



Consumers Health
Forum OF Australia



Medibank Better Health Foundation

Time for national action on loneliness, the unnoticed epidemic

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A report on loneliness, an issue which clouds the lives of many Australians and exposes them to increased risk of depression and other illness, has called for a national plan of action to address the often unrecognised condition.

Fifteen per cent of Australians were considered to be experiencing high levels of loneliness, according to a 2019 survey, yet there remain significant gaps in knowledge and community awareness of the extent and impact, the report finds.

That survey finding is reported in the [*Loneliness Thought Leadership Roundtable Report*](#) produced by an expert roundtable established by the Consumers Health Forum in partnership with the Medibank Better Health Foundation. This report builds on the [*Ending Loneliness Together in Australia White Paper*](#) published in late 2020 by the Ending Loneliness Together coalition.

The Roundtable Report outlines the latest evidence indicating that feeling lonely is also associated with a multitude of poorer health outcomes, including an increased risk of depression, dementia, heart disease and stroke as well as higher levels of inflammatory responses. There is also evidence that the negative effects of loneliness can be chronic and compounding.

The Roundtable Report states: “There is currently mixed evidence of what is helpful and unhelpful for easing levels of loneliness for individuals. There remains uncertainty about what is effective for different population groups, particularly for prevention and for addressing not just social isolation but the more complex condition of loneliness,” recent research shows.

“Both loneliness and social isolation have been found to predict premature mortality, depression, cardiovascular disease and cognitive decline, and to be associated with higher engagement in unhealthy behaviours such as smoking and physical inactivity.”

In 2018, the UK Government launched its first [Loneliness Strategy](#), recognising loneliness as “one of the greatest public health challenges of our time” but in Australia this issue is only now starting to be recognised on the national agenda. The Roundtable Report proposes four actions as a priority to inform and underpin a nationally coordinated plan for addressing loneliness in Australia:

- **A National loneliness index:** Create a national index with agreed definitions, indicators and outcome measures for loneliness and social connection
- **Coordination:** Governments, community organisations and all those interested in addressing loneliness to work with *Ending Loneliness Together* as the national coordination body to facilitate partnerships, coordinate research and synergise efforts to address loneliness across all sectors
- **National campaign:** Undertake a national campaign to talk about social health, reduce stigma associated with loneliness, enable people to self-identify as lonely and provide practical self-help tools and tips
- **Research:** Fund ongoing research and evaluation into loneliness to build the evidence base, demonstrate cost savings and identify what works.

There is a diverse community of stakeholders who bring expertise and a desire to address this issue at all levels and in all sectors of the community. By working together collaboratively these stakeholders can raise the profile of loneliness on the national stage and to enact the actions outlined.

The CEO of CHF, Leanne Wells, said that the report highlights the urgent need for national attention on the epidemic of loneliness in the community.

“It should be a matter of concern requiring urgent action that even before the COVID-19 pandemic, a survey found one in two (50.5%) Australians felt lonely for at least one day in a week, while one in four (27.6%) felt lonely for three or more days.

“The plan of action proposes urgent and practical steps to focus the desperately needed attention on a condition that causes so many people suffering and avoidable illness.

“The solutions to this will come from governments and communities and will work best where the people directly affected have a say,” Ms Wells said.

Medibank’s Chief Medical Officer Dr Linda Swan said loneliness had been an issue for many Australians for a long time, but the challenges of 2020 highlighted these concerns.

“Of all the restrictions placed upon us because of COVID-19, social isolation has been one of the hardest to bear for many Australians,” Dr Swan said.

“Throughout the last 12 months, Medibank has been working to adapt and expand our mental health support services to be there for those Australians who have found it more difficult to cope with the impacts of COVID-19, including through our work with the Medibank Better Health Foundation.

“This report by the Consumers Health Forum builds on the existing body of evidence in Australia on loneliness and prompts important discussions on how we can address this together as a nation.”

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