

Australian Medical Association Limited

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LONELINESS AND ISOLATION CAN LEAD TO AN UNHAPPY AND UNHEALTHY CHRISTMAS FOR MANY

The AMA is urging people to contact or to keep an eye out for family members, friends, or neighbours who, for many reasons, may find themselves lonely or isolated at Christmas and over the holidays.

AMA Vice President, Dr Tony Bartone, said today that Christmas and New Year are traditional happy times for families to get together for reunions and celebrations, but many Australians do not get the chance to share that joy.

“It is unfortunate that Christmas can be a time of loneliness, isolation, and desperation for many people,” Dr Bartone said.

“Hospitals and police report higher incidences of depression, anxiety, and suicide over the Christmas period.

“According to Lifeline’s 2016 Loneliness Survey, 60 percent of Australians often feel lonely, and Christmas can be the loneliest time of all.

“Most of us are fortunate to be spending time with family, friends, and colleagues over the holiday break, but we can all do something to help connect with those who are lonely or isolated.

“It does not take much effort to reach out and connect with possible vulnerable or unconnected people who may be new to your area during the holiday season.”

Dr Bartone said that being lonely or isolated is not confined to older people.

“Being divorced or away from family, having a disability or caring for someone with a disability, being a migrant or new to a region are all factors that can make the holiday season a time of loneliness and social isolation,” Dr Bartone said.

“There are links between loneliness, increased use of alcohol, and poor diet.

“At this time of the year, it’s important to look after yourself physically and mentally, and take steps to reach out and connect with others.

“Staying connected will ensure more Australians will have a happy and healthy Christmas.”

For anyone experiencing loneliness or isolation, there are some actions that can help:

- if you are online, join forums and chat sites;
- make sure you exercise or walk every day;
- become a volunteer;
- if possible, consider having a pet. Pets are important companions and improve your mental and physical health.
- join with others at a charity Christmas lunch.

AMA tips for a healthy holiday season:

- if you know someone who hasn't got family and friends to share Christmas with, suggest they connect with a charity that offers social engagement;
- Christmas isn't just about gifts and consumerism; it is about friendship and companionship. Try to share your time with others;
- street 'get-togethers' and even apartment 'get togethers' are a good way to foster social connections;
- not everyone celebrates Christmas, so be mindful of people with different religious and cultural affiliations; and
- use technology to connect with family and friends. A simple text message, call, or email may make a huge difference.

Background:

- A 2016 Lifeline survey found that more than 80 per cent of Australians believe society is becoming a lonelier place.
- The same survey found that 60 per cent of respondents said they 'often feel lonely'.
- Loneliness in Australia has been linked to poor mental and physical health, including the risk of suicide, depression, and poor social-economic outcomes.
(Ref: <https://www.relationships.org.au/what-we-do/research/online-survey/january-2017-loneliness>)
- Loneliness has been linked to a 30 per cent increase in the risk of having heart disease or a stroke. (Ref: BMJ, 2016, Loneliness and social isolation as risk factors for coronary heart disease and stroke: systematic review and meta-analysis of longitudinal observational studies. <http://heart.bmj.com/content/early/2016/03/15/heartjnl-2015-308790>)
- Loneliness can be more damaging than smoking 15 cigarettes a day, and lonely people have a 64 per cent increased chance of developing clinical dementia (ref: UK Local Government Association guide: <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2016/feb/01/loneliness-forces-older-people-into-hospitals-and-strains-services-say-senior-doctors>.)
- Chronic loneliness increases the odds of an early death by 20 per cent, according to research by the University of Chicago's Center for Cognitive and Social Neuroscience (Ref: <https://www.theguardian.com/science/2016/feb/28/loneliness-is-like-an-iceberg-john-cacioppo-social-neuroscience-interview>)

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