

Young people and the loneliness pandemic



THE MIX

There's no denying that since the coronavirus pandemic, people across the UK have had to handle being socially isolated from friends, family and other support networks, which has really taken its toll on our collective mental health. This is particularly true of young people up and down the country, as they've been unable to attend school, college and university, and have had no access to youth clubs, which has limited their social resources.

Loneliness is not a new issue for young people, but we know that the pandemic has made things much worse. When it comes to the reasons young people have felt lonely throughout the coronavirus pandemic, it came as no surprise that most young people selected being unable to see family and friends when asked why. This was closely followed by missing physical contact with others, also known as skin hunger¹. This indicates that social isolation as a result of the Covid-19 lockdowns is the root cause of young people feeling lonely.

The research also found that while young people are missing their friends and family, this isolation has led to them placing more emphasis on the importance of their relationships, with a huge 81% agreeing that they now value their connections with others more.

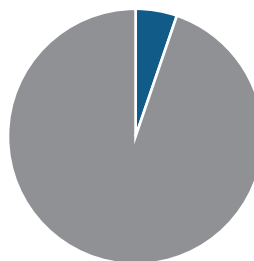
¹ Wired Magazine; Skin hunger helps explain your desperate longing for human touch - <https://www.wired.co.uk/article/skin-hunger-coronavirus-human-touch>

To be able to understand the true impact of loneliness on the lives of young people, The Mix commissioned a survey with independent research and data analytics experts YouGov in February 2021. The key findings included:



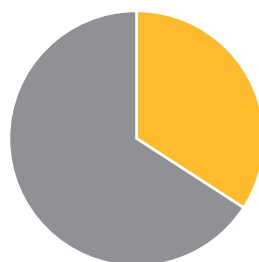
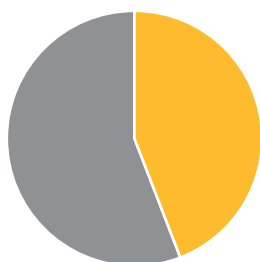
39%

Of 16-25 year olds felt always or often lonely in the past 12 months, with an additional 41% feeling lonely sometimes.

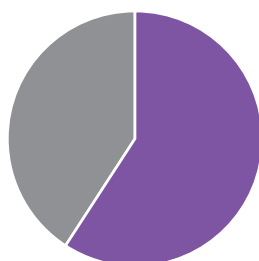


Only 5%

Of young people have never felt lonely in the past 12 months.



Females were more likely to have felt always or often lonely in the past 12 months (44%) than males (34%).



59%

Of young people who self-harmed at some point in their life have always or often felt lonely in the past 12 months compared to only 31% among those who have not self-harmed

Understanding loneliness

Loneliness is, of course, a fact of life. Most people at some point in their lives will experience loneliness to some degree, whether this is in the short term (for example, haven't seen family in a while) or, as has been the case with the UK Coronavirus lockdowns, long term. The latter of the two can truly impact mental health in ways that can be difficult to recover - albeit with loneliness itself not being a mental health condition.

It's key to understand the difference between being alone and feeling lonely. Collins dictionary defines alone as:

"When you are alone, you are not with any other people"² but also as "If you say that you are alone or feel alone, you mean that nobody who is with you, or nobody at all, cares about you".

This is where the line between being alone and feeling lonely becomes blurred; Collins Dictionary describes lonely as

"Someone who is lonely is unhappy because they are alone or do not have anyone they can talk to"³.

The reasons why people might feel lonely can be understood through intrinsic (internal) and extrinsic (external) factors. For example, intrinsic would suggest that the person feels disconnected to their peers but could be physically surrounded by them or in regular contact, however their emotional state means that they do still feel lonely.

² Collins Dictionary definition of "alone", <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/alone>

³ Collins Dictionary definition of "lonely", <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/lonely>

Intrinsic factors can include, for example, being part of a minority group, such as the LGBTQIA+ community or having mental health issues. Extrinsic factors can include, for example, geographical location, economic status, or being physically isolated from others, as many young people have experienced over the repeated UK lockdowns. Regardless of the reasons why a person feels lonely, the impact is the same⁴.

A study by BMC Psychiatry investigated the link between loneliness and mental health, and defined loneliness as being “a painfully experienced absence of social contact, belongingness or a sense of isolation”⁵.

From this, we can take that it is entirely possible for a person to be alone and yet not feel lonely - for example, more introverted personality types might feel happier on their own.

For example, Campaign to End Loneliness quotes a review of mortality and loneliness that found loneliness can increase likelihood of mortality by 26% and notes an increased risk of coronary heart disease and stroke⁶.

Not only can sustained feelings of loneliness lead to a direct physical impact, it can also extend to behaviours which can then in turn lead to health issues. Due to the feelings of depression that can oftentimes come with loneliness, individuals might be more likely to smoke, take drugs or drink excessively. Later in this paper, we ask young people how they're coping with their feelings of loneliness which is inclusive of these impulses.

⁴ <https://www.campaigntoendloneliness.org/blog/hidden-citizens/>, extract taken from 2015. Hidden Citizens: how can we identify loneliness in our communities?

⁵ Beutel Et Al, 2017, BMC Psychiatry: Loneliness in the general population - prevalence, determinants and relations to mental health- <https://link.springer.com/content/pdf/10.1186/s12888-017-1262-x.pdf>

⁶ <https://www.campaigntoendloneliness.org/threat-to-health/>, extract taken from 2015. Loneliness and social isolation as risk factors for mortality: a meta-analytic review

Mental health and loneliness

While loneliness in itself isn't a red flag that an individual is experiencing mental health issues, extended periods of feeling this way can increase a tendency towards anxiety or depression⁷. In turn, this can lead to a pattern of behaviours that can begin to negatively impact an individual's life, for example:



Issues with sleep, eating and other everyday activities such as bathing



Decline in performance at work or school



Problems with finances



Self-harm such as self-poisoning or inflicting injury on their own body



Suicidal thoughts

Another way in which depression and anxiety brought on by loneliness can manifest itself is difficulty maintaining relationships with friends and family. From this, it's clear to see that if a person is depressed or anxious, there's a risk that a perpetual cycle of loneliness and poor mental health might occur that can be incredibly difficult to break.

Leading mental health charity Mind also notes that a person who is experiencing mental health issues might also be more likely to feel lonely due to the stigmatisation of mental health issues⁸.

⁷ Journal of Personality and Social Study; Relation between loneliness and depression - https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Letitia-Peplau/publication/15992650_Relation_between_loneliness_and_depression_A_structural_equation_analysis/links/0c960524386130f754000000/Relation-between-loneliness-and-depression-A-structural-equation-analysis.pdf

⁸ Mind, <https://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/tips-for-everyday-living/loneliness/about-loneliness/>

Gathering our data

All figures, unless otherwise stated, are from YouGov Plc. Total sample size was 1,023 16-25 year olds, of which 1,007 chose to answer the survey. Fieldwork was undertaken between 29th January - 3rd February 2021. The survey was carried out online. The figures have been weighted and are representative of all UK 16-25 year olds.

To better understand which of the age groups within this category are most at risk when it comes to loneliness, the data has also been broken out to be representative of 16 to 20 year olds and 21 to 25 year olds.

The Mix specialises in providing support for young people across the UK, ranging from issues relating to housing, finance, education and body issues. Our aim is to better the lives of young people, to signpost them to key support including but not limited to loneliness and the mental health issues that might arise as a result.



The survey into loneliness intends to understand the relationship between the Covid-19 lockdowns in the UK and loneliness among young people. From this, we intend to gain a better understanding of the support necessary to prevent loneliness becoming a secondary, hidden pandemic.

Impact of UK Covid-19 lockdown on young people and loneliness

77%

of young people agree that the coronavirus pandemic has made them feel more lonely

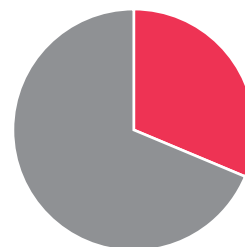
It comes as no surprise that loneliness has been on the increase throughout the Coronavirus pandemic, with people unable to leave their homes to visit friends and family. Young people in our survey stated that this was the main reason they felt lonely - 63% stated that they missed face to face interaction with a friend or a romantic partner, and 60% said they were missing physical contact with other people, an experience also defined as skin hunger. Studies have shown that touch makes you feel calmer and happier so it's unsurprising that being deprived of this would have such a huge impact on our mental health⁹. Other reasons given included:



40%
miss seeing their family
face-to-face



36%
said that they feel like they
have no one to talk to



31%
stated their loneliness is
related to a wider mental
health issue (e.g., it's brought
on by social anxiety,
depression, etc.)

When asked what their reasons for feeling lonely were, young people quoted a range of issues from lack of romantic relationships, social venues being closed and being at home whilst the family aren't getting along very well.

⁹ Wired Magazine; Skin hunger helps explain your desperate longing for human touch - <https://www.wired.co.uk/article/skin-hunger-coronavirus-human-touch>

Interestingly, our survey found that young people between the ages of 21-25 were more likely to agree that they missed face-to-face interaction with family than their counterparts 20 years old or younger, at 47% and 32% respectively. The younger group, however, were more likely to state that they didn't feel understood, at 24% compared with 19% in 21-25 year olds.

Another impact of the pandemic is that it has appeared to help young people value connections with others more - a whopping 81% of young people agreed with this statement. The lockdown appears to have put many young people in a position where they have had to learn to cope with feelings of loneliness, with 47% agreeing with this statement.

The way that most people socialise has changed dramatically in the past 12 months, with many utilising video call platforms such as Zoom to maintain relationships with friends and family. The Mix survey found that 61% of young people turned to messaging and video calling for most of their socialisation. However, it seems that while these methods of coping with loneliness can help, it hasn't been a fix for everyone



- in fact, 53% agreed that they have felt lonely even when in the company of others, including when on video calls.

Who is most at risk of loneliness?

Over half

of unemployed young people have often or always felt lonely in the last 12 months

39%

of students strongly agreed that the coronavirus pandemic has made them feel more lonely - this compares to 28% among young people at work

Bisexual young people

are most likely to have experienced loneliness

Females

were more likely to say that they often feel lonely than males (38% vs 30%)

By nature, everyone experiences loneliness. However, this research by The Mix has identified groups that are more at risk than others. For example, full-time students were more likely to suggest that they have often or always felt lonely (44%) when compared with their counterparts who are gainfully employed (35%). However, it's unemployed young people who are most at risk, with 51% often or always feeling lonely in the past year.



44%
Of full time students have often or always felt lonely in the past year



35%
Of employed students have often or always felt lonely in the past year



51%
Of unemployed students have often or always felt lonely in the past year

This goes to show the importance of socialisation - whether that's in educational settings such as schools or universities, or in physical workspaces. As much of the UK workforce was placed on furlough or put out of work altogether¹⁰, many traditional jobs such as office work were forced to switch to digital ways of working. It could be determined that the continued socialisation through video calling and other methods may be helping people in employment to remain engaged with their peers, in a way that unemployed young people and students may not.



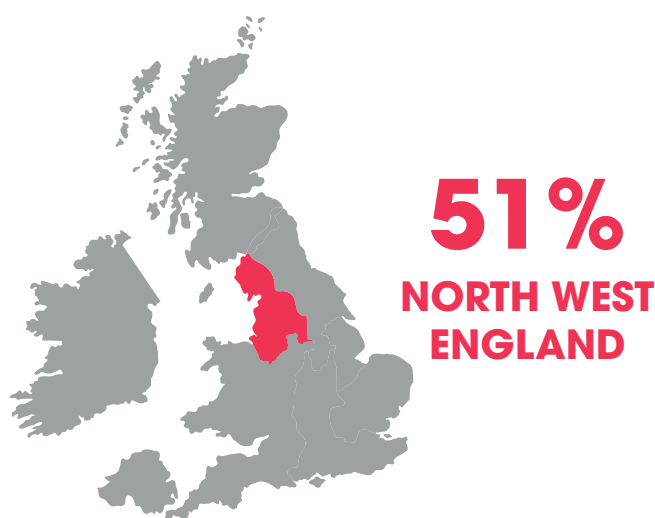
The additional strain on students can be seen in the challenges they faced throughout the pandemic. Many students ended up either confined to their university accommodation, or forced to move back into their family homes whilst simultaneously paying for accommodation that they couldn't legally access¹¹.

¹⁰ <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/business/news/uk-unemployment-rate-2021-b1805962.html>

¹¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2021/feb/17/uk-university-students-empty-accommodation>

Areas most affected by loneliness

When it comes to the areas that young people are most likely to say that they've often or always felt lonely, young people in the North of England most often agreed with this statement at 44%. Interestingly, young people living in London were the least likely to agree with this statement (33%).



In terms of the government regions, while young people from East Midlands were the least likely to say that they felt always or often lonely over the past 12 months (29%), those in the North West of England were the most likely to say so (51%).

It stands to reason that areas with lower population numbers might be more at risk of experiencing loneliness, and our survey found this to be true, with young people from rural areas more likely to say that they feel lonely because of the inability to see their friends or partner face-to-face (70%) - by comparison, 62% of young people from urban areas have had this experience.

Loneliness by gender

When it comes to how often young people feel lonely in relation to gender, this research found a clear split. Females were more likely than males to suggest that they often feel lonely, at 38% against 30%. Females were much less likely to suggest that they never or rarely felt lonely, suggesting that there is a significant gender divide (13% and 23% respectively).

Males were more likely to suggest that they'd know what to do to combat feelings of loneliness, with 59% agreeing that they would against 51% of females.

When asked whether they felt lonely even whilst in the company of others (including on video calls), females were far more likely to agree with this statement than males at 60% vs 47%.



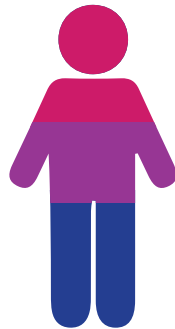
Loneliness by sexual orientation

In terms of sexuality, young people identifying as bisexuals were the most likely to have experienced loneliness often or always in the past 12 months (58%), closely followed by gays or lesbians (49%). In comparison, only 35% did so among heterosexuals.



49%

Gays or lesbians



58%

Bisexuals



35%

Heterosexuals

Bisexuals (72%) and gays or lesbians (72%) are also far more likely to have felt alone even when in the company of others.

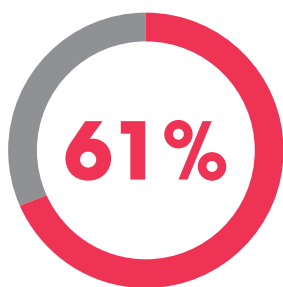
When asked the reasons for their feeling lonely, the difference between those identifying as LGBTQ+ and heterosexuals was abundantly clear - heterosexuals were far less likely to state the reason for their loneliness was because they didn't feel understood or because they are or were being bullied.

	Heterosexual	Gay or Lesbian	Bisexual	Other	Prefer not to say
Being unable to see my friends or partner face to face	64%	65%	62	57%	55%
Being unable to see my family face to face	41%	37%	40%	43%	31%
Missing physical contact with other people	61%	55%	66%	35%	48%
Not feeling understood	18%	30%	27%	39%	20%
I don't have many friends	25%	35%	34%	39%	28%
I am/ was being bullied	2%	2%	3%	4%	7%
Because of a bereavement	8%	7%	5%	13%	7%
Because of a relationship break-up	11%	13%	14%	5%	11%
My loneliness is related to a wider mental health issue*	26%	43%	42%	52%	32%
Feeling like I have no one to talk to	33%	52%	46%	35%	30%
Other	3%	9%	3%	4%	2%
Don't know/ can't recall	2%	-	1%	-	2%
Prefer not to say	0%	-	-	-	4%
Chose not to answer	-	-	-	-	-

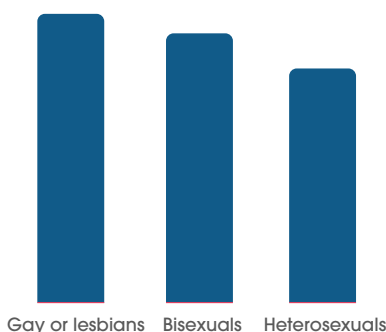
* E.g. it's brought on by social anxiety, depression, etc.

Stigmatisation of admitting to loneliness

Generally, there is a stigma around admitting to feeling lonely. The word “loner” is often used among young people as a slur for someone who doesn’t have many friends. However the actual definition of the word suggests that a person chooses to be alone and doesn’t seek social situations¹² as opposed to having an inability to develop lasting relationships. In fact, the UK government even launched Loneliness Awareness Week in 2019 with the aim of encouraging people to speak up about it¹³.



Overall, our survey found that 61% of all young people believe that there is a stigma attached to admitting that you feel lonely. This stigma is particularly rife among males, with 63% agreeing that there is a stigma around admitting to feelings of loneliness compared to 58% of females.



When reviewing the data based on sexual orientation, gay or lesbian young people (74%) and bisexuals (69%) were also more likely to agree that there is a stigma around loneliness - in comparison only 60% of heterosexuals agreed.



Interestingly, there was a disparity in terms of government regions agreeing whether there was a stigma around loneliness. For example, young people from the East of England were the most likely to agree with this statement (69%), while young people from the East Midlands were the least likely to agree with the statement (50%).

¹² Cambridge Dictionary, definition of loner, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/loner>

¹³ <https://letstalkloneliness.co.uk/get-involved-in-loneliness-awareness-week-2020/#:~:text=This%20week%20is%20Loneliness%20Awareness,to%20raise%20awareness%20of%20loneliness>.

How young people are coping with loneliness

Feeling lonely can be incredibly tough to overcome, especially at a time like the coronavirus pandemic. The repeated UK lockdowns have meant that young people haven't been able to access social support in ways that they might previously have done, which can be even more frustrating for young people if they know that simply hanging out with friends for a short while might relieve their feelings of loneliness.

Research by The Mix has found that 33% of young people wouldn't know what to do to help them cope with loneliness

...while just over half of all young people agreed that they would.

Males were somewhat more likely to agree that they would (58%) than females (50%).

In terms of sexuality, bisexuals were the least likely to agree (40%) and heterosexuals the most likely (59%).

When asked what had helped them cope with loneliness during the coronavirus pandemic, around one in ten (11%) said that nothing has helped them to cope with loneliness. Young people between 21 and 25 years old were more likely to say that nothing has helped them than those aged 16 to 20 years old, at 14% and 7% respectively. In terms of the most popular ways that did help young people cope with loneliness:



60%

Messaging or video calling friends and family



41%

Doing more physical activity



33%

Starting new hobbies

The survey also asked young people to identify thoughts and feelings that they'd had over the past 12 months, to help us identify which behaviours they're inclined towards when they're feeling lonely. Unsurprisingly, many have felt depressed or anxious, with 72% of young people selecting this option - females were slightly more likely to state that they'd had feelings of depression or anxiety than males (75% vs 68%). While this is not necessarily representative of clinical depression, extended periods of feeling depressed can lead to it.

Feelings of depression and anxiety weren't the only negative thoughts and feelings that young people had experienced in the past 12 months. Worryingly, nearly 1 in 5 have felt the urge to self-harm at some point (18%) with females more likely to report this than males. Even more concerning is the 39% of bisexual young people who are three times more likely to feel the urge to self-harm than bisexuals.

Often reported throughout the UK media has been the rise in alcohol consumption across the country, and among young people there's no exception. In the past 12 months, 41% have felt the urge to drink alcohol - with those identifying as LGBTQ+ more likely than their heterosexual counterparts more likely to agree with this statement. 52% of bisexuals and 49% of gays or lesbians have felt this urge vs 39% of heterosexuals.

72%

**Of young people have
felt depressed or
anxious over the past
12 months**

41%

**Of young people have
felt the urge to drink
alcohol in the past 12
months**

Loneliness and self-harm

59% of YP who self-harmed at some point in their life have always or often felt lonely in the past 12 months compared to only 31% among those who have not self-harmed

Extended periods of loneliness can lead to depression - and with this, a real risk that young people might self-harm, whether for the first time or as a repeat behaviour. In fact, of the young people who had self-harmed at some point in their life, 90% said that they felt depressed or anxious when feeling lonely in the past 12 months, which is a stark difference when compared with 66% among young people who have not self-harmed.

90%

Of the young people who had self-harmed at some point in their life, have felt depressed or anxious when feeling lonely in the past 12 months

The urge to self-harm due to feelings of loneliness among those who have a history of self-harm is alarming. Over half (51%) of all young people who have previously self-injured wanted to do so again in the last 12 months. This compares to only 4% among those who have never self-harmed before.

With self-harm, this is often understood to entail cutting, headbanging or sometimes even overdosing. However, people who have self-harmed before are also more at risk of making impulse decisions that can impact their physical health in secondary ways, for example in excess alcohol consumption or taking drugs.



Cutting or stabbing using sharp implements



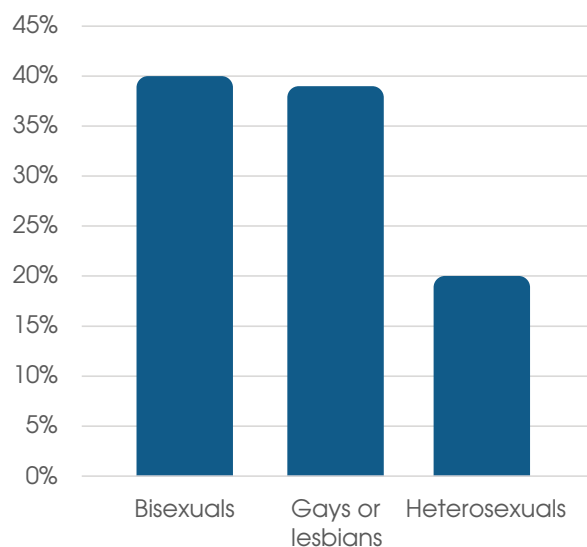
Banging heads and other body parts against walls



Self-poisoning or intentional overdosing

Worryingly, almost a quarter of young people have thought about suicide...

24% had suicidal thoughts, with bisexuals (40%) and gays or lesbians (39%) being twice as likely to experience suicidal thoughts as heterosexuals (20%).



While suicide and self-harm don't necessarily go hand in hand, self-harm is a key risk factor¹⁴. The findings of the report, *Suicide Following Self-Harm*

“underline the importance of prevention initiatives focused on the self-harm population, especially during the initial months following an episode of self-harm”

meaning the two are inextricably linked.

¹⁴ Keith Hawton Et AL, Suicide following self-harm: Findings from the Multicentre Study of self-harm in England, 2000–2012: <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S016503271500004X#!>

Supporting young people experiencing loneliness

The very nature of loneliness is precisely what makes it so difficult to tackle. When people are isolated, it's incredibly tough to reach them to be able to help - however, the research found that young people are in favour of support services that are already offered by The Mix in some capacity.

To gain a better understanding of what can be done to help young people who are experiencing loneliness, we asked young people what kind of support they'd like The Mix to offer. Among those who felt lonely in the past 12 months, the answers were:



32% would like The Mix to offer counselling to improve their support for loneliness



30% would like articles, such as expert support guides, real-life stories and interviews



28% want online live chats (for example, a moderated group chat with other young people)



26% want interactive online activities, such as a watch club where members discuss content



26% want online forums, such as members discussion boards with threads on different topics

The Mix are taking action to provide further resources for young people who are experiencing loneliness, with the aim of empowering young people to find connection with others and to do things that bring them happiness and fulfillment, such as volunteering. In collaboration with our long-term partner, NOW TV, we are producing the following for young people who are lonely:

An online watch club in which young people have access to NOW TV content and then meet to discuss it via The Mix's group chat service

A new loneliness support and advice hub dedicated to combatting loneliness

A new video in which young people offer tips for combating loneliness

New article content on loneliness written by young people and volunteers

Young-person led social content encouraging conversation and connection

As a result of The Mix's research findings, we know it's important to recognise the impact that isolation can have on young people's mental health and wellbeing, and that action must be taken to prevent a secondary crisis in this regard. To be able to do this, The Mix is calling for:

Better social access for young people, be it online or in person once the coronavirus restrictions are lifted

More awareness for the impact that extended periods of loneliness and skin hunger can have on the mental health of young people

Clearer signposting to resources such as those offered by The Mix in other areas where young people might be seeking support, such as in school, at their GP or among peers.

It's no secret that young people spend a lot of time online, and The Mix has a number of resources available that exist to engage young people in conversations around mental health and loneliness. Young people have been making use of our forums and articles for a long time, helping them to feel a sense of community even in situations where they are isolated.



Our intention is to extend our reach wherever we can, to make young people aware that there are tools available to help them utilise their time online in a positive way by engaging with their peers in a way that proactively combats loneliness.

We also recognise that there is a need to provide resources tailored for very specific needs of the young people identified in this survey as being the most vulnerable - for example, young people who are unemployed or part of the LGBTQIA+ community.

Which services offer support for loneliness?

You can speak to your GP if your mental health is being impacted by your feelings of loneliness. Your GP can talk to you about what's going on and help you to find ways to cope and improve your mental health.

They may also refer you for an assessment with a local community mental health team, who can help you find more specialised support.

You can get in touch with these organisations for support, advice and information. They are there for anyone who is feeling lonely, or parents, carers or friends of those who are experiencing loneliness:

The Mix

call 0808 808 4994
(7 days a week from 3pm to 12am)

Mind

call 0300 123 3393 or text 86463
(9am to 6pm on weekdays)

CALM

(for men) Call 0800 585858 between 5pm and midnight, 365 days a year

Switchboard LGBT Helpline

0300 330 0630
(Open 10am-10pm every day)

Black Minds Matter

connect online via
www.blackmindsmatteruk.com

Scope

call 0808 800 3333

MyBnk

find useful financial resources via
<https://www.mybnk.org>

YoungMinds Parents Helpline

call 0808 802 5544 (9.30am to 4pm on weekdays)

Samaritans

Call 116 123 to talk to Samaritans, or email: jo@samaritans.org for a reply within 24 hours

Childline

Text "SHOUT" to 85258 to contact the Shout Crisis Text Line, or text "YM" if you're under 19. If you're under 19, you can also call 0800 1111 to talk to Childline (the number will not appear on your phone bill)