



Measuring what matters Loneliness

TREASURY SUBMISSION 2023

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About Ending Loneliness Together

Ending Loneliness Together (ELT) is the national Australian organisation working to raise awareness and reduce the negative effects of loneliness and social isolation in our community through evidence-based solutions and advocacy.

Inspired by the work of the UK *Campaign to End Loneliness* and the growing research evidence of the role of social connection in the prevention of poor health and wellbeing, Ending Loneliness Together draws together knowledge from national and international researchers, along with service delivery expertise from community groups, professional organisations, government agencies, and skilled volunteers, to effectively address loneliness in Australia.

Ending Loneliness Together takes a central co-ordination role, bringing knowledge, expertise, and action to drive collaborative solutions. By framing evidence-based, cost-effective solutions for individuals, communities, and governments, a thorough breadth of offerings is available to create positive change.

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Registered with Australian Charities and Not-For-Profit Commission (ACNC)

We acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of the lands and seas on which we work and live, and pay our respects to Elders, past, present, and future, for they hold the dreams of Indigenous Australia

Ending Loneliness Together

Ending Loneliness Together is the national leading authority on social health in Australia. It comprises a coalition of organisations focused on combating chronic loneliness and social isolation, since high quality social connections matter for good health, success in school, and productive workplaces. Ending Loneliness Together is also a world leader – having co-founded the Global Initiative on Loneliness and Connection, an international not-for-profit working on evidence-based frameworks and policies to tackle social disconnection, alongside an emerging partnership with the World Health Organization.

What is Loneliness?

A subjective unpleasant or distressing feeling of a lack of connection to other people, along with a desire for more, or more satisfying, social relationships ¹

Ending Loneliness Together has delivered two influential White Papers on loneliness, ^{2,3} and provides consultation to Australian Federal and State Government agencies, the US Government, and global agencies on issues related to loneliness and social isolation. Our work is underpinned by a scientific advisory committee and rigorous scientific research.

The Ending Loneliness Together Outcomes Measurement Framework, ⁴⁻⁶ sets out the measures and indicators that can be used for tracking loneliness in the Australian community.

We are committed to evidence-based action to reduce loneliness, and encourage meaningful connection, for all Australians across the lifespan and across our cultural landscape. We welcome the opportunity to contribute to the Measuring What Matters statement.

Why Measure Loneliness as an indicator of Wellbeing?

Loneliness can affect anyone at any age. ⁷ However, if not appropriately identified and addressed, loneliness leads to poor health and wellbeing. Loneliness is a significant threat to public health and is an important target for the prevention of mental and physical ill-health, and major contributors to health system costs. ^{2,3} Loneliness increases the likelihood of an earlier death by 26% ⁸ and leads to a range of physical and mental health problems, including cardiometabolic disease, depression, and social anxiety. ⁹

Unfortunately, loneliness affects many Australians – it is estimated that **one in four Australians aged 12 to 89 experience problematic levels of loneliness**. At any given time, the estimated prevalence of problematic levels of loneliness is around 5 million Australians. ³

Loneliness is also recognised as the next public global health issue beyond the current COVID-19 pandemic. In recognition of this detrimental impact on health and wellbeing, the World Health Organisation (WHO) released an Advocacy Brief on Loneliness in Older People in 2020, ¹⁰ and this year will commence a three-year Commission to address loneliness across the lifespan. With the launch of this Commission, **loneliness is now recognised as an important social determinant of health**. ²

Loneliness is also costly to workplace productivity, lower staff retention and increased absenteeism. ^{11,12} The New Economics Foundation Report (UK) estimated the cost-impact for non-private and private employers at £2.53 billion and £2.10 billion per year, respectively. ¹³

A 2021 report from Bankwest Curtin Economics Centre estimated loneliness costs the Australian economy **\$2.7 billion each year**, an equivalent annual cost of \$1,565 for each person who becomes lonely. ¹⁴ In 2019, the National Mental Health Commission showed that for every \$1 invested in programs that address loneliness, the return on investment is between \$2.14 to \$2.87 respectively. ^{15,16}

Addressing loneliness requires a whole-of-government and whole-of-society response, and more critically, **effective action can only be monitored and implemented through appropriate measurement**. Given the high prevalence rates of loneliness and the exacerbation of this issue as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, we urge the inclusion of a loneliness measure to ensure we deliver effective, and efficient responses to address loneliness, in order to promote Australians’ well-being.

Measuring Loneliness Accurately Matters

Loneliness is **different from social isolation** which involves having objectively fewer social relationships, social roles, group memberships, and infrequent social interaction. ¹ Measures of social isolation focus on the number and/or frequency of social contacts but are **not adequate for assessing loneliness**.

Loneliness also differs from the general sense of well-being, introversion, (absence of) social support, depression, solitude, and social exclusion, and therefore cannot be accurately inferred from these constructs. Measuring loneliness therefore require its own question.

How to Measure Loneliness?

Consistent with our Outcomes Measurement Framework, ⁴⁻⁶ we recommend the **Office for National Statistic (ONS) Single-Item Measurement of Loneliness** as a standard way of measuring loneliness. ¹⁷ It is a focused, valid, and easy to use measure that is suitable for use across age-groups, languages, and cultures. Levels of loneliness can be reported as the percentage ticking each box.

Office for National Statistic (ONS) Single-Item Measurement of Loneliness ¹⁷

The next question asks how often you feel lonely.

	Please tick one box				
	Often/Always	Some of the time	Occasionally	Hardly ever	Never
How often do you feel lonely?					

The ONS Single Item Loneliness measure is used (annually) in both the UK and New Zealand for mapping loneliness at a local level. It will improve the evidence base on loneliness in Australia, allow a direct comparison of rates of loneliness between countries, and assist in measuring progress against both social and economic outcomes of well-being.

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