Engaging Ethnic Minority Communities in Conversations About Loneliness

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This Resource

This resource is based upon evidence gathered and collected through hyperlocal involvement, interactive activities, and workshops held within the ethnic minority communities (EMC) of Kirklees, who were from the Muslim, Indian and some from the Black Caribbean communities. Many individuals and their voices have contributed to creating this guidance, with the aim for us to reach a deeper understanding of the experiences of loneliness and living in isolation within these communities. This resource was initiated and produced as part of the Kirklees Loneliness Strategy[1].

The various engagement opportunities took place from March 2022 through to August 2023 and done via initiatives led by the Public Health Minority Mental meetings, Health Kirklees Minority Mental Health Consortium, Suicide Memorial and Bereavement Roadshow June 2023, the Anti Stigma Project, and active participation in diverse gatherings, settings, and events.

This resource is an insight into loneliness experienced by EMC and can serve as a guide to:

- raising awareness

- supporting group discussions

- addressing challenges

- use in community outreach projects

- understand and empower communities with the knowledge about the issues of loneliness happening within minority communities

- help dispel any misconceptions that exist amongst the community itself and professionals.

What are the definitions of loneliness, isolation, and solitude?

There generally is confusion regarding the definition of loneliness, isolation, and solitude so it is important to define each and recognise the differences, as this will help in giving the appropriate support offer and interventions for the individuals. It will also help to promote understanding, help to reduce stigma surrounding loneliness, and contribute to the development of targeted community initiatives aimed at improving mental health and well-being.

Loneliness, social isolation, and solitude are subjective experiences, and individuals may interpret and express their feelings differently. What one person perceives as solitude for personal reflection, another may view as loneliness due to a lack of social connection. The emotional states associated with these terms can overlap. For example, someone who is physically isolated may also feel lonely, while another individual intentionally seeking solitude may experience emotional satisfaction.

The three concepts[2] are defined as follows:

Loneliness is described as a distressing feeling that arises when there is a perceived discrepancy between an individual's desired and actual social relationships. It is characterized by subjective experiences of isolation, emptiness, and sadness, regardless of the presence of others.

Social Isolation is mentioned as a condition where individuals lack meaningful social connections or interactions with others. This can manifest as limited social network size, infrequent social contact, or physical separation from others.

Solitude is related to voluntary isolation or being alone by choice. It is noted that solitude can be a positive experience, allowing individuals to engage in self-reflection, pursue personal interests, and recharge without feeling lonely or distressed.

Addressing Loneliness and Isolation in Ethnic Minority Communities

Individuals in all communities are affected by social isolation and loneliness at some point in their lives, however, when addressing this within EMC it is important to understand and educate ourselves about the greater impact of systemic discrimination, racism, negative cultural experiences, and stereotyping has on their self-worth, self-esteem, lack of confidence and the feeling of belonging. These factors create social isolation and segregation between cultures and thus integration into other communities becomes an issue due to the negative life experiences. We need to actively work towards positively shifting these perceptions, attitudes, and behaviours to support diverse communities and individuals who are struggling with their mental health.
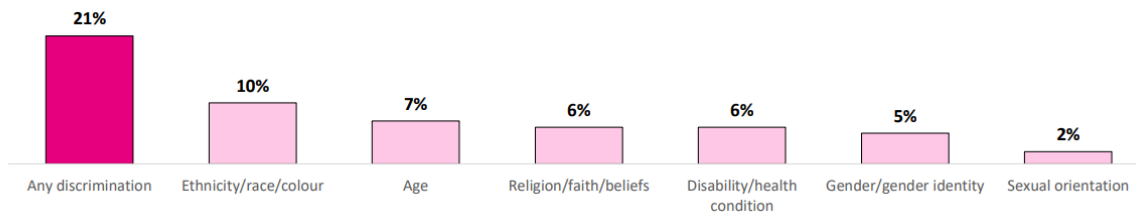
Research[3] shows that people from minority backgrounds are more at risk of experiencing certain factors that cause loneliness and can often face greater barriers to accessing support. The research findings found that:

- 67% of respondents who felt they did not belong in their community said they were always or often lonely, compared to just 16% who felt they did belong.

- 49% who have experienced discrimination at work or in their local neighbourhood reported being always or often lonely, compared to just over a quarter 28% of people who had not.

- 60% of all survey respondents admitting they did not feel confident talking about loneliness, and a third more saying they would never admit to feeling lonely. Worrying about what people would think was higher for some ethnic minority groups.

According to the Kirklees CLiK Survey[4] 2021, A fifth (21%) of Kirklees residents who responded have experienced discrimination in the past year. The most common type of discrimination experienced related to ethnicity/race/skin colour (10%) followed by age (7%).

Bar Chart showing 21% of people experiencing discrimination (such as verbal or physical threats or abuse or unfair treatment).

In the past year, have you experienced any type of discrimination (such as verbal or physical threats or abuse or unfair treatment) for reasons to do with your…?

Any discrimination	Ethnicity/race/colour	Age	Religion/faith/beliefs	Disability/health condition	Gender/gender identity	Sexual orientation
21%	10%	7%	6%	6%	5%	2%

What Did the Communities Tell Us

A significant amount of people ranging from young adults to old people mentioned[5] their emotional struggles particularly feelings of low self-esteem, worthlessness, being devalued, and a lack of confidence resulted due to issues as domestic abuse, coercive control by partners and family, loss and bereavement, alcohol, and drug misuse within family, not fitting in, bullying in workplaces, discrimination, racial slurs, systemic institutionalised racism, enduring social rejection and being insignificant in family. The conversations shed light on the effects of these emotional struggles, highlighting the individuals' struggles with shame and embarrassment stemming from hidden traumas.

These conversations stress the need for support and interventions to address not only the visible consequences of negative impacting situations but also the emotional toll it takes on individuals' self-perception and well-being.

Examples of Conversations and Lived Experiences

Throughout engagement[5] sessions with EMC in South and North Kirklees, various conversations and discussions were held with regards to suicide, mental health, and loneliness. The following quotes were voiced by individuals who felt comfortable in a safe, secure, and supportive space allowing them to openly share lived experiences, concerns, and issues – many for the first time. Throughout these discussions, the individuals were made aware of the mental health resources and support available to them in Kirklees. Additionally, in some instances, individuals received one-on-one support from partner organisations who were present during some of the engagements.

Some of the quotes below were originally communicated in South Asian languages and have been translated into English for the purpose of this guidance.

The Young:

- "I am not allowed to go far from the house on my own. I am not allowed to travel to another part of the area without a male member of my family. My life is controlled."

- "My parents want me to get married abroad, because I have said no, they are now not talking to me and constantly shout at me."

- "Talking about mental health issues within my community is hard, as often they go silent, or I am ignored."

- "I struggle and I no one cares as no one understands me or know what to say or do."

- "I went to a school where I was called names and got beat up, I used to sit in the class on my own, but no one cared, I never told my parents. That was so many years ago, but I still sometimes feel like it was like yesterday. I fear for my children when they are at school."

- "My child is being bullied badly at school and I see bruises on him, no one seems to be bothered at school, he does not want to go to school, he is alone, I am looking into homeschooling him."

- "I want friends who will like me and not judge me, I cannot be happy all the time, but the fear of judgment holds me back."

- "Some days, getting out of bed feels hard. I am tired of being alone."

- "My son saw his friend jumping off a building and saw him die, he has not been the same and he has had no help. He just stays in his bedroom. Now he has gone to university I am scared he will not cope."

- "I struggle to find happiness; I am not as okay as I pretend to be."

- "It feels like I am trapped, and no one really understands what I am going through."

The Adults:

- Other people do not understand me, my culture, my faith, so I find it difficult to connect with others who are not my culture or religion."

- "I face a lot of discrimination at work, I find it hard to connect with my colleagues."

- "I should connect, but for me, language is a barrier. It is frustrating when expressing myself is a constant struggle."

- "The stigma around mental health keeps me silent, people start to judge me, so I do not tell anyone about how I am feeling, how lonely I am and how I struggle with people."

- "Moving to this country has been the hardest for me, all my family and friends are not here, my husband's family do not treat me well."

- "English is not my first language, and though I try my best, there are times when I feel like I cannot fully express myself. So, I do not talk or share as I cannot speak English."

- "I came here for a new life, but instead I am struggling, I find it difficult to live here."

- "I am embarrassed to go out as my husband is an alcoholic, everyone in my community knows and talks about us, so I do not go out and I feel so lonely on my own."

- "I am in an abusive relationship and tried to take my life, the family locked me up in a room and I was told 'to get over it as this is your life."

- "I wish I could explain what is going on in my head. It is a struggle to be normal.

- "I want to see friends, but it is hard to to see them. It is like I am stuck in a cycle of depression, and I cannot get out of it."

The Older People:

- "I am always stuck at home, I have nowhere to go, so I watch Asian dramas on tv."

- "I do not work now, and I have no one to talk to now, sometimes I am home alone all the time since my wife died and my children do not care they are busy in their lives."

- "I am 85 years old, and I live on my own, my children have all gone away to live their lives. I am old and neglected, I have friends and carers, but they go, and I am left alone."

- "How do I get away from the pain of losing my wife, I cannot see my life go on without her, I am so lonely. I wish I had died and not her."

- "I lost my wife, she was 68 years old, I just want to die so that I can be with her, she did everything for me, I miss her so much."

Positive Quotes on Tackling Loneliness

- "In our Sikh community, we always come together in times of joy and sorrow. We find strength in our temple, we share food, and we are in each other's company and support one another."

- If we are lonely, we go to the Gurdwara every day and pray and meet and talk to others, there is always something happening at the temple. It is my second home."

- "We have big family gatherings and celebrations, which are a big part of our culture. Being surrounded by my loved one helps me not to feel alone."

- "I live in a community where my neighbours look out for each other. Knowing that someone is always there for you makes me happy, I can go round to see them."

- "We have many cultural celebrations, and we always get together at the temple and stay in touch with people from my community, friends and family, I don't feel alone when I am at the temple, I can sit there and pray all the time."

- "When I feel lonely, I pray to my god, and he supports me and keeps me at peace with myself."

- "In our community, we have various houses and places where people come together to talk. I have some good friends who are old like me, and we can talk about the old days and discuss today's issues."

- "I am on facetime all time to my cousins, relatives, friends especially in Pakistan, I am old, but I can facetime, and they keep me busy so how can I be lonely."

- "Sometimes I watch my favourite Indian dramas, news, religious programmes on tv, and that keeps me happy, and I don't know where the time goes, but I do need to do more exercise, I don't even know what being lonely is."

- "If I feel lonely, I go see my grandparents and their friends and I like listening to their wisdom of years gone and they always give me good advice."

- "I listen to religious music, and I am happy again as they teach us how to connect with the greater god, we are here on a journey our final destination is to the one above."

Recommendations Arising from Minority Community Lived Experiences and Voices

The recommendations outlined below represent the priorities and outcomes derived from the engagement process and influenced by the input of numerous individuals of the EMC, with some individuals serving as grassroots service representatives for their respective communities.

Specific headings in this section were predetermined and chosen in advance to prompt discussions and to initiate conversations on how to effectively address loneliness within EMC. These recommendations are universal and can be used in all principles of working and as a toolkit when engaging with any community.

Some of the discussions were originally held in South Asian languages and have been translated into English for the purpose of this guidance.

These recommendations are intended as a guide for those supporting mental health and well-being initiatives within communities and has been produced by those who actively participated.

1. Let Us Educate Ourselves:

We need to educate ourselves and be aware of the specific negative challenges and experiences that different diverse groups might face and understand the cultural, social, and historical factors that could contribute to their feelings of loneliness and their mental health. we also need to actively shift any negative beliefs about diverse communities and myth bust these negative connotations, hence why a myth busting section has been added to this guidance.

2. We need to Initiate Conversations:

By initiating casual conversations, showing interest in their hobbies, and experiences, this will encourage individuals to be open to deeper discussions about their feelings and emotions. We also need to recognise that some individuals might be hesitant to share due to distinct reasons such as fear of judgment, lack of trust, wanting to stay anonymous or adherence to cultural norms. Therefore, initiating conversations in a non-intrusive manner is essential to create a safe and comfortable environment where they will feel at ease sharing their thoughts and feelings.

3. We should be Actively Listening:

We must practice listening by maintaining eye contact, nodding, showing genuine interest in what they are saying. Reflecting on what they say shows that we understand, value and care about their perspective, including any cultural barriers or challenges they may face. This approach will help break down the stigma associated with mental health and loneliness. When we truly listen, we confirm their experiences and show that their feelings are important and are respected.

4. Let us be Empathetic in our Responses:

It is important to respond with empathy and validation by using phrases like "I understand," "I hear you," or "That must be really tough", show that we care. We must always try to avoid the minimising of their feelings. Responding empathetically will help counteract the barriers of

shame and isolation that may come with loneliness. Reassure them that their feelings are valid and that many people go through similar emotions, this will help them to connect.

5. We Need to Share Personal Experiences:

Sharing firsthand experiences of loneliness or challenges with individuals or in a group will create a sense of commonality and make them feel less alone, it will also help destigmatise loneliness and mental health illness. By being open and vulnerable ourselves, we can show that it is acceptable to talk about these feelings without fear of judgment.

6. Creating Safe Spaces:

Choosing a local community safe space where individuals can freely and openly express themselves without fear of judgment or criticism is essential for overcoming the barriers that might prevent them from seeking help. These spaces provide a supportive environment where individuals feel empowered to share their struggles without worrying about negative repercussions.

7. Organising Inclusive Activities:

Planning of activities that align with their interests and thus providing opportunities for social interaction, such as cultural events, workshops, or group outings. Plan activities that promote inclusivity, building confidence, self-esteem and self-worth workshops and encourage connections. By engaging in group activities, we can help break down barriers of isolation and promote a sense of belonging. Similar people coming together to support each other in peer support groups has a great significance in building up resilience and belonging. We must support initiatives that have been co-produced and co-designed with the group and that are responsive to their cultural needs.

8. Be Mindful to Cultural Sensitivity:

We need to be mindful of cultural norms, customs, and communication styles as this will show respect and will help in building trust. Understanding that certain minority communities may attach stigma to discussing suicide, mental health, or loneliness, thus the need to approach conversations with cultural sensitivity, emphasising that it is okay to talk about emotions and seek support. Being culturally sensitive in our interactions will help in counteracting the stigma that can be deeply ingrained in certain communities. This sensitivity will encourage openness and trust.

9. Providing Culturally Sensitive Resources:

We need to ensure that we offer information about mental health resources, local support groups, or counselling services that are sensitive to their cultural background. We should be offering resources that are tailored to their cultural background, addressing potential barriers like language or lack of awareness of available support services.

10. Regular Check-Ins:

Consistently check in with them, even if it is just a simple text or call, it is important to them know you are thinking about them and value their well-being. Checking in can challenge the

stigma that might lead them to believe they are alone in their struggles. Regular contact will show that you care and that they are not isolated.

11. Encourage Connections:

Help them connect with others who share their interests or experiences by introducing them to people who might become supportive friends. Helping them connect with others who understand their experiences and can counteract the isolation associated with stigma. This will show them that they are not alone and that their feelings are shared by others.

12. Language Barriers:

If there is a language barrier, use translation tools or find someone who can help facilitate communication, find ways to bridge the gap.

13. Celebrate Cultural Events:

By attending cultural events, we can help combat the stigma by normalising discussions around mental health and loneliness within a community setting which have been shaped by the EMC.

14. Respect Independence:

Understand that not everyone may want or need the same level of interaction, therefore, we need to respect their independence and boundaries. Addressing stigma may involve gently encouraging them to challenge preconceived views and consider seeking support.

15. Long-Term Commitment:

Building trust and alleviating loneliness will take time, so it is important to be patient and be committed to maintaining the connection over the long term. Overcoming stigma and barriers requires a sustained effort and by demonstrating a long-term commitment to their well-being can gradually break down these obstacles.

16. Your Approach:

View each person as an individual, and tailor approaches to individual's need and taking their unique experiences and preferences into account. By addressing the stigma and barriers associated with loneliness within diverse communities, we can create a more inclusive and supportive environment and empowering individuals to seek help and connect with others. We need to target and tailor initiatives to individual and diverse community needs.

17. Awareness and familiarity:

Diverse communities might have a limited awareness of local opportunities for social connection and support, they might be reluctant to venture out of their familiar surroundings. We need to ensure we collaborate with partner organisations and community settings which are familiar to the individuals and are in vicinity of where they live. Using existing community assets, safe trusted settings and localised support could help increase in participation.

Myth Busting - Challenging Stereotypes

The following myth busting statements are paraphrases of a perspective. They aim to counter common opinions encountered in discussions about loneliness and isolation. It is important to refrain from making generalisations based on ethnicity or a community when addressing loneliness, as individual's experience is unique.

Some of the myths below were presented to individuals to initiate discussions and determine whether they hold any truth or are debunked.

Myth: Minority communities are lonely as they do not integrate.

Bust: Loneliness is not tied to ethnicity or community as people of all backgrounds can experience loneliness due to numerous factors, such as social isolation, personal circumstances, lack of awareness or mental health.

Myth: Minority communities do not experience loneliness or isolation as much as others.

Bust: Loneliness and isolation affect individuals from all backgrounds, however, minority communities may face unique challenges such as discrimination, cultural barriers, and lack of representation, which can exacerbate feelings of loneliness and isolation.

Myth: Minority communities are close-knit and immune to loneliness.

Bust: Some minority communities may emphasise strong connections, not everyone experiences the same level of social support as factors like generational gaps, developing technology and changing lifestyles can lead to feelings of isolation.

Myth: Minority individuals do not seek help for loneliness.

Bust: Seeking help is not exclusive to any group and people from minority communities do reach out for support when needed. However, cultural stigmas around mental health might affect help-seeking behaviours. Encouraging open conversations and offering culturally sensitive resources can address this misconception.

Myth: Minority languages contribute to loneliness.

Bust: Language diversity will enrich cultures and create unique connections, language barriers can pose challenges, but they do not cause loneliness. Efforts to promote multilingualism and facilitate communication can enhance inclusivity and diminish potential feelings of isolation.

Debunked: Generational gaps within households creates loneliness within individuals at home especially with the older and younger generation. As the younger generation are more likely to speak English and may not be able to communicate in the minority language, this creates loneliness for the older generation.

Myth: Generational gaps within households create loneliness, particularly between older and younger generations due to language barriers.

Bust: While generational gaps may pose challenges in communication, they do not necessarily lead to loneliness. These gaps are bridged through mutual understanding and shared activities which can create stronger family bonds. Additionally, initiatives promoting intergenerational communication and language learning can help mitigate potential feelings of loneliness among older generations.

Myth: Minority individuals prefer solitude.

Bust: Like anyone else, individuals from minority communities have diverse preferences. Assuming a preference for solitude based on ethnicity perpetuates stereotypes as people's social preferences are shaped by personal traits and experiences, not their background.

Myth: Loneliness only affects minority immigrants.

Bust: Loneliness can affect both minority immigrants and individuals who have lived in a community for generations. The immigrant experience might contribute to isolation due to cultural adjustment, but long-term residents can also face loneliness from other sources like changing family dynamics or work pressures.

Myth: Online communities can solve loneliness in minority groups.

Bust: Online communities can offer connections, but they are not a guaranteed solution to tackling loneliness as virtual interactions might not fully replace in-person connections, especially for communities that highly value face-to-face relationships.

Myth: Loneliness is a personal issue within minority communities.

Bust: Loneliness often has systemic and societal roots, affecting various groups as being faced with discrimination, socioeconomic differences, and lack of representation can contribute to feelings of isolation.

Myth: Joining mainstream communities automatically eliminates feelings of loneliness and isolation for minorities.

Bust: Integration into mainstream communities may not necessarily alleviate loneliness and isolation for minority individuals as cultural differences, discrimination, and feelings of alienation can persist even in diverse environments.

Myth: Loneliness and isolation are taboo topics in minority communities.

Bust: Loneliness and isolation are both a cause and consequence of Mental Health conditions. While mental health stigma exists in minority communities, there is a growing recognition and acceptance of mental health challenges and issues. However, cultural factors and access to culturally competent support can still pose barriers to seeking help.

Myth: Minority individuals are resilient and do not struggle with loneliness or isolation. **Bust:** Resilience is a valuable trait, but it is important to recognise that like everyone else, they can face various challenges and circumstances that contribute to feelings of loneliness, including discrimination, cultural barriers, and systemic inequalities.

In Summary

This insight highlights the significance and importance of understanding and assisting minorities in addressing loneliness and isolation, often overlooked within their communities. Through engagement[5] and holding open, honest dialogues in safe spaces, we have uncovered a range of challenges confronting individuals from diverse backgrounds. Cultural norms, stigma, discrimination, and social inequalities exacerbate feelings of loneliness, combined by barriers in accessing support services.

Nevertheless, what was also witnessed was the resilience and unity within some of the EMC, with grassroots efforts and supporting networks providing vital interventions and support such as those mentioned earlier in this guidance quoting how individuals tackled loneliness.

Looking ahead, we must prioritise support services which are culturally sensitive, raise greater awareness of support and social connection, greater community involvement, more engagement, and tackling systemic inequalities are crucial. By actively listening to minority voices, we can ensure that individuals, irrespective of their background, find a sense of belonging, support, and connection.

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