

THE  
NEXT  
REPORT



*all the*

# LONELY PEOPLE

*We're arguably more connected than ever, so why is it that so many Kiwi women feel lonely? Cath Bennett takes a closer look at why so many of us feel we're living isolated lives*

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When the Duchess of Cambridge admitted motherhood can be lonely, it made headlines worldwide. For many it seemed extraordinary that a woman who appears to have a fairytale life of privilege could concede, "you do feel quite isolated". But in speaking out, the royal mum-of-two raised two salient points; loneliness is more widespread than many realise, and it's indiscriminate in who it affects.

The NEXT Report certainly highlights the prevalence of loneliness – and shows it's on the rise. The survey of more than 1000 Kiwi women nationwide found one in four agree with the statement 'I am often lonely' – a significant increase from the 17% who shared that sentiment in our report in 2008. Our findings are reinforced by the most recent NZ General Social Survey (NZGSS), which discovered 36% of Kiwis experienced some level of loneliness in the previous four weeks.

University of Canterbury senior lecturer Dr Sarah Wright wrote her psychology doctorate on loneliness in the workplace, and describes the issue as "a paradox".

"It is both an invisible and taboo subject that no one wants to confront, yet it is pervasive in society," Wright explains. "Not many people admit to feeling lonely, as doing so would isolate the person even more; it could come across that they're somehow socially inadequate."

Yet it's an issue which academics have proved is deadly. Research drawn from 23 studies and published last year in the journal *Heart*, showed loneliness and social isolation increase the risk of coronary complications by 29% and the chance of

## A SURVEY OF 1000 KIWI WOMEN NATIONWIDE FOUND ONE IN FOUR AGREE WITH THE STATEMENT 'I AM OFTEN LONELY'

stroke by 32%. A 2010 study found those who are isolated are twice as likely to die prematurely as those with a social network, while research by the University of Virginia four years later concluded many of us would rather receive mild electric shocks than be left alone. Mother Teresa was clearly ahead of her time when she called loneliness "the greatest disease in the West today".

### THE PARENTHOOD DILEMMA

While loneliness is often dismissed as an issue that purely affects pensioners, both the NEXT Report and the NZGSS indicated it generally decreases with age. Of those who admitted to NEXT they are often lonely, 40% were aged 15-34, and only 12% were over the age of 70.

Having children is undoubtedly a factor. This was highlighted by Plunket, which last year researched the challenges experienced by Auckland parents. The Inner City Project looked at those living in the CBD with children under the age of five, and concluded that isolation is an overwhelming issue.

Working at the coalface of the problem is Sandy Ritchie, 'community connector' at

Splice, an Auckland organisation that aims to build a community within the city centre. She believes a major factor is the environments these parents are living in.

"Apartment-style living makes it very hard for people to connect with their neighbours; they're not friendly places," explains Ritchie, whose work is funded by the Department of Internal Affairs. "I had a couple of mothers come to one of my groups – they lived in the same apartment block on the same floor, and they didn't know there was another person with a child the same age there."

While Splice are making a difference, by organising get-togethers for everything from yoga playgroups to tai chi, the intensification of housing will likely escalate the issue. Auckland is expected to have 2770 new apartments this year, with a further 3840 due for completion in 2018.

But loneliness isn't just an Auckland problem. The NEXT Report found while the city has by far the biggest concentration of women who feel lonely (29%), the Waikato/Bay of Plenty area and Canterbury are other regions where women are more likely to be affected. Addressing the issue in Christchurch is Rebecca Smith-Andreou. She used online tool Meetup.com to launch Female Friendships Christchurch, a group which has 1000 members, all interested in making friends in the area. In May she ran her first 'speed friendship' event – much like speed dating but for platonic relationships – and the 31-year-old is now launching The City and Me >>

# 29%

## OF WOMEN LIVING IN AUCKLAND ADMIT TO FEELING LONELY



40%

OF US WOULD FEEL LONELY WITHOUT TECHNOLOGY, BUT COULD IT IN FACT BE DRIVING THOSE FEELINGS OF ISOLATION?

Christchurch, which helps connect people through events and challenges.

“I just want to help others to meet new people, make friends and experience Christchurch,” she explains – especially as someone who’s experienced extreme loneliness in the past. “There are quite a lot of interest-specific groups around, like for mums or business networking, but I found there isn’t really anything just for making friends. That’s what I’m trying to offer.”

### LIVING LIFE ONLINE

Much has been made of the effect of technology on social wellbeing. The NEXT Report showed 40% of us would feel lonely without technology, but could it in fact be driving those feelings of isolation? Research in this area produces conflicting results, but Wright is of the opinion that

while the likes of Facebook might connect us with people we wouldn’t ordinarily communicate with, our devices can limit the depth of our relationships.

“Ironically technology that’s supposed to help us connect with people can actually dilute the meaning of some of the relationships we have,” she says. “We’re substituting face-to-face connection with something on a screen – which lacks the benefits you get from physical touch and eye contact. You can only take so much from a text and an emoticon.”

And Wright suggests when it comes to

alleviating loneliness, it’s about forming relationships with people. She says those who are short on time – like the 60% of women who told NEXT there are not enough hours in the day – are running the risk of isolating themselves.

“Work and family life is busy, stressful and demanding, leaving little room to develop the kind of caring relationships needed to fend off lonely feelings. Developing and maintaining good quality relationships takes an investment of time, so when we’re short on time, friendship maintenance gets bumped down the priority list. But losing that regular contact with the people who mean the most to us is definitely a recipe for loneliness.” ✱

## Meet ‘the connector’



I needed friends, I realised it’s nothing to be ashamed of, and then I could move forward.”

The admin assistant’s next step was joining Meetup.com – an online tool which helps people find others who share their interests. “I went to a few things, but found I just wanted to hang out with females. Guys change the dynamic.”

By now pregnant with her first child, Rebecca tried launching her own Meetup group for mums and pregnant women, but it didn’t take off. “I’d find quite often I was sitting at meetups on my own, just waiting for people to turn up.” So she broadened the net, and her ‘Female Friendships Christchurch’ group not only gave her a close circle of friends, it has helped many others meet people too.

“Quite a few are new to Christchurch, there are a lot of empty nesters, and there are also quite a few whose friends left the city after the earthquakes, leaving them with a smaller friendship network,” she explains.

Rebecca’s advice for others is to put themselves out there, even if the prospect is daunting. “Sometimes I have to force myself to go and do it, but I always come home feeling regenerated and with more energy,” she says. “Meeting new people and trying new things is like a breath of fresh air; it can open the door to so many opportunities.”

Bright and bubbly with a sunny smile, it’s hard to believe Rebecca Smith-Andreou once suffered from loneliness so crippling it reduced her to tears. But after moving to Christchurch shortly after the earthquakes, the 31-year-old felt so isolated, she advertised on trading site Gumtree for companionship.

“I literally put an ad up there saying ‘looking for friends,’” admits the mum-of-two, who emigrated from her native Australia with her partner for the rebuild. “I had my partner but I was really lonely. It’s embarrassing, but once I admitted to myself

*‘Once I admitted to myself I needed friends, I realised it’s nothing to be ashamed of’*