

Loneliness and connectivity

An exploration of loneliness and the importance of making connections for positive mental health and protection against suicide

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October 2023

Introduction

On average around 250 people come to the railway to end their life every year. This represents between four and five percent of the overall number of suicides in Great Britain. These fatalities have a devastating impact on the families and communities of those who take their lives and on the rail industry staff and passengers who find themselves involved in these incidents.

Last year there were 240 suspected rail suicides, causing over 750,000 minutes of delay to our passengers with a direct cost of circa £57m to the rail industry. In recent years, there has also been a sharp increase in the number of people presenting on the railway network who are in crisis or in distress.

The purpose of the Make a Connection campaign is to engage with vulnerable people upstream and signpost them to mental health support services before they reach crisis point and consider ending their life on the railway.

Network Rail and the wider rail industry have partnered with digital charity Mental Health Innovations, who run a text messaging support service called Shout. Through the Shout service, anyone can text the bespoke word 'Journey' to 85258 to receive free and confidential mental health support, 24/7.

With increased uncertainty in the world, from the negative impact of social media through to increased cost of living, now more than ever people need support with their mental health.

We have created a dedicated rail industry communications toolkit for the Make a Connection campaign. The toolkit includes a range of promotional material that partners can use across their channels, from display posters and station announcements to social media assets. All materials signpost passengers to the Shout text support service.

Central to our rail suicide prevention programme is the belief that suicide is not inevitable and our charitable partnerships, including Mental Health Innovations, build on the invaluable work we are doing in this area.



Louise McNally
Suicide Prevention Lead, Network Rail

To access the rail in industry communications toolkit, visit:
<https://www.networkrailcampaigns.co.uk/make-a-connection/>

For more information about the Make a Connection campaign, visit:
giveusashout.org/make-a-connection

Summary

For this report, Mental Health Innovations interrogated a subset of Shout data, which comprises more than two million text message conversations with 680k people across the UK. We conducted in-depth analyses of anonymised data associated with more than 180,000 conversations with Shout texters about loneliness, using a combination of cutting-edge data science combined with qualitative psychological techniques. This approach has revealed insights into the underlying themes raised and the most popular resources and coping skills texters use to help manage their loneliness.

We have also conducted a literature review of material around both loneliness and connectivity. Loneliness is considered to be one of the largest public health challenges, linked to poor physical and mental health and an important risk factor in the building up of suicidal ideation. Loneliness is one of the most common and important factors in conversations at Shout. Texters who contact Shout do so because they need someone to talk to, often because they lack meaningful connections. Texters who mention loneliness are also often experiencing low mood, anxiety, and suicidal thoughts, and are of all ages, from 13 or under to over 65 years old, although the majority (65%) are under 25 years old.

Our analyses find that many texters feel lonely or disconnected after relationship breakups, bereavement, and relocation to new areas without friends, family or community networks. We also find, however, that most texters experience a deep sense of loneliness, despite the presence of social connections.

The most common coping skills that texters use to combat feelings of loneliness include: listening to music and watching movies; sleep, practising self-care, such as taking a bath; talking to friends,

family, and other trusted adults; joining clubs and meetings to form new connections; taking exercise, including walking and yoga; and breathing exercises. Popular resources that texters use to deal with loneliness include guides on: combating loneliness; staying connected; and breathing exercises.

To overcome loneliness, it is important to form meaningful connections, where you feel fully supported and valued. This is fundamental to our health and happiness; providing us with a sense of belonging and a better quality of life. Connection is of fundamental importance to mental health and wellbeing and a protective factor against suicidal thoughts and behaviours. It can offer avenues other than suicide and can prevent suicidal ideation.

Shout provides a moment of digital connection for someone in distress that is free, confidential and available anywhere in the UK. Connecting and sharing thoughts and feelings with a Shout Volunteer can act as a vital intervention when a texter experiences suicidal ideation. Opening up and sharing how you feel with a Shout Volunteer, or with trusted connections, strengthening current relationships, and investing in yourself and your interests are valuable ways of building connections and overcoming loneliness.

"When texters reach out, they can feel distressed and lonely. I listen to their feelings and validate them as much as possible. Letting them know that it's okay to feel this way and that it isn't their fault for struggling can help to build rapport. Exploring options that might make them feel connected to others again can be very unique and powerful, in enabling individuals to get to a calmer place. Having someone who listens and who reminds them that they matter helps them to keep going"

- Shania, Shout Volunteer

About Shout

Shout is the UK's only free, 24/7 text messaging support service for anyone who is struggling to cope. Shout was publicly launched in May 2019 and has taken more than two million conversations with 675,000 people who are anxious, stressed, depressed, suicidal or overwhelmed and who need immediate support. The service provides round the clock support from trained volunteers, supervised and supported in real time by an expert Clinical team. We currently respond to 1,500-2,000 requests for support every day. Shout is the first service from charity Mental Health Innovations, whose mission is to use technology to give everyone in the UK access to the digital mental health services that they need.

Shout is a de-escalation service and we work with people in immediate distress to take them to a calmer moment. We empower them with support and techniques to take their next steps to feeling better and handle future issues. We may signpost texters to further support services or their GP so that they can get continuous and long-term support.

In around 2.5% of our conversations where de-escalation is not possible and the texter is deemed to be at imminent risk of suicide, Shout works with the emergency services to keep the texter safe. Shout listens without judgement to people who have nowhere else to turn and we give them the opportunity to feel heard.

"The volunteer I spoke to tonight was absolutely fantastic. Calmed me down, listened to what I was saying, ensured I had the relevant resources before I left. They quite literally saved my life tonight."

- Shout texter feedback

Loneliness

Loneliness is a universal psychological experience, across cultures and across demographics. However, even though it is a common experience, it is a subjective one, unique to each person; an interplay between an individual's predisposition, situation and culture, and then events that precipitate loneliness such as the grief, loss and change experiences in life (Pearce, Myles-Hooton, Johnson, et al, 2021).

Loneliness has been described as *'a subjective, unwelcome feeling of lack or loss of companionship. It happens when there is a mismatch between the quantity and quality of the social relationships that we have, and those we want.'* (UK Govt Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport, 2018)

Not everyone who is lonely is alone, and not everyone who is alone is lonely. The experience of loneliness doesn't only emerge when someone is actually physically alone. A person can be in a crowd or a group or in the company of one other person, and feel lonely. Equally a person might be on their own and not be lonely. Everyone's experience is unique.

The complex, significant impact of loneliness is acknowledged both nationally and internationally. Demonstrating awareness of, and concern for the wide-ranging repercussions of loneliness, the UK Government Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport (DCMS) includes the Minister for Loneliness, The Rt Hon Stuart Andrew MP (and Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport). In 2018 a cross-government strategy to tackle loneliness was published by the DCMS ([2018 Loneliness Strategy](#)) [England] citing 3 objectives:

- Reduce stigma associated with loneliness
- Drive a lasting shift to ensure relationships and loneliness are considered in policy-making and delivery by organisations

- Improving the evidence-base on loneliness

Each year a report is released describing developments and progress, acknowledging achievements and detailing next steps and government strategy over the next two years:

[Tackling Loneliness annual report March 2023: the fourth year - GOV.UK](#)

We may wonder why the government, in partnership with so many organisations, has such a concentrated focus on loneliness. An increasing body of research informs us that loneliness has a substantial impact on physical and mental health and, by association, potentially damaging economic consequences. The Government's Loneliness Strategy highlighted the following potential consequences of loneliness:

- Frequently linked to early deaths
- Health impact thought to be on a par with other public health priorities like obesity or smoking
- Loneliness is associated with a greater risk of inactivity, smoking and risk-taking behaviour
- Increased risk of coronary heart disease and stroke; increased risk of depression, low self-esteem, reported sleep problems
- Increased stress response, cognitive decline and risk of Alzheimer's
- Feeling lonely can make a person more likely to perceive, expect and remember others' behaviour to be unfriendly. This can increase social anxiety and cause further withdrawal, potentially creating a vicious cycle

Echoing the concerns about the impact of loneliness here in the UK, the Surgeon General of the United States, Dr Vivek Murthy, recently declared an epidemic of loneliness in the US and released an 'Advisory on the Healing effects of social connection and community' [[Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation](#)]. He did this citing evidence that there are significant health risks associated with loneliness, isolation and lack of connection equating the impact of loneliness as being equivalent to smoking 15 cigarettes a day and as one of the primary motivations for self-harm. The advisory noted that a lack of social connection is linked to an increased risk of heart disease, stroke, anxiety, depression and dementia and, while loneliness and lack of social connection is particularly common in older people, there is rapidly growing concern about how the younger generations are struggling with these experiences.

In fact, loneliness, or isolation from a group, has been a health risk, and threat to life, throughout history (Heu & Brennecke, 2023). It's a complex experience, sometimes short-term, known as transient loneliness, and sometimes chronic (longer-term, but may leave people feeling it is ever-present). Circumstantial loneliness can also be brought on by those precipitating events that we experience in life; the changes and the losses, such as the end of a relationship, moving home, transitioning between schools, graduating, immigrating, leaving one job for another, being retrenched or retiring and, grieving the death of someone. In the majority of these cases we are losing someone and/or some place that we are attached to, highlighting how important connectedness is, to both people and place.

Young people have identified experiences of social loneliness (lacking in social connection), emotional loneliness (feeling excluded or disconnected, even when with a partner or with

friends), and existential loneliness (a general feeling of being 'lost in life', disconnected and unanchored).

A plethora of research informs us about the potentially serious physical and emotional impact of loneliness. In times of crisis when people are despairing, anxious, panicking, or starting to get worried about an emerging or sudden challenge, everyone needs a person to turn to, someone they trust that will be available, listen to them, show compassion, and support them. We should all be able to identify that one person and, in an ideal world, a tribe of people we can turn to. Sometimes, people experiencing a crisis or feeling like they're sinking into an abyss from which they might not be able to emerge, connecting with someone seems, or is, impossible.

This is what makes Shout such a vital service. Available for free, 24/7 from anywhere in the UK, at any time, a simple text message will be responded to with compassion, kindness and insight by a trained volunteer, with clinicians virtually 'looking over their shoulders', guiding them to help the texter de-escalate to a calmer space, able to consider their next steps or, where necessary refer them to the emergency services for specialised support. Knowing about Shout means that no-one is alone and no-one has to struggle on their own.

Loneliness and suicide

Loneliness is a significant public health issue and is a key indicator of poor mental health, linked directly to depression and anxiety in both older and young adults (Matthews et al., 2016; Domènech-Abella et al., 2019; Van As et al., 2021; Steen et al., 2022), and self-harm in adolescents (Geulayov et al., 2022).

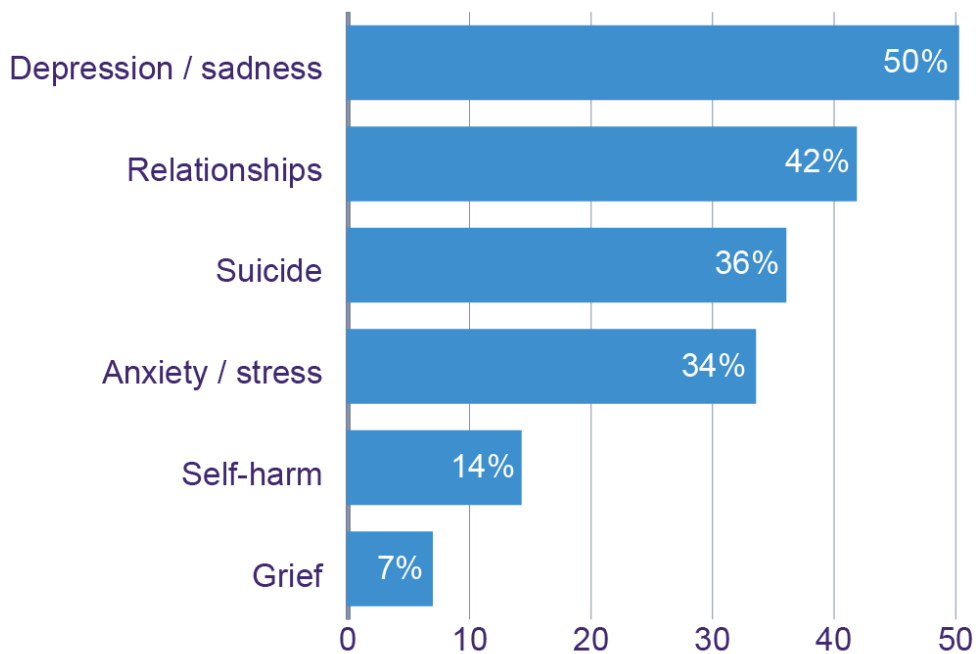
There is a body of research that evidences an association between loneliness, suicidal ideation and behaviour, and an increased risk of suicide (Pandey et al., 2019; Gijzen et al., 2021). Within the Interpersonal Theory of Suicide (IPT; Van Orden et al., 2010), loneliness contributes to the simultaneous presence of two interpersonal constructs: thwarted belongingness, where a person perceives a disconnection in their relationship with others or a lack of reciprocity in caring, and perceived burdensomeness, where the person believes themselves to be a burden on others, which gives rise to suicidal ideation (McClelland, Evans, & O'Connor, 2021). This implies that irrespective of the number of social contacts, the perception that one's social and emotional needs are not being satisfied can be quite distressing, and could drive suicidal behaviour.

Suicide prevention strategies emphasize the importance of social connectedness as a protective factor against suicide. Social connectedness can be described as a sense of being cared for, supported, and belonging, and can be centred on feeling connected to friends, family, colleagues, and other important people, groups and organisations. Having meaningful and regular social connections offers a number of mental health benefits, such as increased feelings of purpose and confidence, amplified levels of happiness, reduced levels of stress, and improved self-worth (Martino, Pegg & Frates, 2017). Having that 'connectedness' also gives us the assurance that we are not alone in difficult situations but are fully cared for, valued and supported, therefore we can reach out to talk, and know that we would be listened to without judgement.

Loneliness in Shout conversations

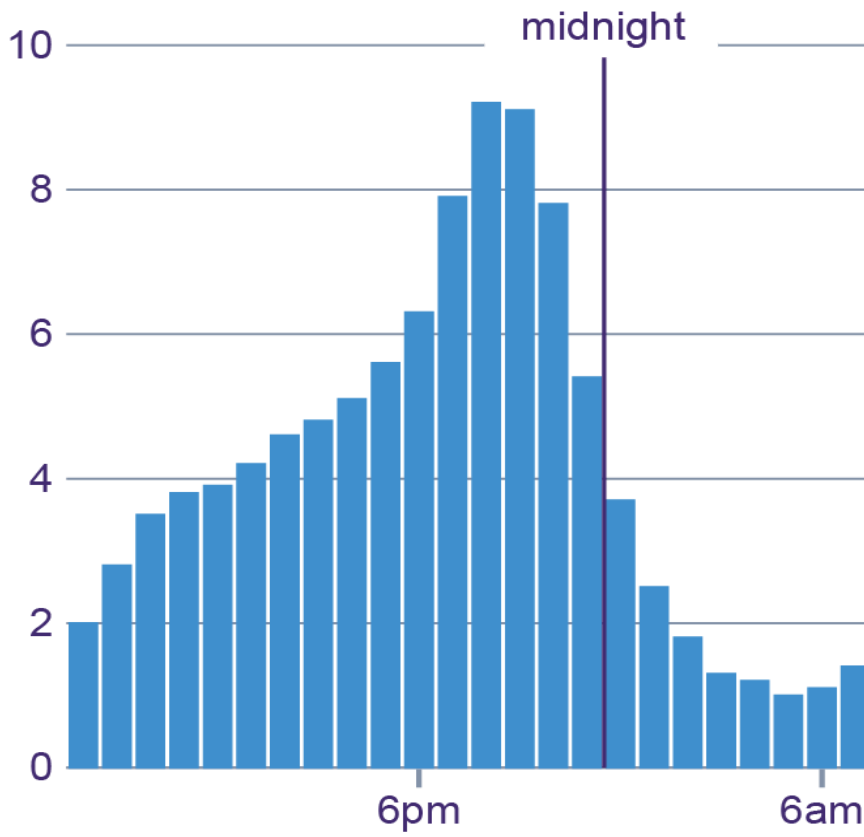
Loneliness is one of the most common reasons people contact Shout. It is the main issue in over 15% of conversations and a feature of very many other conversations. Here, we have analysed anonymised data associated with more than 180,000 conversations with Shout texters about loneliness. We used a combination of cutting-edge data science combined with qualitative psychological techniques. This approach has revealed insights into the underlying themes raised and the most popular resources and coping skills texters use to help manage their loneliness. In more than a third of conversations, texters are having thoughts of suicide:

Most common issues raised in conversations about loneliness (% of conversations)



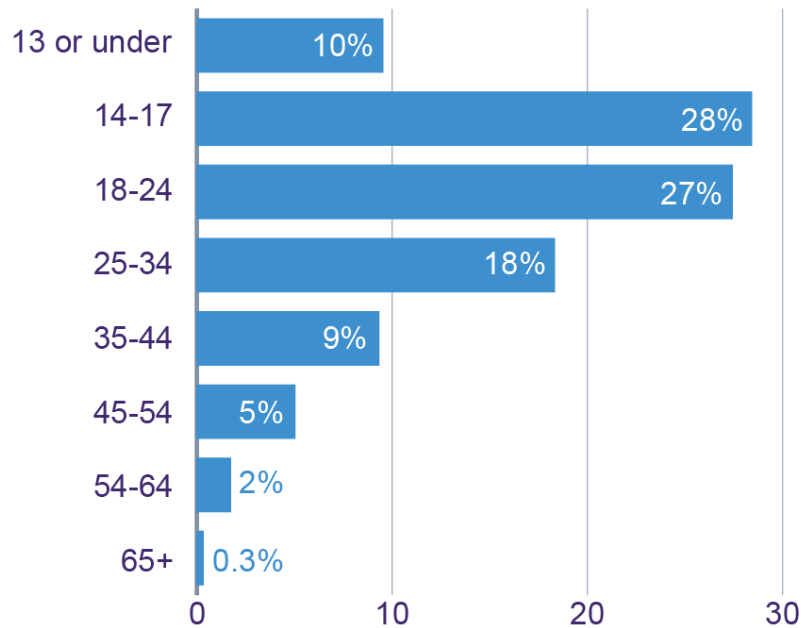
Because Shout is a 24/7 service, people contact us at all times. Demand from people contacting us about loneliness peaks between 7pm and 11pm, when other services are usually closed and people are more likely to be alone. Although people contact Shout about loneliness on all days of the week, this tends to be most likely on Sunday and into the beginning of the week.

Conversations about loneliness (% hourly)



Those texting Shout about loneliness are of all ages, from 13 or under to over 65 years old, but the majority (65%) are under 25 years old.

Age (% of texters)



People who contact Shout about loneliness describe feeling disconnected from others, a sense of emptiness, and in need of someone to talk to. Moreover, more than a third of people (33%) who contact Shout do so because they don't have any friend, family or trusted adults they can talk to. Our analyses find that situational factors such as relationship breakups, bereavement, and relocation to new areas without friends, family or community networks, contribute to our texters' experiences of loneliness. Many texters mention feeling lost, and experiencing intense feelings of loneliness following breakups and the loss of significant others, as they contend with the loss of an important connection, and in some instances, the loss of mutual friendships as well. Young texters at university describe feeling lonely as they grapple with change including moving away from home, and adjusting to a new environment coupled with the pressures of academic demands, making friends and 'fitting in'.

The COVID-19 pandemic had a profound impact on people's social life and relationships, as lockdown restrictions limited social interactions. This had a significant impact on the physical and mental health of people who texted Shout, as prolonged disconnection from friends and family caused overwhelming loneliness, which fueled feelings of anxiety and low mood, and triggered a range of unhealthy behaviours including poor sleeping patterns, lack of exercise and unhealthy dietary habits. Lockdown restrictions also resulted in the transition to online learning, which many student texters described as isolating and lonely, as they felt disconnected from other students and their tutors.

We find that many texters, however, are surrounded by their partners, friends, family, and colleagues but still describe a deep sense of loneliness, as they feel these connections are not meaningful or satisfying. Consequently, these texters are often hesitant to share their experiences, thoughts and feelings due to the fear of being misunderstood or judged, and as a result, keep their emotions and thoughts bottled up, and feel alone. Most of these texters refer

music can help listeners feel as though they are in the company of a comforting friend (Van Den Tol & Edwards, 2013; Schäfer, Saarikallio & Eerola, 2020), feel understood and emotionally supported (Lippman & Greenwood, 2012), and feel less alone (Skånland, 2013; Kiernan & Davidson, 2022).

Sleep is mentioned as a coping skill in around a third of conversations. Many texters who experience loneliness also mention feeling anxious, stressed and panicked, which is consistent with research that have found strong links between loneliness and anxiety (e.g., Domènech-Abella et al., 2019; Steen et al., 2022). Texters describe using sleep to cope with feelings of anxiety and stress, and refer to sleep as a means of escape; an interval of relief from overwhelming thoughts and feelings. The anxiety-relieving benefits of sleep have been observed in recent research, where deep sleep was found to be a natural remedy for anxiety, as it helps people better manage symptoms of anxiety (Ben Simon et al., 2020).

Texters find that practising self-care, such as taking a warm bath or shower, having a hot cup of tea and making something they enjoy for dinner, enhances their mood, helps them to relax and dispels feelings of loneliness. Self-care, also referred to as self-compassion, has been defined as the tendency to bring a compassionate attitude toward oneself when encountering difficulties or setbacks, and involves taking time to do things that de-stress, nurture and support oneself during periods of distress (Neff, 2003). Self-compassion is associated with lower levels of loneliness (Brooker et al., 2020; Farzanfar, Sedaghat & Zarghami, 2020), as it may provide a way to connect with oneself and support well-being, which may reduce feelings of loneliness.

Other texters describe using exercise, particularly long walks in their neighbourhood, to improve their mood and combat feelings of loneliness. Walking, especially in nature, where people are exposed to the sights, sounds and smells of the natural environment has been found to promote feelings of happiness and contentment, boost wellbeing, and is associated with a 28% reduction in feelings of loneliness (Hammoud et al., 2021). Walking in nature could also lead to more spontaneous social interactions (Glover, Todd & Moyer, 2022), which could in turn reduce loneliness.

Many texters find that connecting with friends, family and other trusted adults reduces feelings of loneliness, and associated low mood. Others find that joining a social group provides them with an opportunity to meet new people, form friendships, and feel more connected. As humans, we are hard-wired biologically to be socially connected to others, and having important and supportive relationships is vital for our health and wellbeing. A burgeoning body of research has shown that fostering social connections may act as a buffer against loneliness and depression (Zheng et al., 2022; Petersen et al., 2023). Ideally, everyone should be able to identify at least one person that they can turn to for support.

To extend our thinking about what other aspects of life affect or support our sense of loneliness, a body of research about place attachment and how urban design can increase opportunities to reduce loneliness, by designing spaces that encourage people to connect and also making spaces for people to enjoy being alone (Heu & Brennecke, 2023), is evident.

Dr Murthy reported that 'frequently confiding in others is associated with up to 15% reduced odds of developing depression, among people who are at higher risk due to a history of traumatic or adverse life experiences'. You are that social connection, that antidote to loneliness and social isolation.

Recently I had a convo with a texter who had been awake all night because their anxiety was very high. I gave them lots of reassurance and listened to how they felt. Near the end of the convo they disengaged. But a few days later when I logged on again they had left great feedback saying they felt listened to. They also apologised for falling asleep during the convo. It made me smile, because they felt comfortable and calm enough to be able to sleep.”

- **Carolyn, Shout Volunteer**

Connectedness

Connectedness has been described as the subjective experience of feeling close to and a sense of belongingness with others. Just as loneliness and social isolation have been recognised as well-established risk factors for many health and mental health challenges, connectedness is acknowledged as a strong protective factor. The experience of belonging and feeling close to others, creates a shield that buffers us from the potential ravages of loneliness and isolation.

A recent scoping review (Wickramaratna, Yangchen, Lepow et al, 2022), confirmed that having social connections protects people from symptoms of depression and other mental health disorders. Family support is recognised as a strong psychological resource in combating loneliness and suicidal ideation (Chang et al, 2017).

Having even one strong connection can give meaning to life. In fact having a total stranger reach out and connect can have a positive impact on our life and our sense of belongingness.

“As a Shout Volunteer, I make connections with a variety of people going through a variety of situations. Speaking from experience, when someone is in a mental health crisis, they want nothing more than to feel heard. Reaching out for support via our service is the first step a lot of people make to get help. Listening with no judgement can give people taking that first step a positive experience to carry on reaching out to receive the

support they deserve. That connectivity stays with that person and gives them the strength to keep going.”

- **Lauren, Shout Volunteer**

It is not just in our connections with people that we feel supported and safe. Other forms of connectedness such as with our pets, nature, our careers, schools, sports, community involvement, and volunteering, provide people with a sense of belonging and bolster their mental health. As opposed to each person’s individual identity and how they view themselves subjectively, belonging to, and identifying as a member of a group develops social identity which supports connectedness and mental health (Haslam, Haslam, Cruwys et al, 2022).

The 85-year long Harvard Study of Adult Development has given us the opportunity to look across the lifespan to understand what makes people live happier and longer lives, in other words, what makes for a ‘good life’. Since 1938 the study has followed 724 participants and more recently their spouses and descendants. After all these years of collecting data, they found that it is not fame or fortune or work that makes for a ‘good life’, it is, in fact, connections.

‘The people who were happiest, who stayed healthiest as they grew old, and who lived the longest, were the people who had the warmest connections with other people’

- **Robert Waldinger, Director, Harvard Study of Adult Development**

Conclusion

Loneliness can seriously impact our longevity. It is a public health challenge that we should all be aware of, both in ourselves and in those around us. This report reveals the awareness and understanding we have gathered about loneliness from more than two million conversations Shout has had with texters since 2018. We believe this will provide insight into the risk and contributing factors to people’s experiences of loneliness, while revealing the many coping strategies people employ to combat their lack of connection.

Connection has the potential to be the antidote to loneliness. The power of connection and the importance of making connections for positive mental health cannot be underestimated. The Shout service provides a moment of human connection for someone in distress; connecting and sharing thoughts and feelings with a Shout Volunteer can act as a vital intervention when a texter experiences suicidal ideation. The connectivity provided by the service is a protective factor against suicidal thoughts and behaviours and can be instrumental in saving lives.

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Data notes: Date range: 2018-05-23 to 2023-06-30 inclusive. Demographic data are from optional post-conversation surveys. Conversation issues and coping skills data are from volunteer post-conversation surveys. Content analyses were conducted on randomly selected subsets of anonymised conversations about loneliness.

About Mental Health Innovations and Shout

The charity [Mental Health Innovations](#) was set up with a grant from The Royal Foundation, following the Heads Together campaign. Our mission is to use technology to give everyone in the UK access to the digital mental health services that they need. Shout is our first product.

[Shout](#) is the UK's only 24/7 text messaging support service for anyone who is struggling to cope. Shout was publicly launched in May 2019, with support from The Duke and Duchess of Cambridge. Since then, Shout has taken 1.9 million conversations with 650,000 people who needed immediate support with issues such as anxiety, depression and suicidal thoughts. The service provides round the clock support from trained volunteers, supervised and supported in real time by expert clinicians. Shout currently responds to 1,500-2,000 requests for support every day.

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