

## Young Singaporeans open up about why they feel lonely, yet struggle to lean on others

Nearly 60 per cent of youths in a Talking Point survey considered themselves lonely. Who is checking in with them? The CNA programme finds out about their social disconnection and how they can build and maintain meaningful bonds.

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SINGAPORE: On days when work is extra challenging, that is when Valentina Ko, 35, hits the gym hardest.

“I get really frustrated and then the loneliness sets in. Because then I feel like there’s no one I can talk to who really understands what I’m going through,” she said.

For 24-year-old Zen Ho, he felt loneliest last year when he and his close friends began to grow apart as they followed different paths. While he took a gap year, they started university, moved overseas or found jobs.

“We were kind of going through different phases in life, and I constantly found myself out of sync,” said Ho, relating how they no longer shared similar lifestyles and schedules.

Reaching out to them became a source of anxiety. “What if we meet and we have nothing to talk about?” he wondered.

Valentina Ko speaking to Talking Point about feeling lonely at times while working for a big company.

Everyone can get lonely from time to time. But a recent Institute of Policy Studies poll showed that young Singaporeans aged 21 to 34 faced the highest levels of loneliness and social isolation.

In response to these findings, and in the lead-up to World Mental Health Day on Oct 10, CNA’s [Talking Point](#) launched its #WHOISCHECKINGIN campaign to raise public awareness of youth mental wellness.

As part of its campaign, Talking Point teamed up with Elmo on a video clip to check in with viewers and kick-start a wider dialogue about mental health in Singapore.

The beloved Sesame Street character’s original post on X, formerly known as Twitter — asking people how they were doing — went viral in January and sparked [similar conversations](#) in the United States.

Through its campaign, Talking Point sought to find out why many young Singaporeans feel lonely but struggle to tell someone, and what steps they can take to build and maintain meaningful connections.

Out of more than 1,000 survey responses Talking Point received, about half were from youths aged between 21 and 35.

Nearly 60 per cent of them considered themselves lonely. About 15 per cent also said they had nobody to talk to when there was something important.

“No one (truly) understands (me),” one anonymous respondent wrote. “Not even my wife.”

## **MULTIPLE FACTORS LEADING TO LONELINESS**

According to the United Kingdom-based Campaign to End Loneliness, “loneliness” refers to the emotional experience one has when one’s need for meaningful social connections feels unmet.

Thus, loneliness is a matter of perception. One can be surrounded by others but still feel lonely owing to dissatisfaction with the desired quantity and quality of one’s social relationships.

Social isolation, on the other hand, refers to an “objective” lack of social contact. For those who are content with solitude, they can be physically alone but not feel lonely.

Youths who spoke to Talking Point pointed to different factors behind their feelings of isolation in Singapore, such as declining family sizes and how the pandemic has changed the way they learn and work.

Some of them, such as Nur Dina, don’t have enough bandwidth to seek out and develop meaningful connections.

“I’m always going to work, going to school, so I don’t really socialise a lot,” the 27-year-old part-time student said. “That’s why I sometimes feel a little lonely.”

When surveyed about the last time they felt lonely, respondents’ stories fell into three broad categories.

Some of them felt a mismatch of expectations, where one party valued a friendship more than the other party did. There were those who said they always felt like an outsider to their group of friends or family.

Others were worried about imposing on others and their busy lives.

“Everyone has to go through life somehow. You can’t be sharing your problems everywhere. Your problem is yours to solve,” said Sarah Fam, 33.

## **‘A DIRTY WORD’ AND A HEALTH THREAT**

Given the social stigma around mental health issues in general, many youths remain reluctant to open up to others about their struggles.

“It does take a lot of vulnerability to admit to feeling lonely. Because it’s a bit of a dirty word, I feel, among my peers,” said Sheena Lim, 24.

Youths who felt lonely also indicated feelings of shame. Some wondered whether their struggle to feel accepted and be well-liked by their peers was a result of their own social failings.

***Here are some of your responses:***

It is difficult to admit to being lonely, said Ng Jia Yue, 22, because “there’s a lot of expectation of you having a lot of friends and being social all the time”.

Others spoke of frustration and despair over the difficulty in finding family members or anyone else who could connect with them easily. Finding people who were mutually willing to let themselves be vulnerable in conversation also remained an uphill task.

“It’s very easy to just brush things off,” said Kaize Ng, 22. “A lot of people ... would like to avoid going deep — deep talk.”

Rather than risk potential embarrassment or rejection, many youths turn to a popular coping mechanism: scrolling through social media. “I don’t go and tell someone I’m lonely. ... I just go on TikTok to entertain myself,” said Ethana Sim, 26.

About 15 per cent of youths aged 21 to 35 who were surveyed felt they had nobody to talk to about their problems.

Acknowledging that going online can be a double-edged sword, she added: “You see on TikTok and Instagram your friends ... having brunch together and then they’re at parties. Then you feel even worse.”

Beyond the unpleasant sensation of being lonely, experts say chronic loneliness can have long-term physical and social effects.

The World Health Organisation (WHO) has declared loneliness to be a global health threat, with WHO Commission on Social Connection co-chair Vivek Murthy citing a study comparing the mortality impact of loneliness to smoking 15 cigarettes a day.

“Loneliness is far more than just a bad feeling — it harms both individual and societal health,” Murthy, who is the United States surgeon general, said in an advisory last year.

“It is associated with a greater risk of cardiovascular disease, dementia, stroke, depression, anxiety and premature death.”

Health experts say constantly feeling lonely can elevate levels of stress hormones such as cortisol and adrenaline, which can impair cognitive ability, destroy our immune system and compromise our physical health over time.

In his public health advisory, Murthy described how social disconnection can hurt communities by diminishing productivity, performance and civic engagement in workplaces, schools and beyond.

## **WHAT TO DO ABOUT IT**

But what can Singapore’s youth do to feel less lonely and isolated? Experts say it is about focusing on what you can control in your life.

For some, joining social events has helped in meeting new people.

And more companies are popping up with solutions for those looking for a connection, such as Offline Singapore. Through its game-filled social mixers, attendees have a shot at forming new ties with others, however nascent they may be at first.

Youths taking part in a game during a social mixer hosted by Offline Singapore.

“It’s a starting point. Hopefully (we) can just chat and see how we can become friends,” said first-time participant Rachel Tan, 31.

For others, exercise or volunteering is the answer. Ko, a frequent gym user, said working out “really helps”.

Studies have found that joining social groups, volunteering and exercising can release hormones that help to fight stress and loneliness as well as increase feelings of satisfaction and connection to others.

Sometimes it’s also about reframing your mindset to recognise that people around you do care, said clinical psychologist Joel Yang at psychological consultancy Mind What Matters. He encouraged viewers to resist the temptation to withdraw socially when they feel lonely.

“If they feel like people aren’t there for them or they feel like people wouldn’t understand them, they’re so much less likely to engage,” Yang said, pointing out that self-isolation serves as a self-fulfilling prophecy.

What some Talking Point viewers have done to be there for a friend.

He hoped viewers would feel they can speak more openly about their struggles instead.

Ho, a mindfulness advocate, encouraged viewers to learn to process their thoughts and emotions when experiencing loneliness. Those who become aware of their feelings will be less tempted to use “band-aid solutions” that distract them from their loneliness, he felt.

“As I started to adopt (these) mindfulness practices two months into my gap year, that really helped me become aware of those limiting thoughts,” he said.

“I can still reach out to (my friends). I can be vulnerable ... and say, ‘Hey, I really need to have a catch-up.’”

Zen Ho, 24, finds making tea a perfect complement to his practice of mindfulness.

Much to his surprise upon reaching out, his friends shared that they had the same feelings of loneliness because they lacked “deep, meaningful conversations” with their new friends and colleagues.

Ho said that pausing to look inwards helped him to acknowledge his need for social connection and realise his friends were still in his life — all he needed to do sometimes was reach out first.

For Natasha Kowshik, 24, reaching out to her friends when she feels lonely has got easier over time.

“A lot of people actually do come to help,” she said. “If I think about it, I’d do the same for anyone else. So why should I feel embarrassed or scared?”

**Watch this [Talking Point special here](#). The programme airs on Channel 5 every Thursday at 9:30 p.m.**