Mental Health impact of Loneliness & Social Isolation

At least 1 in every 4 people will experience a mental health problem at some point in their life. One in six adults have a mental health problem at any one time². Loneliness and social isolation are harmful to our health: research shows that lacking social connections can be as damaging to our health as smoking 15 cigarettes a day³! This factsheet presents key information on the groups in Havering most likely to experience social isolation and advice on where to get help.

Loneliness is not about ‘being alone’ but rather a subjective experience of isolation. Many of us can feel a ‘pang’ of loneliness, even in the middle of a crowded room⁴! Persistent loneliness, however, such as that experienced by an unemployed person whose social life centred on work colleagues, can have an effect on both physical and mental health. Stress hormones, immune function and cardiovascular function are impacted by chronic loneliness. It can also lead to anxiety and depression through a persistent self-reinforcing loop of negative thoughts, sensations and behaviours⁴.

Women (6%) are more likely to have a clinical diagnosis of depression than men (2.9%). The highest rate is amongst 25-44 year old women (7.5%), and is likely to include women with postnatal depression or feelings of social isolation following the birth of a baby⁵.

Increasing age is an important risk factor for increased mental health needs. There are a number of conditions that older people are more likely to experience, particularly as this group are prone to social isolation, financial difficulty, chronic physical health problems (long term conditions) and loss/bereavement⁵.

Deprivation is also associated with poorer mental health. The Mental Illness Needs Index (MINI) estimates levels of mental health need relative to England; and includes admissions related to mental health conditions. Brooklands, Heaton and Gooshays wards have higher scores than England, indicating more mental ill health⁵.

Social networks and friendships not only have an impact on reducing the risk of death or developing certain diseases, but they also help individuals to recover when they do fall ill. Activities such as volunteering not only help improve mood by doing something good, but also reduce social isolation.

What can we do?

- Get support from organisations such as Havering MIND, Age UK, Mental Health Foundation
- Take small steps to feel connected with the world – maybe try visiting your local library for details of classes and groups
- Go for a walk – not only does this give you fresh air and exercise which improves your mood, you might also meet people on the way
- Utilise safe social media to stay connected with people – there are many online forums to share and support each other
How many people in Havering have a mental health problem?

- There are an estimated 46,200 people in Havering with at least one mental illness
- Of these, around 30,300 are estimated to have a neurotic disorder, which includes conditions such as anxiety and depression
- 5% of the adult population in Havering (9,300) have a confirmed diagnosis of depression
- 6% of women have a diagnosis of depression
- 25-44 year olds have the highest rate of diagnosed depression
- The number of older people aged 65+ with depression is expected to rise from 3,983 to 4,698 by 2025
- People with long term conditions such as diabetes and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) are more likely to suffer from mental illness e.g. depression and anxiety; and that these can exacerbate their physical ill health.

What are the risk factors for poor mental health?

- Age, peaks in middle age
- Gender, women and younger men
- Deprivation, higher in lower socio-economic groups
- Ethnicity, south asian women
- Alcohol use
- Drug use
- Contact with criminal justice system
- Antenatal and postnatal period
- Learning disability
- Cognitive impairment
- Chronic physical health problem

Why is loneliness bad for us?

Our early social environment and parental behaviours determine to a large extent what level of social connection we feel comfortable with, and learn to expect. If our expectations about those relationships are not met, our body reacts and alerts us that something is ‘wrong’, through stress hormones and feelings of anxiety. If the loneliness persists, it starts interfering with our ability to regulate the emotions that we associate with loneliness.

Is loneliness a cause or a consequence of mental health?

Both. Loneliness and mental health can become a vicious circle of negative thoughts and emotions. Being socially isolated can be a big factor in loneliness which in turn leads to depression. However, once depressed, feelings of anxiety and low self-esteem can lead to people removing themselves from their circle of friendships due to perceived stigma about their condition.
What makes people lonely?

Certain lifestyles and the stresses of daily life can make some people socially isolated and vulnerable to loneliness. There are many situations that might make you feel isolated or lonely. For example, if you:

- lose a partner or someone close to you
- go through a relationship break-up
- are a single parent or caring for someone else – you may find it hard to maintain a social life
- retire and lose the social contact you had at work
- are older and find it difficult to go out alone
- move to a new area without family, friends or community networks
- belong to a minority ethnic group and live in an area without others from a similar background
- are excluded from social activities – for example, because of mobility problems or a shortage of money
- experience discrimination and stigma – for example, because of a disability or long-term health condition, or your gender, race or sexuality
- have experienced sexual or physical abuse – you may find it hard to form close relationships with other people

What can we do about it?

Help and support is available from many organisations such as Havering MIND, the Mental Health Foundation and Age UK. Befriending schemes and other voluntary activities can be a worthwhile way not only to combat a volunteer’s depression but help people suffering with loneliness and depression. The charity MIND have developed the following list of activities that might help:

- exercise classes or walking groups
- social groups for lesbian, gay or bisexual people
- art, music or poetry groups
- church, religious and spiritual meetings and services
- dance classes
- gardening groups
- IT classes
- parent and baby clubs
- meditation groups
- political groups
- slimming clubs
- sports clubs
- voluntary organisations

Are there any digital or online resources and I use to help me?

NHS Choices website has a developed a Mental Health Apps Library. This features apps and digital tools that can demonstrate effectiveness in the treatment of mild and moderate anxiety and depression. These are compliant with the Improving Access to Psychological (IAPT) quality standards and offer treatments for anxiety and depression disorders approved by The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE). Some examples include:
I think someone I know is depressed or anxious – how can I help?

Depression can develop slowly. Someone who is depressed doesn't always realise or acknowledge that they're not behaving as they usually do. Often it's a partner, family member or carer who first realises help is needed and encourages their relative or friend to see a doctor or find another source of support.

Feeling sad from time to time is normal. But if this lasts more than a couple of weeks or starts to affect everyday life, help is usually needed. Use these tips to help someone who seems down.

- Encourage the person you're worried about to see their doctor.
- Encourage them to talk, and listen to what they say.
- Let them know you care about them.
- Remind them they can't help being affected by depression.
- Encourage them to help themselves, for example by doing regular exercise, eating a balanced diet and taking part in activities they enjoy.
- Get information about the services available to them, such as psychological therapy services and support groups in their area.
- Stay in contact with them by sending a card, phoning or visiting them. People who are depressed can become isolated because they often find it difficult to leave their home.

Where can I get further help and support?

Please visit the following organisations for support: