves.

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