



## **FACT SHEET 2:**

### **Loneliness - a mental health perspective**

#### **What is loneliness? How would you define it?**

Loneliness is a common experience for people who experience mental illness. I recently sat with a group of people who have experienced mental illness and asked them about their experience of loneliness.

Loneliness is acutely felt around Christmas. It is meant to be a time of family and friends, food and presents. A unique time when people are drawn together to be community. For many people who experience mental illness it can be a time of great loneliness and sadness.

The group defined loneliness as emptiness and sadness.

Not knowing what to do with themselves.

Being disconnected from others, especially family.

Isolation, not belonging, dissociated, not being able to get out, not knowing what to do.

Feeling rejected, not worthwhile.

#### **What are the feelings experienced by people who are lonely?**

There were many feelings that came with the experience of loneliness. Some of those feelings are jealousy, anger, frustration, worry, stuck, stir crazy, confusion, suicidal, trapped emptiness, and sadness.

For many, the feeling of experiencing another loss due to their mental illness is devastating and many are tempted with the thoughts of suicide, especially around Christmas time.

The thoughts that 'I don't belong' or that 'I am not wanted' increase the sense of shame and loss.

#### **If a person who feels alone were to ask you how to change their situation, what would you advise them to do?**

The advice from the group included information like: plan ahead to minimise the loneliness. Don't just expect things to happen, but plan to attend events and gatherings so that the loneliness is reduced.

Find people you trust to share the burden, people who are able to listen and who are will try and understand. Keep contact with friends. Many said that you may not have a family, but that you can create connections by joining groups, community centres.

Make sure that you keep yourself busy, going for walks, enjoying music, get involved in some form of volunteer work, and learn to push through the anxiety and to challenge some of the misconceptions around the stigma and prejudice of mental illness.

Some said it was important to get professional help so that people can work through some of the issues and the grief that is experienced by the loss and change due to illness.

**If a person knows someone who is experiencing loneliness, how could they go about helping this person?**

People might be fragile and that they might find it hard to trust. So be careful. By careful, we mean to take the time to listen and understand and to not give up on the first attempt.

Make telephone contact first before going to visit.

Invite the person out. Arrange to go out for coffee, meal together. Do things that you both like to do.

Limit the time that you spend with the person. Don't expect them to spend the whole day, but make sure that they are able to manage the time with others. Medication and recovery means that people's energy levels may be low and their ability to maintain conversation may be difficult.

Don't be afraid to sit in silence with people; don't feel like you have to make conversation. People often appreciate the fact that people are willing to sit alongside.

Information supplied by:

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**This fact sheet is designed as a resource tool.**

**The Uniting Church SA recommends that those struggling with loneliness or isolation seek professional help.**

**A helpful starting point is to contact Lifeline on 13 11 14.**



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