

In this ultra-connected world, experts say many of us feel more

So many friends ... lonelier than ever



REBECCA
BAKER



THANKS to technology, we've never been as connected as we are today but increasingly, experts say, many of us have also never felt as lonely – and it is making us sick, literally.

For it's said loneliness is as bad, if not worse, for our health as being obese or smoking 15 cigarettes a day.

Adelaide clinical psychologist Tom Nehmy says loneliness is something "we are hearing more and more about these days".

"I think technology is part of the explanation," Dr Nehmy says.

"We are so driven by efficiencies – and technology-assisted efficiencies in the workplace – we have less of that incidental, face-to-face contact."

Similarly UniSA's Professor Nicholas Procter says there is growing evidence social media and web-based platforms such as Facebook and Instagram are fuelling this widespread sense of loneliness and social isolation within the community.

"It is called the social-media paradox; we might have lots of followers on Facebook and Twitter and connections on LinkedIn but we feel more isolated than ever before," says the Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Research Group leader.



CONNECTIONS: Adelaide Airport's people, culture and terminals executive general manager Dermot O'Neill, right, with staff members George Therrios and Alicia Mackay.

Picture MATT TURNER

"At its heart, it is a sense of disconnection. On the one hand, you are connected but for some the connections don't have a meaningful social element or are not deep enough.

"We need to be in the presence of others who value us, who we trust, who we can communicate with, who we can prosper with and plan our lives together.

"That is the fundamental human thing, and without those connections that's when you are at risk of loneliness."

Prof Procter says there are triggers that can exacerbate those feelings of isolation such as the loss of a loved one, relocating to a new city or the breakdown of a relationship.

FLINDERS University's Dr Priscilla Dunk-West says some social scientists theorise that exponential advances in technology have resulted in the "speeding up" of time.

"(It is based on the idea) that we can communicate at any time of day

or night to anyone anywhere in the world and it is so fast, resulting in us experiencing things in a more rapid way ... (it's) both good and bad," the senior social work lecturer says.

"US studies have shown when technology is used to consolidate social relationships – that is, existing face-to-face relationships – then it decreases loneliness.

"But when technology is used to limit that face-to-face, in-person interaction, loneliness increases."

New research by global HR think

tank Reventure reveals 40 per cent of Australian workers are feeling lonely at work, affecting not only on their own wellbeing but on productivity, too.

Reventure director Lindsay McMillan says while the results of the first-of-its-kind study are worrying, they are not surprising.

"We do know that within the Australian community just over 50 per cent of people feel lonely and the way we work is actually contributing to loneliness," Dr McMillan says.

"We've lost the art of being relational; we have become transactional in the workplace. There is competition around the word busy – the busier you are, the better colleague/employee you are (viewed to be).

"We do know from our research that people who are lonely at work make more mistakes, take more sick leave, feel less inclined to join in and are not easily approachable in the workplace.

"What we are now saying is that work needs to be part of the solution and that means being kinder to one another, being more compassionate to one another, taking a genuine and sincere interest in each other beyond the task.

"Australians spend more than half of their waking hours at work, so it's now time we look at what we can improve in workplaces to end loneliness. This (*Workplace Loneliness* study) is the first piece of research in Australia that actually looks at loneliness in the workplace."

According to the research, involv-

STAYING CONNECTED WITH YOUR KIDS

AUSTRALIAN education blogger Linda Stade believes it's more important than ever for parents to take the time to meaningfully connect with their kids.

"This is becoming increasingly important in an age where disconnection is becoming the norm, especially

for our young girls," she says. "They curate a version of themselves online that is disconnected – they post doctored photos of their bodies and their lives to the point where they can't possibly live up to their online persona.

"They have relationships with others online that are

superficial at best, based on likes or Snapchat streaks or texts made up of emojis.

"There is minimal authenticity, and a lot of our kids are deeply lonely.

"They need real, solid, committed relationships with people who care about them."

Ms Stade offers these tips to building "connection daily" with your children.

1. **A QUICK** pat on the back, or a touch on the shoulder.
2. **A FLY-BY** kiss on the head, or a hug.
3. **A WINK.**
4. **HOLDING** a gaze, a little longer than usual and smiling.

5. **AN** in-joke.

6. **NOTICING** something personal, such as, "We have the same hands".

7. **A QUICK** text message.

8. **A FEW** minutes of focused one-on-one time.

9. **TURNING** off your phone off when they want to talk to you.

isolated than ever before – with a toll on health and happiness



SUPPORT: Marion mothers' group members Karen Davis with Ella, Lexy Baker with Xanthe, Shirley Tan with Alexander and Rachel Whittenbury with Zoe. Picture: BRENTON EDWARDS

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Group chats a lifeline for new mum

WHEN you are first-time mum and your family lives more than 16,000km away, support from friends who understand what you're going through is crucial.
It's the reason UK national Lexy Baker joined a Marion mothers group when her daughter, Xanthe, was just 10 weeks old – and she says it has become a lifeline.
“When my husband (Justin) and I decided to have a baby we knew that it would be difficult without having our family nearby, let alone on the other side of the world – we are both

incredibly close with our families,” the 31-year-old says. “For me, this group has been a lifeline.
“I have a handful of amazing friends in Adelaide but few with children. This group has allowed me to meet some amazing women who have been there for me through good and bad times.”
Mrs Baker and her husband, a doctor at Flinders Medical Centre, relocated to Adelaide three years ago with “two suitcases and Justin's job”.
She says the support she has received through the women in the

Child and Family Health Service's mothers group has been invaluable.
“If I need a babysitter, or some advice, or if I'm missing my friends and family they are always there,” Mrs Baker says.
“We talk about anything and everything, from sleep to breastfeeding to our baby's poo!
“I feel so lucky to have these women in my life and would feel lost without them. I do truly believe that without them I would have been very isolated and likely to have tried to return to the UK.”

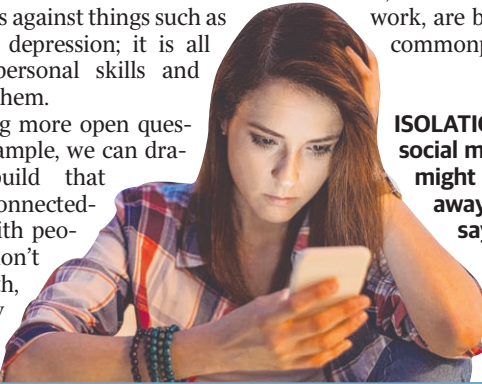
ADELAIDE Airport is an example of where inroads are being made, he says. “(The airport) has done a lot of work around these people-related, conversation-related themes and are now running connectedness workshops,” Dr Nehmy says.
The airport's people, culture and terminals executive general manager Dermot O'Neill says his company has worked hard to “cultivate a culture we're really proud of”, including connecting teams through a “day-in-the-life” program.
“This program promotes taking time out of your own role to instead walk a day in a colleague's shoes,” Mr O'Neill says. “Close to 90 per cent of our team have now participated in this program. We also encourage our team to engage in opportunities that bring them together through our corporate sponsorship program, working with organisations such as Foodbank, the Adelaide Fringe or hosting students from Tauondi College (at Port Adelaide).
“These programs contribute to the sense of community we've built in our workplace.”
Prof Procter agrees that amid the shocking statistics there are some “encouraging things that are being said and done”.
“If we don't address this issue, and don't take action in the best possible way, you're going to see those physical and mental health (associated with loneliness) impacts play out in an increasing way in the future,” he says. “Loneliness is unhealthy.”
Need help? Phone Lifeline 131 114 or Beyond Blue 1300 224 636

ing more than 1000 workers aged between 18 and 65 nationwide, males and females are feeling equally lonely in the workplace and it doesn't matter where you live.
“It's a universal thing and reflects the culture of work in Australia so it doesn't matter if you are in Perth or Adelaide or Brisbane,” he says.
BUT Generation X and Millennials are experiencing loneliness in the workplace more acutely than other age groups, the research found.
Dr McMillan says the fix doesn't lie in “trite and artificial attempts” to foster social connection between colleagues, such as workplace drinks on a Friday night.
“(It is about addressing) the fundamental underlying human need to find meaning in what we do, to ex-

perience genuine and authentic relationships and to grow as individuals through satisfying works,” he says.
The rise in loneliness – which has been labelled a “major health epidemic” and is linked to increased rates of cardiovascular disease, high blood pressure and lifestyle risks such as excessive drinking, smoking, being overweight and high cholesterol – is a worldwide phenomenon.
Last year, the UK appointed its first Minister for Loneliness.
“For far too many people, loneliness is the sad reality of modern life,” former prime minister Theresa May said at the time of the appointment.
The good news, according to Dr Nehmy and others, is that teaching skills that “build connectedness” aren't difficult, either in the school environment or the workplace. He

works with schools and companies to build resilience and wellbeing through his company, Healthy Minds Enterprises.
“Leading organisations are those who see staff wellbeing as a core part of their business,” Dr Nehmy says.
“We see from research and our own experience when that connectedness is present.
“It protects against things such as anxiety and depression; it is all about interpersonal skills and how we use them.
“By asking more open questions, for example, we can dramatically build that sense of connectedness even with people that we don't ‘click’ with, and by really taking the

time to listen to what the other person is saying, and to communicate you've listened and understood,” he says. “It may sound simple but these straightforward building blocks are such an enormous driver when it comes to connectedness and building rapport.”
Programs addressing connectedness, both in schools and at work, are becoming more commonplace, he says.



ISOLATION: Dozens of social media friends might be a swipe away but experts say technology could be fuelling loneliness.