

# 34, MARRIED, SUCCESSFUL...

AND LONELY



*It's the modern health issue that nobody wants to talk about, yet it can hit at any age and be especially hard at Christmas. Three readers tell their stories of isolation and how they escaped it*

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**I**f you had to think of the most pressing health issues we face in the UK at the moment, what would they be? Cancer, maybe? Or heart disease? Well, research has shown it's a lifestyle issue – loneliness – that can increase the risk of premature death by 30%. This makes it as dangerous to health as obesity. And don't be fooled into thinking that isolation is the preserve of the elderly: a report by the Office for National Statistics this year showed that nearly 10% of 16-24 year olds admit to feeling lonely, and women are more likely than men to experience it.

Such is the scale of the issue that the Government has even appointed a Minister for Loneliness, Tracey Crouch, who has been tasked with tackling the problem sweeping the country. It seems that an increasing number of us are facing this issue because more of us than ever are living alone and, of course, we're connecting more online than in person these days. Plus, loneliness is a serious taboo, so millions are suffering in silence.

But the good news is that there are lots of really effective ways to tackle it, as these three inspiring readers from different generations show. Here, they open up about their own battles with loneliness and how they emerged with a new sense of strength and purpose.

## 'FINDING MY TRIBE CHANGED MY LIFE'

Catherine Lux, 27, is a digital content creator from Surrey



'I thought university would be all about the social life, with the odd lecture thrown in for good measure! But the reality couldn't have been more different. I'd been living in Perth, Australia, for a few years – we'd transferred there because of my dad's work – but, at 18, I decided to go to university in London.

After a bad experience with alcohol in Sydney, I'd stopped drinking – so when

I went to some of the freshers' events and saw everyone boozing until they were sick, I realised it wasn't my scene. Plus, I was very self-conscious – I didn't feel I fitted in with the other students.

So, instead of hitting the town, I stayed indoors, on Skype with my Aussie friends and my boyfriend, who was still back there.

My life revolved around being alone in a tiny box room, emerging mainly for lectures. It was awful. I'm actually an extrovert and thrive on being around other people, so loneliness hit me really hard.

After nine months of sobbing down the phone to my dad, he encouraged me to sign up to a social club he knew in London. The thought of going to that first event, an evening drinks do, terrified me. I wanted to curl up and cry. But I forced myself to go because something had to change.

When I walked into the party, two people came up to me immediately and started

*“The thought of going to that first event terrified me... but something had to change”*

chatting. They invited me to another party a few weeks later and I gradually started going to more events – and my social life snowballed from there. It was such a confidence boost to realise I could make friends here after months of feeling so miserable. Plus, a lot of this new group were nearly 10 years older than me and more mature than the uni crowd, which made a difference. I'd found my “tribe”.

I split up with my boyfriend at the end of my second year and ended up staying in London. So, while life is nothing like I imagined, it couldn't be better. I have a wide friendship circle, a great job and my social life is so busy that I write a blog about all the bars, restaurants and clubs I go to.

My advice for anyone going through what I did? New friends aren't going to come and find you. You have to get out there and look for them!

## 'THE KINDNESS OF OTHER MUMS SAVED ME'

Sonal Keay, 39, is a criminal barrister and mum of two from London



'In my old life, work always came first. As a criminal barrister in London, I was in court all day and my evenings were spent preparing for the next case. So, when I had my first baby four years ago, those early weeks were a real shock. I'd been in a male-dominated environment for such a long time that all my friends were men – and all of them were still working.

Obviously, I loved my baby, and I have a very supportive husband, but he was at work, too, so daytimes were very lonely. Plus, I had no idea how to relate to other mums. And yet there was something about having a daughter that made me feel an urge to develop strong connections with other mothers – I realised that I needed some support.

I questioned myself constantly – how was I going to make motherhood work? How could I be a driven, successful barrister, but also a gentle and loving mother? Before children, I was in control of everything, but afterwards I began to feel I was in control of precious little. I'd lost my sense of self and that made me feel terribly alone.

My lowest point came when I climbed into bed and refused to move for a few days. It was then that I realised I could either wallow in my loneliness or do something about it. So I started going out with the baby in the pram. The fresh air and exercise calmed both of us.

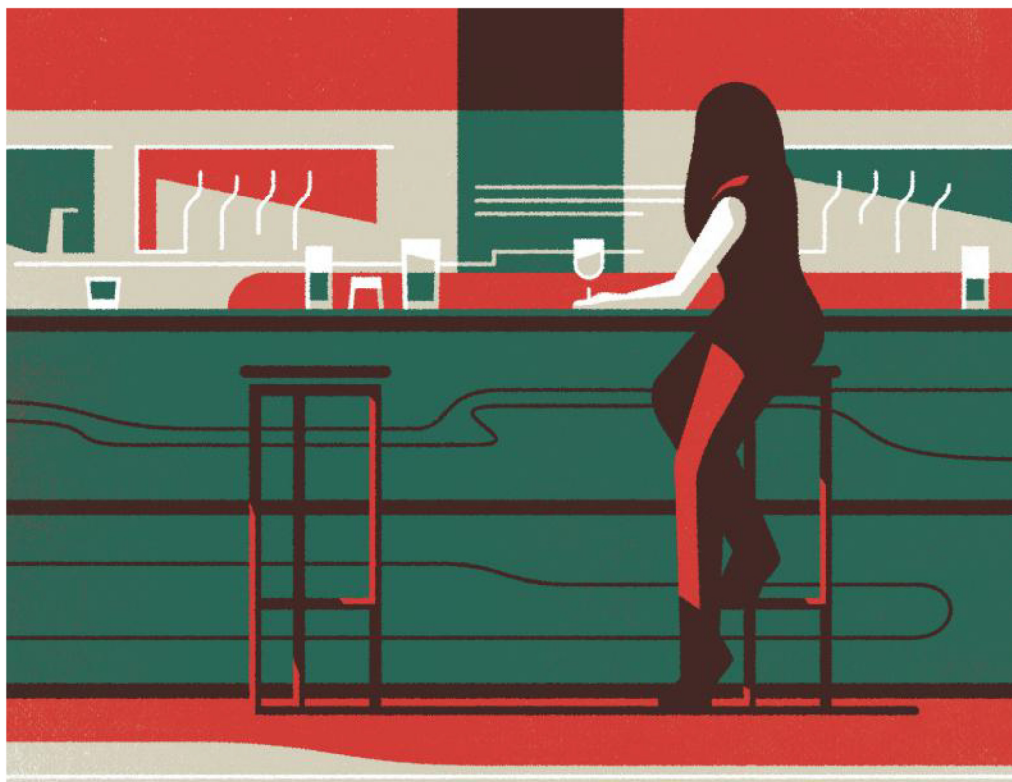
A few months later, I really felt I had to get out and meet other mothers, so I joined a local mums' group. I'd attended baby groups before, but I'd felt like a fish out of water. Sitting and chatting about babies just wasn't me! However, this time, although I'd had my reservations, I instantly clicked with the founder, Amy. Through our conversations she could tell I was feeling lost, so she suggested I run the group. Suddenly I felt like the old me →

again: chairing meetings, sorting membership fees, running events and overseeing the group's magazine. And I enjoyed being around the other women – most were working mums and they showed me that you don't have to compromise your identity just because you have a child.

The friendships I've built up mean so much to me, and the other women have taught me such a lot about how to be a mother but still be "me".

Still, I felt guilty about going back to work (which now involves the law and running a luxury silk pillowcase business). But it's important to be happy and to have a purpose in life – for me, that is work.

I also felt it would set a good example to my kids to do what mattered to me. My advice to other mothers in my situation? Don't be dismissive of mums' groups. Keep trying them until you find like-minded women. Once you do, you'll be surrounded by so much support, empathy and generosity. My loneliness really was cured by the kindness of other women.'



*“Volunteering has saved me. I love chatting to the customers and I feel needed again – it’s filled a big gap in my life”*

## ‘HELPING OTHERS GOT ME THROUGH MY GRIEF’

**Margaret Jones, 74, is a grandmother and charity worker from Peterborough**



'When my husband, Patrick, died in February 2012, it was such a shock. He became ill very suddenly with pneumonia and then he was gone. We'd been married for 41 years and had done everything together. We'd also lost our eldest son, Colin, 12 years before, so his death came as a double blow.

People were very kind at first. They'd pop round to make sure I was OK. But after a few weeks the phone calls stopped

and then there was nothing. My son, Alan, lives nearby with his wife, Ruth, and my four-year-old granddaughter, Ellie, and he was brilliant. But everyone else, understandably, was getting on with their lives. As the months passed, the house was so quiet that I'd put the radio on in every room just to drown out the emptiness. I don't have any other relatives locally, and because Patrick and I did everything together we didn't have that many friends, so I felt very alone.

When the annual summer fête came around in July at Thorpe Hall – our local Sue Ryder hospice – I plucked up the courage to go along with a friend. Then, when she cancelled at the last minute, I nearly didn't go; I'm from a generation that never went to things on our own. But Patrick and I had gone every year

and I didn't want to miss it. So I said to myself, "You will go and you will enjoy it".

It was hard and I felt nervous, but when I arrived I bumped into some old colleagues from my nursing days, which really lifted my mood and boosted my confidence.

I don't know what got into me, but I called in at the Sue Ryder shop on the way home and asked if they needed volunteers. They did! When I got home, I thought: "How am I going to cope? I haven't worked in years!" But volunteering there has saved me. I love chatting to the customers and I feel needed again. The team is like a second family – it's filled a big gap in my life.

Of course, I still have difficult days, but I'm so grateful to have had Colin and Patrick in my life. Patrick used to say: "Tomorrow is another day", and he was right. I have so much to look forward to.' →



## HOW TO CONNECT



*Clinical psychologist and columnist for The Telegraph, Linda Blair, shares her top tips for conquering loneliness*

**1 Aim to put your passions first**  
 'Seek out things you love to do rather than actively joining clubs and doing courses in order to find new people to meet. When you sign up for something you're passionate about – whether it's a book club or a dance class – you will almost certainly meet new and like-minded people.'

**2 Escape your mobile phone**  
 'Social media is a great tool for finding out what's happening in your area and as a way to meet new people – but the thing it can't do is stop you feeling lonely. Our brains need real, human connections and not just a phone screen!'

**3 Become a good listener**  
 'When you're in a new social situation, ask questions and listen well. People will want to be around you if you show an interest in them. The tendency when we get nervous is to fill in the pauses and do too much talking. Don't be scared off by a little silence.'

**4 Be kind to others**  
 'If you're facing Christmas Day alone, why not consider volunteering at a local homeless shelter? If you give of yourself in a place where people have nothing, you'll feel as though you've used your time well and will feel better about yourself.'



## MOOD-LIFTERS

If you're feeling a little low, try these self-care boosts

Still-life photography Pxeleyes



Studies have shown that a warm bath or shower can be comforting if you've been lacking social warmth. So up the feel-good factor with **Puressentiel Rest & Relax Bath Shower\***, £9.99/999 points (100ml).



Not only does exercise help increase the happy hormone, serotonin, but just being among others can ease loneliness. Keep track of your progress with **Fitbit Charge 2 Special Edition** in **Lavender/Rose Gold** (**Boots.com only**). See online for price.



Listening to music before a nerve-wracking event has been shown to help us relax. Try popping your favourite track on with **New Fresh 'n Rebel Lace Earbuds** in **Ruby**, £19.99/1,999 points, before you head out to that first meet-up.



Two-thirds of women say perfume helps them to feel positive. In other research, freshly mown grass was considered most stress-relieving. Get the benefits of both by spritzing **Impulse Body Mist** in **White Lace + Muddy Grass**, £6/600 points (150ml).

\*Available in selected stores.