

Why do people feel lonely at Christmas? Here's what the research says

December 20 2022, by Andrea Wigfield and John Ratcliffe



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

Christmas is said to be a time for connecting with friends, family and having fun. But it can also be time of loneliness. Indeed, the results of a 2018 survey looking at loneliness during Christmas time in the UK revealed that 17% of people felt more [lonely over the festive period](#).

[Loneliness](#) is a subjective emotion, where we feel our [social relationships](#) are insufficient, particularly when compared to our peers. Christmas, with its images and expectations of gift-giving, socializing and excess can often be a time when our own relationships or connections are put under the spotlight. This can lead to feelings of inadequacy if the period doesn't match up to perceived ideas of what our lives should look like at Christmas.

This year, the cost-of-living crisis will also inevitably make things tougher. Add in the long dark nights and a festive diet of alcohol, sugar and less sleep and it's not surprising that Christmas can become a tricky time for many people.

That's not to say that loneliness is experienced only at Christmas. And as [recent research](#) shows, it's not just experienced by those in later life. Around 45% of adults in England say they have feelings of loneliness—whether occasionally, sometimes or often. This adds up to more than [25 million people](#).

Loneliness post-COVID

The [social isolation](#) enforced by the COVID-19 lockdowns has arguably [exacerbated loneliness](#). Indeed, research by the Office for National Statistics and the [Campaign to End Loneliness](#), a charity that works to combat chronic isolation, found that 3.3 million people living in Britain were "chronically lonely" or felt lonely all the time between December 2021 and February 2022.

Loneliness can strike any of us, at anytime. And if not addressed, it can lead to a wider health conditions such as anxiety and depression—it has even been [linked to cardiovascular disease](#).

[Some research](#) shows that young people age 18 to 25 are as, if not more,

likely to be as lonely as [older people](#). In most societies loneliness resembles a U-shaped curve with [high scores](#) in adolescence, a decline through middle age and then a rise again in old age.

Young adulthood is often perceived to be a time when people have an active social life as well as an ability to make friends easily. This can exacerbate the [social pressures](#) on some young people and their feelings of loneliness—particularly if they think they have less friends than their peers.

As a result, they may find it [harder to admit to feeling lonely](#)—especially at Christmas—and may feel worse about themselves as a result.

Young adulthood is also a period when various life transitions take place that are known to [trigger loneliness](#)—such as moving to a new educational institution, starting employment, moving out of the parental home, or [having children](#).

And according to the [2016 Viceland UK Census](#), a survey of 2500 18 to 34 year-olds by the media company [Vice](#), loneliness is the number one fear for young people today, ranking ahead of [losing a home or a job](#).

It affects everyone differently

Other studies have drawn attention to factors that can trigger loneliness regardless of age. One study for example shows that people who identify as a sexual minority report higher ratings of [loneliness than heterosexuals](#)

Loneliness is also one of the [key issues facing refugees and migrants](#). In a 2014 study 58% of migrants and refugees described loneliness and isolation as their biggest challenge while living in London. Another study, meanwhile, highlights that social disconnection is an important

determinant of [mental health and suicide risk](#) among migrant populations in English-speaking countries.

Research has also shown that being a caregiver can lead to [loneliness](#). Caring responsibilities can reduce time for maintaining [social connections](#) with friends, work colleagues and other family members. Caregivers UK, a national charity that supports unpaid caregivers, [reports](#) that eight out of ten caregivers have felt lonely or isolated as a result of caring and that most don't feel able to talk about this with their friends.

Caregivers are not all old either, there are an estimated [800,000](#) young caregivers aged five to 17 in England. And Christmas can be an especially difficult time for these [young people](#) who are most likely having a very different festive experience to their friends at school.

So as you enjoy your festive shopping, eating, drinking and partying, spare a thought for the many people around the world who will be feeling lonely this Christmas and indeed throughout the year. And if you feel a little lonely or flat from time to time during the holidays, don't panic, it's very normal.

If you know someone who'll be spending a lot of time alone this Christmas or who is likely to feel lonely, there are things you can do to help. Sometimes the smallest of gestures can make people feel less isolated: a smile or greeting to a passer-by, a [phone call](#), text or Christmas card to a friend who you haven't had contact with for a while.

But it's also important to remember that we can all feel lonely from time to time and that it's ok to not always feel happy and filled with fun—even at Christmas.

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