Loneliness & youth work

Are we doing all that we can?

Over the last few years, reports and statistics gathered from UK young people have shown a significant increase in feelings of loneliness and isolation.

In a research survey titled Generation Isolation conducted in 2024 by youth organisation OnSide and YouGov, 5200 young people were interviewed specifically around their feelings and experiences of loneliness and isolation with a staggering 44% of young people reporting high or very high feelings of loneliness. In addition, UK Youth (2024) released some data reporting that young people aged 16-24 are more likely to say they feel lonely often/always than every other age group.

Summing this up nicely - here's a quote from the Campaign to end loneliness:

"Younger generations are expressing high or chronic levels of loneliness which demonstrates the importance of understanding why this happens, how it can be prevented, and how it can be intervened effectively. Since the peak of the pandemic, chronic levels of loneliness have not returned back to levels we saw before lockdown. While this could, in part, be down to loneliness becoming a more accepted and talked about issue that can impact any of us at any stage of life, it's clear that there are millions of people experiencing the severest form of loneliness, which we must continue to address."

Why then are we seeing this rise in loneliness?

Well, loneliness can be defined as *'a mismatch between one's desired and actual social relationships, between how connected we want to be and how connected we really are'* (Newport Institute).

And this definition reminds us that while young people may have a deep longing to feel connection with like-minded friends and partners, they feel a disconnect in what they experience. Perhaps they are struggling to find opportunities to meet new people in real life or are lacking the social skills or confidence to step into new spaces.

Wait - How much did the pandemic impact it?

Even though the pandemic (and lockdowns) was a different time to now, the lasting impact on our young people, AND the impact on children who are now young teens in our youth groups, is still being understood and a very relevant topic. At the time, a study by the Institute of Fiscal Studies and UCL (2021) reported that 52% of young people aged 4-7 (who are now around 8-12-years-old) and 42% young people aged 12-15 (now our 16-20-year-olds) had their social and emotional skills worsen. And this impact on social skills and peer connection was reported across many studies and is still seen today. A new study from LSE, University of Exeter and the University of Strathclyde (2024) highlighted the impact school closures during the pandemic had on social-economic skill development (such as social interaction and emotional regulation) and the detrimental impact this will have on these young people.



This reminds us that the young people we work with today are different to those we may have worked with before or during the pandemic. Their development was interrupted and that means they may not have learnt the skills needed or built the friendships that we traditionally do to carry into their teenage years.

Next - Does the amount of time we spend online impact this?

With around 76% of young people saying they spend much of their free time on screens (Generation Isolation, 2024) are we seeing a loss of interaction or communal activities? From a developmental perspective, young people need interaction with others during their teen years to help them build identity, strengthen their confidence in socialising, practice problem solving, befriending, managing conflict and resolving differences - and it's hard to know if this looks the same for online friendships and in-person ones.

But we do know that young people share our worries. Around 52% of young people who spend much of their free time online want to significantly reduce (Generation Isolation, 2024) and many have spoken out about regulating the online world and social media to make it safer and limited for them!

But - Is there the space for them to socialise?

According to the Generation Isolation report (2024) 85% of young people do not attend a youth centre or project. This means that there are many young people not currently accessing youth work or youth ministries across the country. And this is no surprise, in 2024 Unison reported that cuts across England and Wales since 2010 had led to 1,243 youth centres closing (leaving less than 600 still in operation).

Whether the young people would come to these spaces or not, isn't fully known. But, as youth workers across the UK, we do know that loneliness is an issue that we are already working to fix - running groups and activities with young people in up and down the country, every week. AND we know that providing space for young people is essential. We also know the impact it can have - summed up here in a great statistic - that 93% of young people that attend a youth centre say it has made a positive difference to their lives! (Generation Isolation, 2024).

If we have the answer, how do we make it happen?

Well, a recent research paper looked at young people's ideas for improving social connection after the pandemic. And these young people shared that tackling this issue isn't done through explicit programmes, but as an unintended consequence of spaces, groups and projects that are 'mild in structure and low in pressure', interesting, free, regular and easy to access (Lim et al., 2024). And I think youth work knows something about providing those spaces.
So, every week that we turn up for youth groups, ministries, run organisations or provide spaces for young people - we need to ask ourselves - are we making more seats at the table?
Inviting more to the banquet?



And to do that here are 3 things to consider:

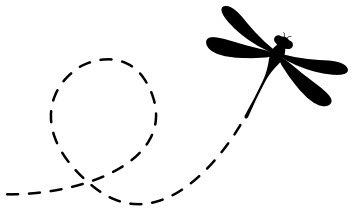
1 - We need to identify those who may feel on the fringes or who are struggling with feeling disconnected from others. This may be young people IN our youth spaces who need more support to build friendship, more mentoring or small group time or inviting to other projects /opportunities. But we also need to spot the people on the outside.
Rather than just relying on young people bringing their friends, can we advertise so that professionals (teachers, social workers, parents) know they can turn to us if they are helping a young person find a safe space to be themselves & make friends? Can we go to places where those young people are and build connections that last?

2 - We need to think about what else young people can be a part of. Whatever is going on in our local church/organisation or even just area, let's be on the lookout for other projects young people can be a part of. Go along with them to new hobbies and spaces that they could find other groups to join. Gather with other youth groups in your area or attend para-church youth events (or set them up!). Get your young people involved in volunteering or helping with other projects (or set-up more spaces for young people to be a part of).

3 - I think we need to prepare for and work towards more young people coming into our spaces. We want to provide safe spaces for those who are lonely, and friendship/connection for those who join us.

Let's think -

- How many chairs are we laying out?
- What does it look like when a new person joins you?
- How long does it take someone to become a 'regular'?
- When do people feel at home?
- How do we help foster friendships in the space?
- Where do people hear about us?
- How frequently do you extend the table?



These are the kind of questions we need to constantly ask ourselves. Whether we have a bubbling youth group, a small table of friends or someone unique, new, different or just beginning. It is important to pay attention to those who may join us & to make them feel welcomed.
Because Jesus talks SO much about bringing people in, welcoming people into a Great banquet and that all can be a part of His Kingdom - so let's start here, extending tables and building authentic relationships.

This month on the Mental Health Hub you'll be able to find a range of worksheets that you can use with the young people you support to further discuss ways of building connections with others, along with some fantastic resources from other organisations.

