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# Loneliness

Coming to university usually involves a lot of change in lifestyle, work patterns and degree of independence. The accumulated effect can be disorientating and make you feel uncertain of what to do or how to be with others. Social insecurity can then creep in, even if you normally feel quite socially adept. Or it may feel like a repeat of other times when you arrived somewhere and found it hard to make connections.

Loneliness can be common at university for lots of different reasons including:

- being away from friends and family, perhaps for the first time
  - it may be the first time in many years when you have had to 'start from scratch' in making new friends
  - you may have been lonely before you came to Cambridge and hoped that things would be different here
  - you may be missing old friends and finding it hard to replace them – or you may feel reluctant to engage with new people
  - you may be preoccupied with issues that make it hard to be as sociable as you would like
  - you may have a long-distance relationship and feel torn between life here and elsewhere
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- you may be anxious about work and feel in conflict about spending time on social activities
- you may feel like you don't belong in Cambridge.

Loneliness can lead to you feeling socially inadequate, unlikeable, uncomfortable in the company of others or angry and critical of other people. It can all build up. Feeling burdened by loneliness can feel draining and undermine your self-esteem. All of this can make it harder still to take part in social activity or to look after yourself by doing the things you normally enjoy or that help you feel better. It can also feel hard to say no to things you wouldn't normally do.

### **What you can do**

Most of us experience feelings of loneliness at times. It can feel that you are the only one in that situation but, for all you know, others might be putting on a brave face and be experiencing similar feelings to the ones you struggle with. The pain you feel is a normal reaction because social contact is such a basic human need.

Here are some things that might help:

- Look after yourself. Some of us take longer to settle in socially to a new environment. If your initial efforts do not bear fruit, acknowledge the efforts you are making.
  - Try to say hello, or even just smile, at people you pass on the staircase or elsewhere in college or in your workplace. That can make it easier to later strike up a conversation.
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- It can feel unfair if you are having to make all the running in organising to do something with someone. But it may be the only way to initiate having more fulfilling social relationships. It can be aggravating and dispiriting if people don't reply to your texts, emails or other contacts. Remember that most of the time it won't be to do with you personally.
  - Of course you can try activities that you enjoy, as well as new ones, both for the experience and to widen the opportunities for social contact. You don't have to stick with an activity if you find you don't like it, but do try to give it some time - initial experiences don't always meet our expectations but can change over time. Pace yourself - you don't have to try everything at once; doing so might leave you feeling overstretched. If your early time at Cambridge did not go well, it is unlikely to be too late to still get involved.
  - If there isn't a group or society for your passion, why not start one? It may seem like a bold step, but it might be easier than you think, and having a project can also reduce your loneliness.
  - Going online to connect with others safely can feel like a less challenging way to reduce your loneliness, but balancing it with fact-to-face experiences is likely to be even more rewarding.
  - Carry on doing the things you really enjoy – take yourself to the movies or to an event, even if there is no one to go with.
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- Doing things for other people can make us feel good about ourselves, and can reduce loneliness, as well as helping to build relationships.
- Some of us are more at ease in groups and others in one-to-one situations. Notice your own preference and 'style' and play to your own strengths.

## **Where to seek more help**

Try talking to people in college who are there to support you. If you continue to feel lonely, you can use the University Counselling Service which offers both group and individual counselling. Working in a group can be particularly helpful for issues of loneliness.

You can find more information on the University Counselling Service website: [www.counselling.cam.ac.uk](http://www.counselling.cam.ac.uk)

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2/3 Bene't Place, Lensfield Rd  
Cambridge, CB2 1EL

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