
2. TOOLS AND ADVICE FOR DETECTING LONELINESS

WEIGHTING THE SIGNS

So far, we have seen that loneliness has **multiple causes** and analysed how it can have **consequences on various areas**, which means that to tackle loneliness is to promote the **prevention** of other (psychological, health, social) issues. We have also examined the **risk factors** for loneliness and explored some of the components that make it **difficult to detect** (mainly subjectivity and the stigma surrounding the issue).

One of these components, **attention to subjectivity**, or how the person feels about and assesses the situation (beyond any presence of risk factors), is absolutely fundamental for person-focused loneliness detection. The warning signs for possible presence of loneliness are a key element: when recognising the protective factors present, when sharpening of the senses during the assistance process, and when creating populational loneliness risk maps. Nonetheless, these signs must be weighted differently in our assessments, and we need to **remember that what the person is expressing to us** is a decisive verification element.

Next, we will look at the **signs, clues, warnings** or **tools** we can consider in our everyday practice, linking them to *elements of communication* (direct and indirect expressions, other paralinguistic elements) that can emerge in *different areas of life* and to aspects of *service characteristics and procedures*.

The recommendations presented here may be more or less pertinent or adapted to our practice depending on the nature of the service that we provide, and our professional role as **part of a multidisciplinary community network**. Regardless, it is important to take them into account overall in order to facilitate networking and referrals, considering all elements that can be observed from different angles of specialisation.



SIGNS LINKED TO ASPECTS OF COMMUNICATION

Active listening and the creation of a climate that encourages emotional expression are key when dealing with manifestations of loneliness, as they ensure that the person expressing them can speak openly and have opportunities to communicate and the person receiving them (in this case, the professional) can be an attentive, available recipient who is open to the message.

The central role played by **listening** in loneliness detection is key, as (Martínez, 2022):

- It enables us to consider **subjectivity**.
- It helps us to **raise the alarm** based on implicit expression.
- It invites us to **ask** if the person feels lonely, giving us the opportunity to normalise tackling the issue directly during interaction.

Active listening and the creation of a climate that encourages emotional expression are key when dealing with manifestations of loneliness.

As a rule, we must keep our eyes and ears open and be willing to look, listen and make the most of opportunities to investigate once signs are given. We will now reflect on some of these communication elements.

A. DIRECT MANIFESTATIONS OF LONELINESS

As we have seen, loneliness is hard to express directly, but it can emerge tacitly, and this manifestation can act as a cut-off point to validate the detection of loneliness. Statements like 'I feel all alone', 'I didn't think I'd feel this lonely at a time like this', or 'the loneliness is getting to me' are direct, real expressions we can come across in the assistance context. Though, as indicated above, the emergence of these direct statements or other similar declarations during interactions is not always frequent, and if they do arise, we can deal with the situation and integrate an approach to loneliness into our intervention in various ways.

WHEN A DIRECT EXPRESSION OCCURS, WE CAN:

- **Give an empathetic response that validates their feelings** and shows that we care about the issue, that we are willing to work on it together.
- **Investigate further to verify it**, if appropriate. For example, we can ask about the frequency and duration of these feelings. Sometimes, asking about emotions out of nowhere, out of context in the conversation, can be invasive, or inappropriate due to the nature of the request being handled. When a direct expression occurs, it is important to take the opportunity to investigate it.

- **Offer, propose, guide to:** a certain service, space or programme that can deal with the situation, if the moment and our professional role are appropriate for this. We can alternatively indicate that we are looking at this issue and working on it, if the person would like support. To this end, the website *Barcelona Against Loneliness*¹¹ offers various resources for combating loneliness: municipal services and programmes, municipal facilities and spaces, initiatives developed by social organisations, etc.

B. INDIRECT MANIFESTATIONS OF LONELINESS

In the face of a subjective issue surrounded by heavy stigma, opening our eyes and ears helps us to receive messages of loneliness that are not explicit, direct or defining. Here, the indirect communication of loneliness through other manifestations becomes key.

We have provided some hypothetical indirect expressions, organised according to the sphere to which they refer: personal, home environment, close daily interactions or community, all of which are defined in the *Guide for prevention, detection and support for teenagers and young people in situations of loneliness*,¹² by Barcelona City Council (2021).

These expressions may come from people of various age groups throughout their life cycle and in different situations.

11. <https://ajuntament.barcelona.cat/dretssocials/ca/barcelona-contra-la-soledat>

12. https://ajuntament.barcelona.cat/dretssocials/sites/default/files/arxius-documents/guia_soledat_joves_2021.pdf



Loneliness is a subjective issue surrounded by heavy stigma.

Opening our eyes and ears helps us to receive messages of loneliness that are not explicit, direct or defining.

The indirect communication of loneliness through other manifestations becomes key.

IN TERMS OF... INDIRECT EXPRESSION

PERSONAL SPHERE	LOSS	'All my friends and family have died in the last few years'
	COMMUNICATION	'I don't have anyone to talk to. I spend hours alone in my room without chatting with anyone'
	ROUTINES, USES OF TIME	'I spend a lot of time at home alone with the baby. Days can pass without me talking with an adult. I miss it'
	LIFE PLANS	'Without work it's really hard to have a decent home, and without a home we can't even think about having kids. I've always wanted them and now I feel empty, disconnected'
HOME ENVIRONMENT	SUPPORT, CARE	'I spend all day taking care of my mother, without any support. It's exhausting and I have no energy. I've given up practically everything I used to do before'
	ISOLATION	'There's no lift in our building, so I haven't been outside in a long time. If no one visits me, I'm always alone'
	VIOLENCE	'My dad is always really angry, and sometimes I get scared. He shouts at me and I just need someone to listen to me and hug me'
	INSTITUTIONALISATION	'There are a lot of people with dementia at the home and I barely speak to anyone. I had a friend but she died in the summer. I don't feel like building relationships in here any more'
CLOSE DAILY INTERACTIONS	STIGMA	'When you have a disability, people leave. It's not easy finding a partner when you have a disability'
	SOCIAL MEDIA	'Sometimes watching YouTubers makes me feel worse. It makes me feel like I never talk to anyone in real life' 'When I see everyone doing things with friends on Facebook, and I'm always at home, I feel like a bit of a failure'
	WORK	'I've changed job so many times and my hours are so all over the place that since I arrived in the city, I haven't got remotely close to anyone at all. I don't know who to turn to'
	PLEASURE	'I retired just before the pandemic and I don't dare to do any activities out of fear. I was looking forward to this time when I could do things and now I've been feeling bored and isolated for two years'
	PEER GROUP	I would like to have more friends but I don't fit in, no one invites me to do things and I spend a lot of time alone'
COMMUNITY DIMENSION	NEIGHBOURS	'I don't have anyone to give a spare house key to' 'The neighbours have changed a lot, the neighbourhood isn't the same. A lot of the shops I used to visit every day have disappeared. I don't have that neighbour who's lived there for years and you can rely on any more'
	SERVICES	'I really like talking to you, I want to chat. Don't hang up on me' 'I make the most of the time the carer is here to talk. If she doesn't come, I don't talk to anyone all day'
	ACCESSIBILITY	'There's been construction work going on in my neighbourhood for years and I find it hard to get to places. I ended up spending afternoons alone because moving around the streets doesn't feel safe'
	RACISM	'When I go in a shop I feel like they are watching me. They always think I'm going to steal, so I buy something quickly and leave. That makes me feel rejected everywhere I go'

Source: Original.

The presence of **these manifestations** of relational loneliness (in terms of suffering linked to the state of the person's network), as well as references to sadness, emptiness or exclusion (as they do not feel part of anything), **are invitations to talk about loneliness** when it is difficult. This is an opportunity that opens a gap in the assistance context for investigating further without invading or forcing.

Knowing if we should **ask anything else**, if it is the right time to offer or suggest a resource or if the person simply needs us to listen and offer warmth **depends on the relational and communicative context that has been created**, and each professional will act in accordance with opportunities and their competencies. We must pay attention to the presence of these words, though, as they open up the path to detection with care (Martínez, 2022).

C. THE RHYTHMS AND SILENCES OF THE STORY

Paralinguistic elements can also provide very valuable information. The silence and rhythms in the story of their life a person tells, the everyday occurrences and needs they communicate, often reveal much more than verbal expressions (Martínez, 2022).

A silence indicates a gap, a lack, which can sometimes indicate a deficiency or dissatisfaction with relationships (network, frequency, quality, etc.).

- For example, when we ask for details of a **contact person** and they cannot give us one, this points to a significant **lack in their support network**.
- If we ask about their day-to-day life and they say that they **do not have contact with anyone day to day**, this might be causing them anguish. We have a **lack of interaction indicator**, which can be used to find out more.

The **story**, rhythms and tempos that make up the conversation can provide relevant information from a detection standpoint:

- *A child might tell us, for example, that he spends a lot of hours watching television every afternoon, and that his parents spend most of the day working from home in the study. He expresses to us that he understands that this is just the way it is.*
→ Implicitly, he indicates that he does not do anything between the time he leaves school and the time he goes to bed. He does not go to his friends' houses and his parents do not play with him, because they are busy. He has not told us that he is lonely, but **we can see a story of absences** that might be making him feel lonely (absence of family members, of peer group, of playing opportunities).
- *Another person might explain, for example, that their son comes over once a week, brings them their shopping, and leaves again. She says that he has no time and that she is not complaining, but she has no one else around her.*
→ She is not directly expressing that she feels lonely, but her story shows us that (1) she only has occasional **instrumental support** from a family member (and no other type of support) and that (2) 'she is not complaining', meaning that she is **not outwardly upset about it, which is not the same as saying that she is actually satisfied** (Martínez, 2022).

SIGNS LINKED TO SERVICES

A. PROCEDURES

Within our services, we can identify tools that we use in our day-to-day practice that provide us with relevant information on the signs indicative of a possible situation of loneliness, while there are others that we could incorporate to increase the amount of information we have. We have indicated some of these procedures and tools in the following table:

PERSONAL SPHERE	HOME ENVIRONMENT	CLOSE DAILY INTERACTIONS	COMMUNITY DIMENSION
Consider the presence of risk factors in each sphere			
Draw up a relational map (amount, frequency)	Get to know their family or home situation	Draw up a map of their friend network (composition, frequency...)	Encourage networking across the region (awareness-raising, conferences, professional circuits, etc.)
Analyse day-to-day life from a relational point of view: how they relate to others every day	Consider the changes that may be taking place (separations, illnesses, house moves, migrations)	Detect situations of separation or rejection	Build a geographical map of the community network around the person
Create a time use map	Analyse their management of their day-to-day life (access to services, information, etc.)	Detect situations of bullying, harassment or discrimination	Investigate about their interest in participating or getting involved in their surroundings
Investigate about connections on special occasions (holidays, birthdays, etc.)	Find out about their view of relationships (cultural, personal, expectations, etc.)	Consider support with life plans (incorporation into the world of work, retirement, maternity...)	Check whether they are familiar with the community network
Examine the existence of any communication barriers		Analyse relationship with social media and new technologies (barriers, addictions, facilitation of connections...)	Check for the existence of spaces of exclusion, discrimination and barriers around them

Source:
Based on the *Guide for the prevention, detection and monitoring of adolescents and young people in situations of loneliness*. Barcelona City Council, 2021

B. SERVICES

Elsewhere, we can consider **generic recommendations** to be made more specific in accordance with the characteristics of each sphere (Martínez, 2022).

1. Recognising professionals as key agents in the detection of loneliness.
2. Including the detection of loneliness among the service's **goals** (taking the necessary resources into account).
3. Promoting **person-centred assistance**, by paying attention to the emotional aspect and cultivating a connection.
4. Ensuring the **training, tools, tempos** and **spaces** needed to make detecting loneliness possible.
5. Defining, on an **operational level**, what is expected from teams and to what extent they should take action.
6. Promoting **coordination** with other sectors, services and programmes against loneliness, by facilitating networking and links with community and third-sector spaces.



KEY IDEAS AND SUMMARY

The element of subjectivity must be considered in the detection of loneliness. There are signs that warn us that someone might be feeling lonely.

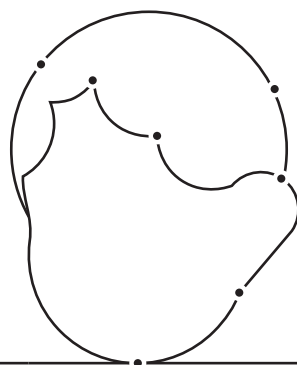
It is difficult to express loneliness directly.

The indirect communication of loneliness through other manifestations is key in the detection process. Opening our eyes and ears will help us to receive messages of loneliness that are not explicit, direct or defining.

Indirect expressions of loneliness can be identified in the personal sphere, in the home environment, in close daily interactions, and in the community dimension.

Paralinguistic elements can also provide very valuable information.

Within our services, we can identify tools that we use in our day-to-day practice that provide us with relevant information on the signs indicative of a possible situation of loneliness. They can be categorised as relating to the personal sphere, to the home environment, to close daily interactions, and to the community dimension.



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