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# A GUIDE FOR IDENTIFYING LONELINESS

LONELINESS is the subjective experience resulting from the discrepancy between, on one hand, the quality and quantity of one’s relationships, and on the other, one’s personal standards for social relationships: in other words, between what one has and what one considers ideal. Loneliness is therefore considered a negative expression of feelings that can manifest in individuals of all ages (Barcelona City Council, 2020).

- Let’s remember what it means to feel lonely and how it is a complex, plural, diverse construct marked by **SUBJECTIVITY AND STIGMA**.
- Let’s consider the implications loneliness has on the person, how difficult it is to recognise the feeling, and the fact that **THERE ARE AS MANY KINDS OF LONELINESS AS PEOPLE WHO FEEL IT**.
- The experience of the person **we are dealing with IS AND WILL ALWAYS BE UNIQUE**.

## LET’S CREATE THE RIGHT CLIMATE AND SPACE

Let’s go beyond the main purpose of our service and **broaden our perspective to include the EMOTION the person is putting across**.

**Let’s put our loneliness glasses on:**

- ▷ Let’s generate a **space of safety and trust that will help us to recognise loneliness more easily**.
- ▷ Let’s show **empathy, consistency, respect, warmth**.
- ▷ Let’s **avoid depicting the person as vulnerable** and maintain an **empowering dialogue**.
- ▷ **Let’s facilitate conversation around loneliness with empathy, openness and respect**.
- ▷ **Let’s normalise expressing negative emotions**.

## OBSERVATION

**We only need to OBSERVE.** Pay attention to the signs that could be WARNING of a situation of loneliness. **This is not about intervening or evaluating.**

**RISK FACTORS.** Have we identified the presence of some risk factors?

### Sociodemographics

Gender, age, marital status, socioeconomic status, place of residence.

### Health and personal independence

Self-perceived health, functional decline, mobility difficulties, deterioration in functional capacity, comorbidity.

### Psychology and personality

Depression, poor mental health and low life satisfaction, low self-esteem and self-efficacy, unhealthy habits.

### Interaction and social participation

Composition of the household, social network, quantity and quality of social relations, degree of social participation, social support.

It is important to remember that these are objective elements that can warn of a risk of loneliness, but we will always have to investigate more and find out **HOW THE PERSON FEELS**.

**THE NARRATIVE.** Pay attention to the various direct and indirect expressions, silences and other elements that could be indicating a possible situation of loneliness (see: ‘Tools and advice for detecting 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 expressions of loneliness.

But loneliness is a subjective issue surrounded by heavy stigma, so opening our eyes and ears helps us to receive messages of loneliness that are not explicit. Expressions related to:

- ▷ loss: *all my friends and family have died.*
- ▷ communication: *I don’t have anyone to talk to.*
- ▷ life plans: *without work it’s really hard to have a decent home.*
- ▷ stigma: *when you have a disability, people leave.*
- ▷ work: *I’ve changed job and I don’t know anyone.*

or similar, could indicate a case of loneliness.

**PHYSICAL PRESENCE AND ATTITUDE.** Pay attention to the person’s physical appearance. Without stigmatising, observe the details that could be signs of risk. Observe, without judging, whether there may be an attitude of having GIVEN UP.

**LIFE TRANSITIONS.** Try to identify life events that could involve a transition or a change: retirement, becoming a carer or no longer being one, illness or death of a loved one, change in place of residence, incorporation into the world of work, a newly empty nest, etc.

**IDENTIFY** (without stigmatising) whether there may be an aspect of their identity subject to discrimination: for example, perhaps they are a young person who has been bullied, a transgender person, or a racialised woman, or perhaps they have another profile that could have an impact on loneliness.

## THE CONVERSATION

Once this observation has been made, if you believe there may be a risk of loneliness, you will need to assess whether you can ask them about it directly. **In order to do this, it is important to generate a space of safety and trust first, following the indications in section 01.** If this is the case and the person is in agreement, you can have a conversation. To do so, you first need to assess what kind of communication is most suitable:

- **DIRECT:** if you deem this appropriate and think the person is lonely and they can express this openly, you can simply ask them directly:

- ▷ *Have you felt lonely at all lately?*

- **INDIRECT:** if you are not sure whether the person is lonely, or you think the person might get uncomfortable, avoid answering the question or struggle to answer it, you can try indirect questions:

- ▷ *Do you feel you have enough company? How does that make you feel?*
- ▷ *Do you have relationships with others in your day-to-day life? How do they make you feel?*
- ▷ *Do you feel you have the support you need when you need it?*
- ▷ *Do you feel bored in your day-to-day?*
- ▷ *Do you feel disconnected from your community or neighbourhood? Why?*

These questions do not constitute a psychometric test; they are simply a series of subjective assessment indicators. **Just one or two affirmative answers could be indicative of a possible case of loneliness.** Remember the importance of a qualitative perspective when dealing with loneliness. The subjective nature of loneliness requires this perspective, so that we may notice the details that can provide information on a case of loneliness.

## HOW CAN I GUIDE THE PERSON?

### Some RECOMMENDATIONS

- Remember that loneliness is not easy to recognise or express, and that this process is just an initial observation.
- When assisting the person, pay attention to the TIME and assess whether it is the appropriate time for giving them guidance.
- Sometimes, even if we are certain that the person is lonely, it is not the right time or context for proposing a service or resource. The reasons for this can be multiple: the person might be overwhelmed, they might be with someone who will not facilitate the process, or they might communicate that they are receiving psychological care, for example.
- We might have to investigate further and wait for the next visit.
- Be aware that overly direct communication or a hasty suggestion might put the person on high alert and lead them to reject the suggested assistance.
- If you observe someone at risk of suffering from severe loneliness, assess the possibility of referring them to specialist services.

### GUIDANCE

- On the Barcelona Against Loneliness website,<sup>14</sup> there are a series of municipal services and programmes and community facilities with activities that help to tackle loneliness.
- The Barcelona Assets Map<sup>15</sup> displays the different resources offered by organisations in the city.

14. [https://ajuntament.barcelona.cat/dretssocials/ca/barcelona-contra-la-soledat/noticies-soledat/quant-els-treballs-causen-soledat\\_1142715](https://ajuntament.barcelona.cat/dretssocials/ca/barcelona-contra-la-soledat/noticies-soledat/quant-els-treballs-causen-soledat_1142715)

15. <https://mapadactius.barcelona/index/autocura/totes-les-edats/tota-la-ciutat/>