

A short guide to measuring loneliness in East Sussex

The Connecting People and Places: Tackling Loneliness programme is keen to encourage everyone in East Sussex to have a better understanding of loneliness and the importance of social connections.

We are therefore inviting groups, services and organisations across the county to explore whether their activities help people feel less lonely. This is part of our collective efforts to understand the impact of different activities and approaches.

Loneliness is ‘a subjective, unwelcome feeling of lack or loss of companionship. It happens when we have a mismatch between the quantity and quality of social relationships that we have, and those that we want’.

Which questions should you use?

There are various ways of measuring loneliness, for example, using positive or negatively framed questions. We suggest that you use the nationally recommended ‘gold standard’ questions proposed by the ONS. Using these questions will enable comparison with other surveys – and between different projects and activities – to help understand what really works.

There are slightly different sets of questions for young people aged 10-15 years (see Appendix A) and for people 16 and over (see Appendix B). These are both made up of three indirect questions and one direct question to cover a comprehensive picture of loneliness. If you only have space or time to ask one question, you should use the fourth question: "How often do you feel lonely?".

When should you use the loneliness measurement questions?



- The questions can be used to measure change over time, so ideally you would ask them at several points during your project or activity.
- It is best practice to ask the questions as close to the start of your activity as possible so you can establish a ‘baseline’.
- You can then repeat the questions at a later date (for example, 3 or 6 months) and compare the results.
- The questions should not be used to determine eligibility or thresholds for a service or activity.

Be clear why you are asking the questions

Make sure that anyone asking these questions knows how to explain why they want to know this information. People being asked to respond to the questions need to understand:

- the aims of the activity and its evaluation
- how you will be using, storing, sharing and publishing any information about them
- how you will make sure their information remains confidential, and how anything they tell you will be kept anonymous if published or shared
- how to opt-out at any point during the process, should they no longer want to take part.



It can sometimes be difficult to ask people about how they feel, particularly when questions might bring up painful experiences of loneliness. Staff and volunteers should have the right support, training and guidance to be able to help people should they have any questions or if they become distressed.

How to understand the results



The responses for the first three questions can be combined to calculate a ‘loneliness score’ from 3 to 9 for each respondent. The lowest possible combined score on the loneliness scale is 3 (indicating less frequent loneliness) and the highest is 9 (indicating more frequent loneliness). However, there is no agreed threshold above which someone would be considered lonely - and it’s more helpful to look at the average scores across your sample to see what has changed over time, and how different people score relative to the average.

The fourth question should be treated separately in terms of scoring, and the results shouldn’t be added to the aggregate score for the first three - it’s a standalone score.

We know some groups of people are more likely to experience chronic loneliness, so you may want to add some of these options to your demographic questions if you don’t have them already. You could include: age; gender; ethnicity; number of people living in the household; marital status/living as a couple; rented or owned accommodation, poor health, disability or limiting conditions.

Share your findings with us

We’d welcome hearing from groups, services or organisations adopting these questions and who are able to share anonymised summary information with us, to help broaden our understanding of activities and their impact in East Sussex. Please also get in touch if you would like to collaborate on more detailed measurement and evaluation activities, including qualitative experiences of loneliness and other forms of insight gathering.



Further information and support

If you would like any help or advice on measuring loneliness or evaluating your activities, please contact: tacklingloneliness@sussexcommunity.org.uk You can also find lots more helpful information in What Works Wellbeing's [Brief Guide to Measuring Loneliness](#)



APPENDIX A:

Recommended questions for young people aged 10-15 years

We would like to ask you a few questions to enable us to measure how helpful our services/activities are. You can choose to answer all or none of the questions, and choosing not to answer will not affect your access to any of our services in any way.

When answering the questions, you could take account of the following:

- There are no right or wrong answers
- We would like you to be completely honest
- In answering the questions it is best to think of your life as it generally is now (we all have some good or bad days)

Questions

		Hardly ever	Some of the time	Often		
Q1	How often do you feel that you have no one to talk to?	1	2	3		
Q2	How often do you feel left out?	1	2	3		
Q3	How often do you feel alone?	1	2	3		
		Often/ always	Some of the time	Occasionally	Hardly ever	Never
Q4	How often do you feel lonely?	1	2	3	4	5

APPENDIX B:

Recommended questions for people aged 16 and over

We would like to ask you a few questions to enable us to measure how helpful our services/activities are. You can choose to answer all or none of the questions, and choosing not to answer will not affect your access to any of our services in any way.

When answering the questions, you could take account of the following:

- There are no right or wrong answers
- We would like you to be completely honest
- In answering the questions it is best to think of your life as it generally is now (we all have some good or bad days)

Questions

	Hardly ever	Some of the time	Often			
Q1	How often do you feel that you lack companionship?	1	2	3		
Q2	How often do you feel left out?	1	2	3		
Q3	How often do you feel isolated from others?	1	2	3		
	Often/ always	Some of the time	Occasionally	Hardly ever	Never	
Q4	How often do you feel lonely?	1	2	3	4	5

Note: An introduction to the questions may not always be necessary in the context of your service delivery or activity. An important consideration is how well the questions flow on from preceding questions in your work with people and whether it is necessary to introduce the questions to signal a change of topic. The decision may also depend on whether all four questions are used or just one.

If an introduction is used, we recommend that the word “loneliness” is not included because this may affect responses to the first three questions, which are intended to measure loneliness without mentioning the word.

Sources:

What Works Wellbeing (2019) *A brief guide to measuring loneliness for charities and social enterprises*. Available at: <https://whatworkswellbeing.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Brief-Guide-to-measuring-Loneliness-Feb2019.pdf>

ONS (2018) *Measuring loneliness: guidance for use of the national indicators on surveys*. Available at: www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/wellbeing/methodologies/measuringlonelinessguidanceforuseofthenationalindicatorsonsurveys

Campaign to End Loneliness (2015) *Measuring your impact on loneliness in later life*. Available at: <https://www.campaigntoendloneliness.org/wp-content/uploads/Loneliness-Measurement-Guidance1.pdf>