A Guide to <u>Measuring</u> Loneliness for Community Organisations

ENDING LONELINESS TOGETHER

Belonging Through Connection

MEASUREMENT
OUTCOMES
FRAMEWORK

Guide 1

**This document is part of Ending Loneliness Together's Measurement Outcomes Framework series.
This is document one of three.**

Ending Loneliness Together

Ending Loneliness Together (ELT) is a national Australian initiative that aims to raise awareness and reduce the negative impact of loneliness and social isolation in our community through evidence-based interventions and advocacy.

Inspired by the work of the UK Campaign to End Loneliness, ELT has drawn together research expertise from Australian and international universities, service delivery expertise from not-for-profit organisations and government agencies, community groups and skilled volunteers, in order to address loneliness in Australia.

www.endingloneliness.com.au

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Introduction

Who is this guidance for?

This guidance is for community organisations seeking information on how best to measure loneliness in order to evaluate programs or activities designed to reduce loneliness. It will be useful for community services and organisations interested in aligning their activities, and benchmarking their programs, as part of the Australian initiative Ending Loneliness Together, launched in 2020. In adopting this guidance, you will be helping to build the evidence base on loneliness in Australia and the most effective solutions to reducing it.

What is loneliness?

The working definition of loneliness used here is:

> **Loneliness is an unpleasant, often distressing, feeling of lack of connection to other people, and a desire for more, or more satisfying, social relationships.**
>
> **www.gilc.global**

Loneliness is a subjective experience, so it is not easy to to know who is (or is not) lonely. Someone may be living, studying, or working with others, yet still feel lonely. Similarly, a person may be living alone or socially isolated, but not feel lonely.

Feeling lonely is a common human experience that comes and goes. Loneliness affects people of all ages, backgrounds, and abilities. Statistics from the Australian Loneliness Report[1] indicate that around one in four Australian adults are lonely, whilst data from the Australia Talks survey showed that about half of the participants reported that they "rarely" or "never" feel lonely[2].

However, the rate of loneliness found in different studies and community settings is influenced by a range of factors, including: the specific groups examined, the timeframe being considered, and how loneliness is measured.

Loneliness is influenced by a wide range of life experiences (e.g., migration, cultural identity, bereavement, leaving home, redundancy) and personal factors (e.g., age, self-stigma, poor physical and mental health[3]).

People who are lonely will describe their experience in highly personalised ways, but there are two common elements: an *emotional* component (sadness, distress), and a *social* component (feeling that your social connections are lacking in quantity, and especially in quality). Importantly, there is strong evidence that chronic (i.e. persistent, enduring) loneliness has a negative impact on health and well-being, educational attainment, and economic outcomes[4,5].

What loneliness is not

Feeling lonely is a *subjective* experience that needs to be distinguished from other similar concepts. Specifically, loneliness is different from the *objective* state of being alone or socially isolated which involves the complete, or near complete, lack of contact with other people. Social isolation refers to the degree of contact with other people.

Measures of social isolation therefore differ from those used to assess loneliness, and often focus on the number and/or frequency of social contacts. Loneliness also differs from the general sense of well-being, introversion, (absence of) social support, depression, solitude, and social exclusion.

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Why measure loneliness?

When evaluating your service to reduce loneliness in the community you will need to be able to show service users, funding bodies and boards of management that your program or activity is making a real difference.

By measuring loneliness – rather than related issues such as social isolation or well-being – you will be able to produce clear and accurate evidence of what works, and what does not, and make informed decisions for your service.

Which measure of loneliness?

In selecting measures of loneliness, it is important to decide how well the questions suit your program, activity or service. There are many different measures of loneliness. Some are classed as *direct measures of loneliness* (they use the term 'lonely' in the questions) whilst others are called *indirect measures of loneliness* (they do not use the word 'lonely' in the questions).

Consistent with current guidance from the UK Campaign to End Loneliness, we recommend that both a direct and an indirect measure be used for service evaluation, where possible. However, if only one measure can be used, due to time or resource constraints, then a direct question about loneliness is recommended.

Loneliness measures also need to be: valid (accurate) and reliable, brief and easy to use, and suitable across age-groups, languages and cultures.

Recommended measures for adults

The University of California Los Angeles Loneliness Scale (UCLA-LS)* is an indirect and widely recommended measure of loneliness. There are many versions available, which differ in the number of questions and response options presented and it has been translated into many different languages[6,7,8]. There are also many direct measures of loneliness, often using a single question, which differ in item wording and the period of loneliness being rated.

For community sector organisations, we recommend the following measures for service evaluation:

1. The UCLA Loneliness Scale - 4-Item Version

The University of California, Los Angeles Loneliness Scale (UCLA-LS, 4-item version, Russell, Peplau, & Cutrona, 1980[9,10]).

This version is valid for use across a wide range of age groups (18 yrs and over), including younger, middle-aged and older adults, and will permit benchmarking of scores against other programs, whilst minimising the number of questions presented[11].

2. Single-Item Measure of Loneliness

This single-item measure is currently used by the Office of National Statistics, UK. This item assesses how often the respondent feels lonely and will allow a direct comparison of data between the UK and Australia.

Note: Copyright of the UCLA-LS is held by Daniel W. Russell, PhD. Use of this measure is permitted for research and evaluation purposes only (not for commercial benefit).

The UCLA Loneliness Scale - 4-Item Version

Instructions

The following statements describe how people sometimes feel. For each statement, please indicate how often you feel the way described.

For example: If you were asked the question '*How often do you feel happy?*', if you *never* felt happy, you would circle '1', while if you *always* felt happy, you would circle '4'.

Never 1	Rarely 2	Sometimes 3	Always 4

	Please circle one response for each question			
	Never	**Rarely**	**Sometimes**	**Always**
1.* How often do you feel that you are "in tune" with the people around you?	1	2	3	4
2. How often do you feel that no one really knows you well?	1	2	3	4
3.* How often do you feel you can find companionship when you want it?	1	2	3	4
4. How often do you feel that people are around you but not with you?	1	2	3	4

Russell DW, Peplau LA, Cutrona CE. The revised UCLA Loneliness Scale: concurrent and discriminant validity evidence. J Pers Soc Psychol Sep 1980;39(3):472-480.

Russell DW. UCLA Loneliness Scale (Version 3): reliability, validity, and factor structure. J Pers Assess Feb 1996;66(1):20-40.

How to score and interpret this measure

Items with an asterisk must be reverse-scored (i.e., 1=4, 2=3, 3=2, 4=1) and the scores for each item are then summed. The minimum possible score is 4 and the maximum possible score is 16. Higher scores indicate greater degrees of loneliness[6]. For a worked example see Appendix 1.

There is no specific score that distinguishes between people who are lonely and those who are not lonely. For recommended cut-off scores and guidance on how to use these scores for service evaluation, see the companion document entitled: *Ending Loneliness Together (2021). A Guide to Evaluating Loneliness Outcomes for Community Organisations*.

Single-Item Measure of Loneliness

Instructions

The next question asks how often you feel lonely.

Please tick one box:					
	Often/ always	Some of the time	Occasionally	Hardly ever	Never
How often do you feel lonely?					

Office for National Statistics. Measuring loneliness: guidance for use of the national indicators on surveys. United Kingdom 2018[12].

How to score and interpret this measure

Calculate the percentage of service users reporting each response before and after your service is provided.

For further details, see: *Ending Loneliness Together (2021). A Guide to Evaluating Loneliness Outcomes for Community Organisations*.

Recommended approach to collecting answers

Ending loneliness requires a systematic and coherent response so that chronic loneliness is prevented and the skills for reconnecting with others are facilitated.

It is important that the wording of the instructions, questions and response options is not changed (with nothing omitted), so that a standardised approach to measurement is maintained. If using both measures, it is best to present the UCLA-LS 4-item measure first, followed by the direct single-item measure*. It is also important to check that the font size and layout used is appropriate for your program participants. If in doubt, ask your service users what would work best for them.

Due to the subjective nature of loneliness, and the potential effects of stigma (which can make it harder to admit to feeling lonely), we advise that service users answer these measures without help. When this is not possible, it is preferable to use the same method of presenting the questions and collecting answers each time the measure is used. Interpreters/translators assisting service users with literacy or language difficulties should try to keep closely to the instructions, questions and scoring options (without adding anything new).

See separate survey evaluation forms on p.18 and p.19.

## Best practice in service evaluation

These measures are recommended to assist with service evaluation: they will help you to quantify change in loneliness associated with your service.

Service users should be clear that completing the measures is voluntary, responses will be kept confidential and anonymous, and used only for the purpose of service evaluation and improvement.

How often should loneliness be measured?

To be able to examine the potential impact of your service, you will need to have measures of loneliness taken from each service user before they start taking part in your program (sometimes called 'baseline' data) and again (typically several weeks or months later) when the program is completed. To determine if the effects of your program last, optional follow-up data can be taken at a later date (several months later).

Figure 1 Best-Practice Data Collection

Data point 1 — **Baseline Data**

Data point 2 — **End of Service Data**

Optional data point 3 — **Follow-Up Data**
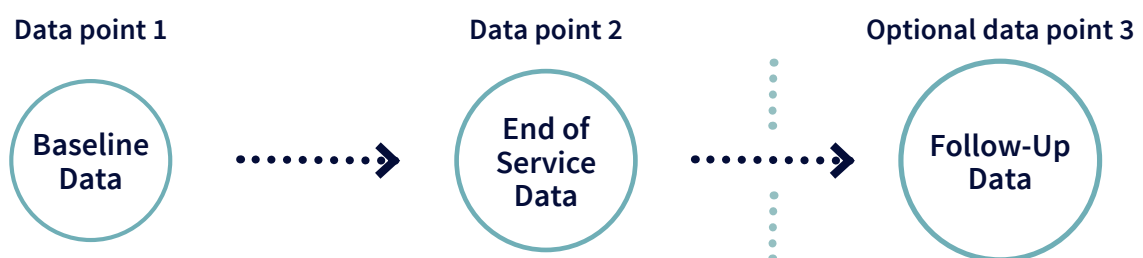
Advantages and disadvantages of recommended measures

It is important that you are aware of the strengths and weaknesses of the measures you use to evaluate your service.

Weaknesses of the recommended measures:

- People vary in how they interpret the response options. For example, someone with a score of 14 may not be twice as lonely as someone with a score of 7; though we can be confident that one is lonelier than the other.

- Direct, single-item measures may not be sensitive to changes in loneliness over time.

- Direct questioning about loneliness may lead to under-reporting, due to the stigma associated with admitting to feeling lonely.

- The questions do not assess how long loneliness persists, and do not assess the intensity of loneliness felt.

- In-depth information about the lived experience of loneliness is not provided, including the reasons why someone became lonely.

- The recommended measures of loneliness were developed and standardised in white, Anglo-American cultures and may not fully capture the experience of loneliness in culturally diverse groups.

Develop a common outcomes language

Using consistent measures of loneliness across different services provides a common outcomes 'language' that can help all organisations to share, compare and learn from each other's achievements.

Strengths of the recommended measures:

- They are brief and easy to administer, making them easy to use even when time and resources are limited.

- The UCLA-LS is a valid and reliable measure of loneliness. The value of using standardised, high quality measures to evaluate services is increasingly recognised as best practice.

- Multi-item measures may be more sensitive to change in loneliness over time than single-item measures.

- The measures have a strong track record for use in the general community, with younger and older adults, and in a variety of settings.

- Translated versions of the UCLA-LS have been found to be valid and reliable measures of loneliness in a wide range of countries and cultures.

- Quantitative measures of loneliness can help you to improve the quality of your service for reducing loneliness, by establishing baseline data for monitoring and evaluating change.

The process of measurement: Tips before you begin

1 Planning and preparation

- Be aware of the relevant ethical principles, legislation, national/professional standards and whether ethical review is required for your measurement and evaluation activities[1].

- Develop and implement policies and practices accordingly.

2 Understand what can influence loneliness scores

- Loneliness is influenced by many different risk factors[3] including people who experience poor physical health and mental health. Loneliness scores could be higher in these risk groups, so you should be aware that your outcomes may not be comparable to other general community samples.

- Collecting additional information about factors that can increase risk of loneliness may improve your service evaluation.

- Remember, service users loneliness may also change as a result of factors unrelated to your program or activity.

[1]https://www.nhmrc.gov.au/about-us/resources/ethical-considerations-quality-assurance-and-evaluation-activities

3 Mapping the process

- Maintaining privacy: how and where will service users complete the measures?

- Maintaining data confidentiality and security: how and where will the data (i.e. answers) from each service user be stored? What steps will be used to keep personal information confidential? How long must data be stored? Who 'owns' the data? Who will have access to it and under what circumstances? Who is responsible for data security?

- How will you determine the cost of evaluating your loneliness program or activity?

- Develop, implement, and refine relevant policies on privacy, confidentiality and security accordingly.

4 Deciding what to measure (and how)

- Implementing co-design: how can you engage people with a lived experience of loneliness in your service evaluation?

- Organisations tackling loneliness often collect a range of data to evaluate their outcomes. What measures of loneliness best suit your program? Do you need to supplement the recommended measures with other tools?

- What funder requirements and costs need to be considered? Will service user characteristics (e.g., hearing/vision loss) influence selection or administration of measures?

5 Helping your staff

- Collecting high quality data: what capacity, skills and resources exist (or need development) for data collection and evaluation? For example, do staff know about standardisation of service evaluation? Have staff been trained in responding to service user queries?

- Understanding staff attitudes: do staff see value in evaluating your organisations' program to reduce loneliness? Have systems been put in place to assist staff if service users feel upset or need more help?

- Implement professional development and training on a regular basis.

Additional measurements

Incorporating additional measures into your outcomes framework

While this guidance is focused on recommended measures of loneliness, your service may have other goals as well, such as improving subjective well-being. We know that some things may be protective against loneliness, such as having good access to strong social support networks, transport, and being employed. Asking about these factors could help to improve understanding of why loneliness usually comes and goes, but sometimes becomes chronic.

In the points that follow, we outline some recommended additional questions to consider in evaluating your service.

Demographic Indicators

It can be helpful to ask some questions about your service users, so that you have some understanding of their personal background, living arrangements and factors that may make them more vulnerable to chronic loneliness.

These questions could include information about:

- Age
- Gender
- Marital status/living as a couple
- Number of people living in the household
- Renting or home owner
- Poor mental and physical health
- Disability or limiting conditions
- Financial status
- Migration status (with/without family, and length of time in Australia)
- Education level
- Employment.

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What do we do with the data?

We recommend measuring loneliness to assist with service evaluation. After completing recommended measures, it can be useful to give service users the opportunity to talk about their feelings of loneliness, ask questions, or make any comments. This could be done informally, through a follow-up conversation, or in more formal ways, through qualitative semi-structured interviews. It can also sometimes be helpful to remind people of other supports available, including their GP.

Further information on how to use the recommended loneliness measures to evaluate your service can be found in Ending Loneliness Together (2021). *A Guide to Evaluating Loneliness Outcomes for Community Organisations.*

References

1. Australian Psychological Society. Australian Loneliness Report. Melbourne 2018.

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Appendix - Worked Example

The UCLA Loneliness Scale - 4-Item Version

Instructions

The following statements describe how people sometimes feel. For each statement, please indicate how often you feel the way described.

For example: If you were asked the question '*How often do you feel happy?*', if you *never* felt happy, you would circle '1', while if you *always* felt happy, you would circle '4'.

Never 1	Rarely 2	Sometimes 3	Always 4

	Please circle one response for each question			
	Never	**Rarely**	**Sometimes**	**Always**
1.* How often do you feel that you are "in tune" with the people around you?	1	(2)	3	4
2. How often do you feel that no one really knows you well?	1	2	3	(4)
3.* How often do you feel you can find companionship when you want it?	(1)	2	3	4
4. How often do you feel that people are around you but not with you?	1	2	(3)	4

How to score this example

- First reverse-score items with an asterisk (i.e., 1=4, 2=3, 3=2, 4=1), then sum all scores.
- **Item 1: score 2 becomes 3.**
- Item 2: score 4 stays 4.
- **Item 3: score 1 becomes 4.**
- Item 4: score 3 stays 3.
- Sum of scores = 14.

The total loneliness score in this example is 14 out of a maximum possible score of 16.

Service Evaluation Form

Program Name:
Date:

Instructions

The following statements describe how people sometimes feel. For each statement, please indicate how often you feel the way described.

For example: If you were asked the question '*How often do you feel happy?*', if you *never* felt happy, you would circle '1', while if you *always* felt happy, you would circle '4'.

Questionnaire	Please circle one response for each question			
	Never	**Rarely**	**Sometimes**	**Always**
1.* How often do you feel that you are "in tune" with the people around you?	1	2	3	4
2. How often do you feel that no one really knows you well?	1	2	3	4
3.* How often do you feel you can find companionship when you want it?	1	2	3	4
4. How often do you feel that people are around you but not with you?	1	2	3	4

Office use: For instructions on how to score, see Ending Loneliness Together (2021). A Guide to Measuring Loneliness for Community Organisations (p.7).

Service Evaluation Form

Program Name:
Date:

What is loneliness?

Loneliness is an unpleasant or distressing feeling of a lack of connection to other people and a desire for more, or more satisfying, social relationships. Loneliness is not the same as being socially isolated, which is an observable reduction in the number or frequency of social contacts that you have (e.g. living alone; talking to family or friends less than once a week).

Instructions

The next question asks how often you feel lonely.

Please tick one box:					
	Often/ always	**Some of the time**	**Occasionally**	**Hardly ever**	**Never**
How often do you feel lonely?					

Contributors

This document is authorised and published by Ending Loneliness Together (ELT).

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