



Taking on social issues through business:
Loneliness and social isolation (Part 1)

Statistics, definitions, and social impacts of loneliness and social isolation



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Introduction

Refrain from going out unless necessary, and when you do, wear a mask and maintain a sufficient distance between yourself and others.

Between 2020 and 2021, when COVID-19 swept the world, a state of emergency was declared in Japan which, while not a strict lockdown, robbed people of social connections that they had previously taken for granted. As this semi-mandatory ‘remote lifestyle’ dragged on, many people experienced feelings of loneliness, regardless of whether they lived alone.

This experience, which has shown us that loneliness is not exclusive to people living alone, can also be said to have been an opportunity for all of us living in society to come face-to-face with the fact that there is no way to completely shut out loneliness from our lives.

According to a Cabinet Office survey conducted in 2018, the number of broadly defined ‘recluses’ in Japan, including both semi-reclusive people who go out only for their hobbies; people who leave their homes only, for example, to visit convenience stores near their homes; people who leave their rooms but never leave their homes; and people who rarely leave their rooms, is estimated to be around 613,000.¹

According to another recent government report², the number of suicides in 2022 was 21,881, an increase of 4.2% over the previous year. Breaking this figure down by gender, the number of suicides among men, which was about 2.1 the number of suicides among women, increased for the first time in 13 years, and the number of suicides among women increased for the third consecutive year.

A survey on solitary deaths, covering data from April 2015 to March 2022, reveals the average age of both

men and women who die alone to be 62, which is much younger than the average life expectancy, and that 40% of all solitary deaths occur in the working-age population.³

Data from the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare also reveals that the number of child abuse cases handled by the 225 child guidance centres across the country in FY 2021 (April 2021–March 2022) was 207,660 which is the highest number ever recorded.⁴

Reclusive lifestyles, suicide, solitary death, and abuse—loneliness and social isolation are two of the factors that can contribute to these tragedies, as well as health problems, fraudulent business practices, drug addiction, and other problems. Looking at the number of people in these situations, even accounting for some overlap, it is evident that a significant number of people are affected by loneliness and social isolation.

There is a theory that loneliness and social isolation have existed since humans first chose to live in groups and collaborate to make their lives safer, more efficient, and otherwise better. In other words, it is thought that social problems have existed for as long as society itself.

Loneliness and social isolation are issues that concern all of humanity, regardless of factors such as gender, age, or social status. Therefore, as a symbol of human history, we have chosen an image of the Earth for the cover of the first report in this series.

In this series of reports, we seek to gain a deeper understanding of loneliness and social isolation, while also examining what businesses can do to help.

Please note that in this series, we refer to isolation as ‘social in line with the UN and EU.

1 Cabinet Office 「特集2 長期化するひきこもりの実態」 Accessed May 29, 2023. (https://www8.cao.go.jp/youth/whitepaper/r01honpen/s0_2.html)

2 Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare/National Police Agency 「令和4年中における自殺の状況」 Accessed May 29, 2023. (<https://www.npa.go.jp/safetylife/seianki/jisatsu/R05/R4jisatsunojoukyou.pdf>)

3 The Small Amount & Short Term Insurance Association of Japan, ‘第7回孤独死現状レポート.’ Accessed May 29, 2023. (<https://www.shougakutanki.jp/general/info/2022/kodokushi.pdf>)

4 Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, ‘令和3年度 児童相談所での児童虐待相談対応件数.’ Accessed May 29, 2023. (https://www.cfa.go.jp/assets/contents/node/basic_page/field_ref_resources/a176de99-390e-4065-a7fb-fe569ab2450c/1cdcdbd45/20230401_policies_jidougyakutai_07.pdf)



1. Concepts and definitions

Although the terms ‘loneliness’ and ‘social isolation’ are widely known, it is unclear whether we all share a common understanding of the definitions of those terms.

According to the results of the National Survey on Loneliness and Isolation⁵ conducted by the Cabinet Secretariat in December 2022, approximately 60% of respondents answered ‘rarely’ or ‘never’ when directly asked, ‘How often do you feel lonely?’ On the other hand, when asked indirect questions such as, ‘Do you ever feel like you are lacking connections with others?’ ‘Do you ever feel left out?’ or ‘Do you ever feel isolated from others?’, only about 50% answered ‘rarely’ or ‘never’. This 10% difference in the results indicates that individuals’ understanding of loneliness and social isolation is unclearly defined, leading to variations in answers depending on how they are asked.

It is also thought that the same person’s answers to these questions may vary depending on whether they are feeling lonely or isolated at the time. Those who answered that they ‘rarely’ or ‘never’ feel lonely at the time of this survey did not necessarily feel that way ten minutes earlier or later, and those who answered that they ‘always’ or ‘sometimes’ feel lonely may also have experienced times when loneliness was not a conscious presence in their lives.

While several authorities have developed definitions for the concepts of ‘loneliness’ and ‘social isolation’, there is no one standard definition that is accepted throughout the world (Figure 1).

However, based on some of the common ideas that these definitions share, we believe it is possible to define these two concepts generally as follows.

Loneliness:

This is a subjective state that is caused by having fewer social interactions than a specific individual would like to have.

Social isolation:

This is a measurable objective state that can be determined by the number of points of contact a person has with society.

In other words, loneliness is an emotion experienced by each person as an individual. One person can’t judge whether another is lonely; this can only be determined by the individual.

Social isolation, on the other hand, is a status that can be measured by others. Even if a person feels lonely, that person may not be socially isolated if they do not fit the defined measurement criteria.

Thus, while loneliness and social isolation are related to one another, one does not necessarily accompany the other—in other words, not everyone who is socially isolated feels lonely, and not everyone who feels lonely is socially isolated.

Please also note that we were only able to confirm the definitions published by six public authorities, including Japan, online. These authorities are all based in societies that place great importance on 1) individualism, with a high awareness of individual human rights, and 2) capitalism, with an emphasis on economic activities, and may therefore be particularly sensitive to the social impact of loneliness and social isolation.

⁵ Cabinet Secretariat, ‘孤独・孤立の実態把握に関する全国調査（令和4年）調査結果のポイント,’ Accessed May 30, 2023. (https://www.cas.go.jp/jp/seisaku/kodoku_koritsu_taisaku/zittai_tyosa/r4_zenkoku_tyosa/tyosakekka_point.pdf)

Figure 1: Definitions of loneliness and social isolation⁶

Country/Region/ Institution	Definition	
	Loneliness	Social isolation
Japan Cabinet Secretariat	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Generally a subjective concept, referring to the mental state of feeling alone and sometimes including feelings of loneliness 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • An objective concept, referring to a state of no or little social connection or support
World Health Organization (WHO)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The painful subjective feeling—or ‘social pain’ –that results from a discrepancy between desired and actual social connections. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The objective state of having a small network of kin and non-kin relationships and thus few or infrequent interaction with others.
EU: European Commission	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • While different definitions of loneliness exist, it is most commonly defined as a negative subjective experience of low quality and/or quantity of one’s social network. • Emotional loneliness refers to the feeling of a lack of a meaningful relationship with a significant other, or a close friend. • Social loneliness is the experience of an insufficient broader social network, including friends, neighbors, or colleagues. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A key indicator of social isolation is the lack of potential to get help if needed.
UK: Age UK	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A subjective feeling about the gap between a person’s desired levels of social contact and their actual level of social contact • Loneliness is never desired and lessening these feelings can take a long time 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • An objective measure of the number of contacts that people have: about the quantity and not quality of relationships • Can be overcome relatively quickly by increasing the number of people they are in contact with
US: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The feeling of being alone, regardless of the amount of social contact 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A lack of social connections
Australia: Australian Institute of Health and Welfare	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some definitions include loneliness as a form of social isolation (Hawthorne 2006) • An emotional reaction to social isolation (Heinrich and Gullone 2006) • The two concepts do not necessarily co-exist—a person may be socially isolated but not lonely, or socially connected but feel lonely (Australian Psychological Society 2018; Relationships Australia 2018) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Seen as the state of having minimal contact with others (Peplau and Perlman 1982)

Source: Table created by PwC based on information provided by the respective organisations

6 WHO: World Health Organization, ‘Social isolation and loneliness among older people.’
 EU: (Loneliness) European Commission, ‘Defining loneliness.’ Accessed May 31, 2023. (https://joint-research-centre.ec.europa.eu/loneliness/defining-loneliness_en)
 (Social isolation) Eurostat, ‘Social participation and social isolation.’ Accessed July 3, 2023. (<https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/documents/3888793/5847145/KS-RA-10-014-EN.PDF.pdf/e9a887c8-1b36-43cf-bb63-1bd62ac87ed8?t=1414779640000>)
 UK: Age UK, ‘Loneliness and isolation - understanding the difference and why it matters.’ Accessed May 31, 2023. (<https://www.ageuk.org.uk/our-impact/policy-research/loneliness-research-and-resources/loneliness-isolation-understanding-the-difference-why-it-matters/>)
 US: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, ‘Loneliness and Social Isolation Linked to Serious Health Conditions.’ Accessed May 31, 2023. (<https://www.cdc.gov/AGING/PUBLICATIONS/FEATURES/LONELY-OLDER-ADULTS.HTML#:~:TEXT=LONELINESS%20IS%20THE%20FEELING%20OF,LONELY%20WITHOUT%20BEING%20SOCIAL%20ISOLATED>)
 Australia: Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2021. ‘Social isolation and loneliness.’ Accessed July 29, 2023. (<https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/australias-welfare/social-isolation-and-loneliness-covid-pandemic>)

2. Social impacts of loneliness and social isolation

Loneliness and social isolation are research topics that we expect to receive even more attention around the world going forward. It is already well known that loneliness and social isolation negatively impact mental and physical health, and studies conducted in various countries have concluded that people with poor health are more likely to feel lonely.

In recent years, a wider range of academic disciplines have begun to study loneliness and social isolation. For example, studies and articles have been published that calculate the economic losses caused by these problems.

In 2007, the New Economics Foundation published a report which calculated the losses incurred by employers in the UK in relation to loneliness and social isolation at 2.5 billion GBP⁷. In the US, this cost is estimated to be around 154 billion USD, and employees experiencing loneliness miss about 5.7 days of work per year more than others⁸.

Awareness of the negative impact of increased loneliness on economic activities throughout society has risen in recent years, particularly in the wake of COVID-19. Amidst these circumstances, the UK government appointed its first Minister for Loneliness in January 2018 and announced its first loneliness policy⁹ in October of the same year. To improve the quality of life of patients and reduce demand on the National Health Service (NHS), this policy set forth the target that, by 2023, all general practitioners (GPs) should be able to refer lonely patients to community activities and volunteer services. This initiative, for which 21.8 million GBP was allocated, has been underway since then as a collaborative effort by various ministries.

In 2021, Japan became the second country in the world to appoint a minister of loneliness and social isolation, and the world is watching its progress closely.

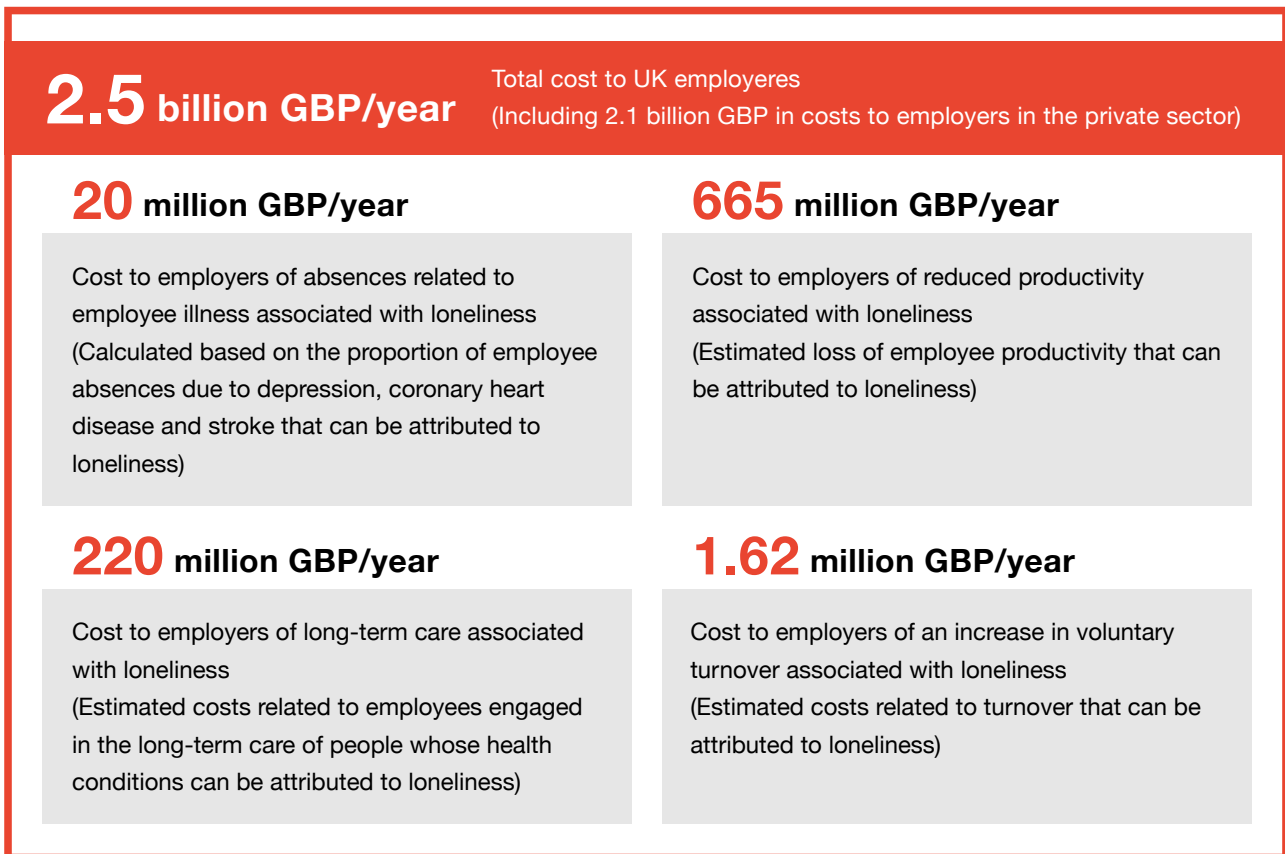


7 New Economics Foundation. 2017. 'The cost of loneliness to UK employers.' Accessed May 31, 2023. (<https://hewconomics.org/2017/02/cost-loneliness-uk-employers>)

8 Emerald Insight. 2022. 'Loneliness influences avoidable absenteeism and turnover intention reported by adult workers in the United States.'

9 UK Government. 2018. 'PM launches Government's first loneliness strategy.' Accessed June 1, 2023. (<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/pm-launches-governments-first-loneliness-strategy>)

Figure 2: Loneliness-related costs incurred by UK employers



Source: New Economics Foundation¹⁰

¹⁰ New Economics Foundation. 2017. 'The cost of loneliness to UK employers.' Accessed May 31, 2023. (<https://neweconomics.org/2017/02/cost-loneliness-uk-employers>)



Conclusion

In this first report in our new series, we examined the seriousness of loneliness and social isolation as social problems through approximate figures on the number of affected people in Japan, definitions of the concepts, and the impact of these issues on business in the UK and the US.

In our next report, entitled 'Causes and effects of loneliness and social isolation and public- and private-sector initiatives', we examine factors that can cause loneliness and social isolation, the views of various authorities on the effects of loneliness and social isolation, and some examples of public and private sector initiatives and activities both inside and outside of Japan.

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