

Mental Health Awareness Week is next month (9th to the 13th of May), and this year's theme is "Loneliness".

Loneliness is something that can affect us all in different ways and at different times in our lives.

To support our school community this Mental Health Awareness Week, we wanted to share a few resources that shed light on loneliness and how to cope.

This includes:

- [Loneliness: How to Cope When There's No One Else at Home](#)
- [How to Self-Care When Battling Loneliness: Pete's Story](#)

## Loneliness: How to Cope When There's No One Else at Home

by [Lily-Jo Project](#)

I am in all ways an extrovert, my energy is drawn completely from other people. I find myself naturally gravitating towards people and, much like a cat or dog, I don't always do this to communicate with them or interact with them in any way; often I simply feel most comfortable just being in the same space as another person rather than alone.

The recent outbreak, and isolation that has been implemented as a result of it, has put me in a position where I am now living alone. This means not only is there no one else in my house but, due to restrictions around leaving home, I don't see anyone else at all day to day.

This is a situation many people around the UK – and globally, are finding themselves in.

Each day, seeing no one. It can be a debilitating situation and easily cause an individual's mental health to spiral downwards, **even in situations where mental health has not been an issue in the past**. Some form of relational contact and nurture from another person is vital to a person's mental health and their personal development.

It's essential to have this in some form. And despite being alone at home, and physically alone in life, through simple decisions each day I have been able not only to survive but thrive.

You can too!

**So how do we build relational contact, maintain relationships, and nurture ourselves in that way when we are physically alone?**

Here are the things I do to ensure this is happening.

# 5 Ways to Cope When Living Alone

1

## Have a Clear and Structured Routine

This is something I never truly saw the value of until recently. My colleagues would make lists of things they wished to achieve that day and key times they wanted to do them, whereas I would simply turn up and decide moment by moment.

Entering each day, however, with a thought out plan of what I would do and some frame of how and when I would achieve these things proved to give a new sense of purpose to each day and meant my productivity and sense of fulfillment was drastically increased.

Throughout the week I maintain this clear structure, waking up as if I were going to my workplace (or place of education) at the time I would usually do that.

Following the normal morning routine, as I started work from home, I would then spend half an hour deciding what I would fill my day with. Which key tasks did I want to do? What was important for that period of time?

This could be something which remains the same each day, if you are studying in school, for example, you may decide that every day of the week you will do one subject in the morning and different one each afternoon. It's important that it works for you, but having this plan for the day written down and available for you to see each day is a great way to maintain it and not give up with it.

This plan can also include any non work-related activity. You could decide that you will spend this time of the day doing exercise, the next time reading – it really can be anything you make of it.

**Structuring your day not only gives you a clear sense of what you're going to do, but it also helps you feel a sense of achievement each time you complete something in your plan.**

This has a great effect on the body and means that you will physically feel more positive. Additionally, when you then do take a day off, for example at the weekend, you feel much more comfortable not having such a rigid plan. It feels ok to just go with what you feel for the day. I feel much more relaxed at weekends because I've given myself such a clear purpose during the week.

2

## Communicate with someone

We live in a great time when we have the ability to speak face to face with people over the internet. This is a key way to combat loneliness.

Again, structure within this can be good. I speak with the same one person at the same time each day. Sometimes this is the only conversation I have with another person directly each day.

It feels good to know every day that no matter what, I will at least have that one conversation. This person is someone I've been friends with for a long time. However, we have found that as a result of doing this each day, our conversation has been more meaningful and direct than ever before. It's a great way to nurture relationships, even ones which are not currently that strong. **People across the world are all in need of some communication and it's a great time to make new friends or reconnect with old ones.**

Another great way to communicate in a new way is to write a letter. I've found that sometimes I simply don't have the capacity to talk with people over the internet and writing has been a good way to not only manage my time and energy and give myself more control over when I talk to someone, but also to get creative.

Writing to communicate forces you to think differently about how you talk and can often inspire you to see some amazing things that have happened in your day as you are forced to think deeper with no opportunity for small talk.

3

## Diet and exercise

What you put into your body and how you maintain it directly has an impact on how you feel. Some foods, though instantly satisfying, take energy from you in the long run. It's so key in this time more than ever to self-care, and this is a vital part of that. It doesn't mean altering your lifestyle completely, **small changes are often much more impactful than big ones.** It can be as simple as going for a walk each day or cutting out one unhealthy snack. I have a really strong sweet tooth and often eat a lot of sweets and chocolate. Rather than cutting these out completely, I have cut down and now decide on one I would like to eat each day more than any other sweet treat. This is also a great way to build some structure into your day, deciding that each day at a certain time you will do some exercise gives at least one thing to aim for each day. I love to start the day with exercise as I then already feel I have achieved before I even sit down to do anything else.

If you are self-caring effectively it gives a great starting place for good mental health in your life.

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## Relax and take time for yourself

It can seem strange that you would need to actively take time for yourself when you are living alone in these times. I have found, however, that I often still have a lot to do and don't then have the energy to interact further some days.

**In order for me to look after my mental health, I have to allow some time for myself – to do something I love and to put some boundaries on the access people have to me.**

It's not healthy to give all people access to yourself at all times. After 7 pm each day, I will not use my phone except for a few key people in my life. During this time I do things that relax me such as watch TV, read, and meditate.

Purposefully allowing specific time for this makes it so much more valuable and helps me manage the time I am alone. As I mentioned, being alone is not my first choice. However, being purposeful about it means that I am expecting it each day during that time I have set aside for it, and then I look forward to it. Look forward to relaxing!

5

## Open Up

This is always something at The Lily Jo Project we encourage people to do. **Sometimes life is just really hard, and it's ok to feel like that – I often do.**

During these times, opening up to either someone you trust or reaching out to a service such as Shout is so important. You don't even have to discuss all your deepest darkest secrets for this. It can be as simple as saying to someone that you'd like to just have a chat or see someone's face. You can even say that you're bored or feeling a little down.

Small steps once again are often more important. Just that process of reaching out can open your mind to remembering that there are people out there who love and care for you and stop the downward spiral that is so easy to get into. There are people who love and care for you who not only will be there for you, but would love to hear from you as talking to you brings them joy too!

It's easy to feel alone when you physically are alone. **In these times, engaging with your purpose, having structure, looking after yourself as well as you deserve (really well), and opening up to people and communities available to you will ensure that emotionally you won't be alone.**

It's a tough time, and that can feel overwhelming and scary – and self-caring is key. You deserve to feel emotionally and mentally well. You are worth it!

**About the Author: Peter Bonnebaigt**

## How to Self-Care When Battling Loneliness: Pete's Story

Loneliness can, in many ways, be very debilitating. The more time an individual feels lonely, the harder it can become to step out of that feeling. It can become increasingly tiring to participate in social activities just because of how much energy it can take to do so. For some, this can become a barrier to stepping out at all. As a result, a person can easily be left feeling even more lonely than when they started.

It is also entirely possible to feel lonely even whilst surrounded by people.

If there aren't people who share our interests, beliefs, or values in our close circles, it can be very easy to feel isolated; set apart in a crowd. Beyond simply being around others, as humans, we need connection with people in more meaningful ways. I personally have often felt a big sense of loneliness when going for extended periods of time without connecting with others who share my passions and interests.

As well as that, I have also struggled throughout my life with social anxiety. As a result, even when I am with people I value a lot and connect with, my thoughts can spiral and become quite negative, very critical of myself. This internal criticism can cause me to shy away from being my full and genuine self. Instead, I retreat internally and cause myself to feel increasingly lonely.

Whilst that is an area I need to work on every day, and I often feel that underlying feeling of social anxiety, building a successful self-care routine has transformed my ability to overcome that anxiety. I have been able to build my confidence, silence my inner critic, and be genuinely who I am. This has also helped to combat my feelings of loneliness.

Here are some self-care tools that I have found very effective in my own mental health journey.

# Self-Care When Battling Anxiety: 5 Practical Tips



## Identify your interests and values

Connection with people who share my values and interests is a key part of my own self-care. By connecting, I am able to stimulate my mind and get a sense of fulfilment from each day.

Sometimes, however, it can feel overwhelming finding people with shared interests. The first step to finding people you connect with, who do share your values and interests, is identifying what those interests actually are. Once you know what those things you are passionate about are, you will be in a much stronger position to find people who are also passionate about those things.

Simply listing these things out on a piece of paper will help you to do this. Writing them down will make them more real and much easier to action. You will have a list of things you enjoy which you can refer to at any time.

This also helps to weed out the things you are not interested in, making it more manageable to approach. Rather than feeling like you have to explore everything, you will have a short list of things to look into.

Once you have identified the things you are interested in, you can begin to find others who share the same interests. Start simply with just one thing from your list. Next to that thing write down all the places people would engage in that activity or interest or the ways people would connect around it.

Once you have done that you will know exactly where you can go to find people who share your interests. Sometimes in doing this I have noticed that I am not currently connected to anyone with that interest. Knowing that has helped me to evaluate the areas I would like to connect with new people.



## Read and learn new information

A big part of my self-care routine is reading and engaging with new information.

When I feel lonely or anxious, it is often because my mind has nothing to do. It gets bored and starts a spiral of negative thinking. I find that by purposefully committing to setting time aside each day to read books, listen to podcasts, and learn new information, I am able to keep my mind engaged.

I do this every morning, no matter what, at the same time. That works for me. The key is finding a regular time that works for your schedule that you can commit to.

Because I am reading each day, there is always something new for my mind to engage with. It is much harder to get bored when you are filling your mind each day with new information and ideas.

Because I am less bored, I don't have that much time to spiral into negative thinking. Therefore, I am able to maintain a much more positive view of myself. As a result, I am much more willing to engage with others socially. This also helps to combat any loneliness I may have felt as a result of negative thinking holding me back from other people.

3

## Clear and structured routine

Having a clear and structured routine is a key way that I am able to effectively self-care.

This routine includes different self-care tools and activities I use each day. I schedule them in at the same time each day, to ensure I prioritise my self-care. It is much more difficult to forget about self-care when you have it scheduled into your calendar. It makes things consistent. I know that these things are going to happen for my self-care, and I know when they will happen. My self-care becomes non-negotiable.

For me these daily self-care activities include: exercise, eating healthy, reading, learning and upskilling, and affirmations. I do these things every day at a time which works for me no matter what.

My routine also includes work and recreation activities so I clearly know what I will do and when.

This helps a lot with overcoming loneliness as I am able to see times when I may have a lot of downtime or may be alone for a long time. I can then schedule things into those times if I need to, or simply enjoy the space and purposefully relax without feeling guilty for doing so.

4

## Eat healthily and exercise

It is really easy to not eat healthily and to not exercise. Just the thought of it can be enough to put us off!

The benefits, however, are amazing!

When we look after our physical wellbeing, we simultaneously look after our emotional wellbeing. The more we invest in our physical health, the better we feel about ourselves. This really helps build confidence and can be a key way to combat loneliness. Often our feelings about ourselves can hinder us from reaching out to people or engaging socially.

The key is to make it manageable. You don't have to instantly completely change your exercise or eating habits, taking small steps which you can maintain into the future is vital.

It could be a short walk, swim, or run. It could be a regular game of football or basketball. Finding something that you enjoy will help you maintain this into the future.

A good way to look after your body is to make sure you stay hydrated and drink water regularly. If you don't drink a lot of water, increasing your water intake will really help. You could start by switching one drink in the day for water, or by committing to having a glass of water first thing in the morning every day.

5

## Affirmations and silence the inner critic

My thought life, and the value I placed on myself as a result of critical thoughts about myself, was something that really did negatively affect my self-esteem. A large part of

the social anxiety I have experienced is a direct result of my negative thinking. This thinking led to me shying away from others and sometimes not being very social. Daily affirmations have really transformed my thinking.

Our brains accept what we tell them as the truth. This means that if we think negatively about ourselves, our brains will start to believe it. Affirmations make sure we are talking positively about ourselves.

I like to do affirmations at 3 different times each day:

1. In the morning.
2. In the evening.
3. When I find myself thinking about myself critically or negatively.

Catching my negative thoughts and actively speaking positive affirmations about myself really has trained my brain to start to see myself in a positive way.

I have also found that my proficiency for different things has increased exponentially simply because I am not criticising myself; and when I do, I am actively deciding to notice that criticism and think more fair and realistically about myself, identifying positive things about myself.

It may be that you find it difficult or uncomfortable to do this. Again, start with small manageable steps. Simply think of 1 positive thing about yourself and write that down as an affirmation you can use. Each day, think of at least 1 more positive thing and add it to the list. You will quickly find that you have a great list of positive things about yourself that you can refer to when you find your thoughts becoming negative.

As I have begun to think more positively about myself, I have found I naturally engage more with social situations, therefore having less time to feel lonely.

## Final Thought: Open Up

This is always something at The Lily-Jo Project we encourage people to do.

Sometimes life is just really hard, and it's ok to feel like that – I often do.

During these times, opening up to either someone you trust or reaching out to a service such as [Shout](#) is so important. You don't even have to discuss all your deepest darkest secrets for this. It can be as simple as saying to someone that you'd like to just have a chat or see someone's face. You can even say that you're bored or feeling a little down.

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