

Why do men feel so alone?

In our column and podcast series, Professor Sarah Niblock, CEO of the UK Council for Psychotherapy, explores challenges that affect us all. This issue, she tackles loneliness among men in this era of constant, but hollow, social media ‘connectedness’

Despite all the ways we have to interact with others, people still feel isolated and alone. Loneliness is an increasing problem – so much so that, last year, the government introduced a loneliness strategy and minister for loneliness. We often talk of the condition in relation to older people but rarely gender. It may come as a surprise then that so many of those affected by loneliness are men.

A recent YouGov survey for Movember, a charity event that raises awareness of men’s health issues, asked men about their friendships and whether they had people outside their homes they could confide in about their worries. Half of men asked said they had two or fewer friends and one in eight had none – that’s 2.5 million men with no close friends. Even worse, men’s friendlessness trebles between their early 20s and late middle age.

Harmful stoicism

Isolation can have physical and mental health implications. A 2017 report by the Commission on Loneliness said loneliness is as detrimental to health as smoking 15 cigarettes a day. Research shows a correlation between loneliness and coronary heart disease and strokes, and other studies associate loneliness with depression. But why are so many men affected? In our latest podcast, psychotherapist Noel Bell says some men feel they have to be self-reliant. Due to prevailing social stereotypes, it can be viewed as a sign of

weakness for men to admit they have a problem, express their deepest feelings or discuss a serious personal topic.

Perhaps due to the way generations of men have been raised, it is often difficult to recognise feelings of loneliness in the first place. Behavioural differences between boys and girls are not hardwired at birth, they are socialised. Girls are stereotypically seen as more emotional and talkative and so their verbal, expressive skills are more valued than those of boys by parents and teachers, according to researchers.

For some men, having a partner and a family can help ward off the negative effects of loneliness – but what if their personal circumstances change? After a relationship breaks down or there is a bereavement, some men find their friends have drifted away and they have no one to talk to. Social media can be beneficial if it leads to interaction in the real world, but online networks are no substitute for face-to-face friendships – the number of likes on your most recent post does not compare with genuine connection.

Social activities such as team sports aren’t for everyone and, if you’re already feeling lonely or isolated, it can be difficult to build the confidence to enter those environments and connect over a shared interest. There is also the danger that some male-dominated social environments encourage drinking alcohol and may not be the right places for those who are feeling the mental health



PHOTOGRAPH: PAL HANSEN. HAIR AND MAKEUP: CARL STANLEY

effects of isolation. That said, ‘shoulder to shoulder’ active interactions for men, such as exercise, especially running, are proven to be beneficial. But such activities do not appeal to all men and this is where psychotherapy can be of particular use.

Don’t suffer in silence

A psychotherapist is not a friend, nor is therapy a substitute for a meaningful friendship. A therapist will, however, help a client identify what may be creating barriers to them building supportive friendships and determine the factors that may be causing their feelings of isolation. A therapist will work with the client to address their issues, providing an impartial, non-judgemental space in which a lonely person can work out what is best for them and how to move towards a more connected and contented life.

Bell says too many men enter therapy only when a situation has reached crisis point and he encourages men to not bottle up their emotions. ‘Reflecting on your feelings is healthy and normal,’ he says.

ASK THE EXPERT...

Therapist Noel Bell regularly comments on TV news items relating to addiction, depression, relationships and social media



Q How can we help a man who is lonely?

Men need to overcome the stigma of seeking help; that they should be strong, self-reliant and not require assistance. Lonely people often need a confidence boost, so include them in social gatherings. People can feel alone due to situational obstacles, such as living in a rural area. Social circles expand with introductions. Organising social events can be a great way to connect people to your network.

Q Where can people make new friends?

Friendships often start with common interests. Try to find groups of people who meet regularly and have interests similar to your own. Try to be patient. Quality friendships develop slowly, need to be nurtured and given time to mature; they don’t just blossom

overnight. The quality of relationships matters much more than quantity. So often with social media, there can be an emphasis on the quantity of superficial connections that require little investment. In authentic friendships, we can be ourselves, show vulnerability and benefit from mutual respect.

Q What else can lonely men and women do?

There is an expectation to have a wide social circle, but who says this should be so? The important question is: are you satisfied with your number of close friends? Therapy can uncover your possible fear of social criticism and help you understand your human need for companionship. Try to be proactive at social gatherings. Shyness can be misinterpreted as aloofness. Persevere with speaking to others at events. noelbell.net



THE UKCP TALKING THERAPIES PODCAST

Men and loneliness in the modern world

Listen to Matt Nicholls and Noel Bell discuss male isolation and how therapy can help at psychologies.co.uk/why-are-men-so-lonely-podcast-ukcp

About the UKCP and how to find a therapist

- **The UKCP** Alongside professional support for our members, we are the leading research, innovation, educational and regulatory body working to advance psychotherapies for the benefit of all. Our membership includes more than 8,000 therapists and 70 training and accrediting organisations. Members work privately, in public health or third-sector organisations, offering a range of approaches for couples, individuals, families and groups.
- **To find the right therapist**, log on to psychologies.co.uk/find-a-therapist and look at our Life Labs Channel of experts who may be able to help, or visit psychotherapy.org.uk/find-a-therapist to locate a therapist near you.

