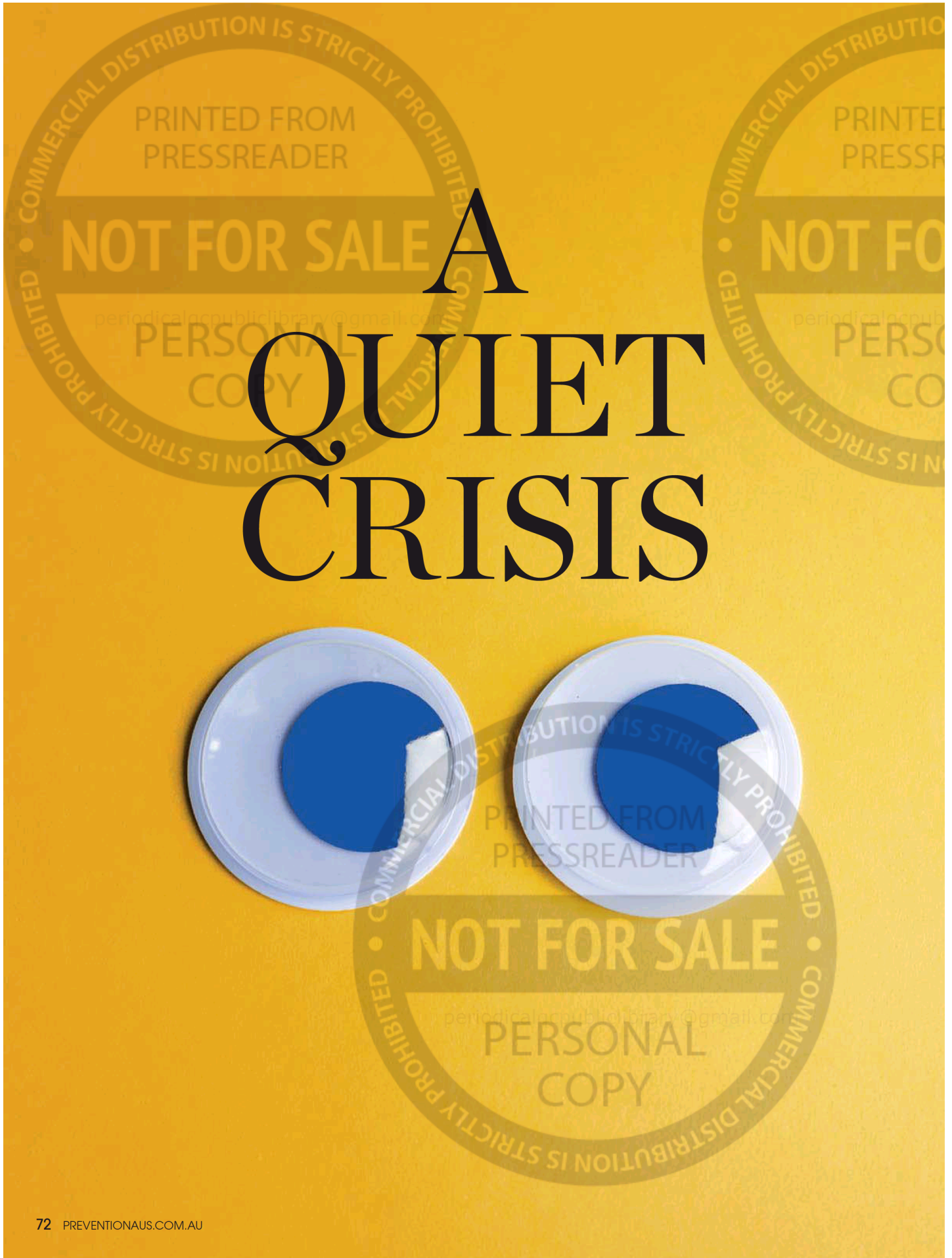


- Loneliness



TACKLING LONELINESS

PRINTED FROM
PRESSREADER

NOT FOR SALE

Loneliness isn't just an emotional state – it's a health condition that could impact your heart, your brain, even your longevity. Here's what you need to know about protecting yourself.

BY JENNIFER WOLFF

Did you
know?

One in four Aussies feel lonely, and 30 per cent don't feel part of a group of friends.

SOURCE: AUSTRALIAN PSYCHOLOGICAL SOCIETY

Loneliness is an all-too-human emotion that poets, novelists and songwriters have for centuries tried to capture in words in every language. But some researchers contend that it's more than a feeling: It's a scourge, an illness, a condition to be treated like

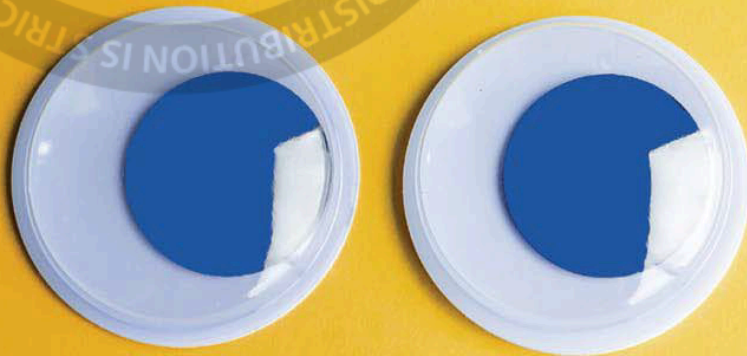
a disease – and an infectious and deadly one at that.

According to a literature review, lacking a social connection is considered more dangerous than smoking 15 cigarettes a day and deadlier than obesity. Thus it makes sense how feeling alone can translate into physical ailments. Humans are social creatures, which doesn't mean we simply enjoy being social; it means we need to be. It's how we survive – together, in groups, finding strength in numbers even if, unlike our ancestors, we wouldn't literally starve to death if we didn't have a go-to crew. Being socially isolated, by contrast, hurts emotionally and psychologically, and its stresses take a physical toll. Persistent loneliness (lasting longer than two weeks) is linked to high blood pressure, depression, heart disease and stroke among other conditions, including Alzheimer's disease. This appears to be due to increased inflammation; in excess, inflammation is associated with chronic disease.

"People think of their relationships as related to emotional wellbeing, but they don't recognise the profound effect they have on physical health," says psychology professor Dr Julianne Holt-Lunstad. According to her research, lonely people have a 26 per cent increased chance of early death. For those who have little or no social contact, that rises to 29 per cent, and it jumps to 32 per cent for people who live alone. "We need to take our social relationships as seriously as we take our diet, exercise, nutrition and everything else that we know impacts our health," she says. ►

PRINTED FROM
PRESSREADER

It's the 30-to-60 crowd who researchers are coming to understand may be the most vulnerable of all.



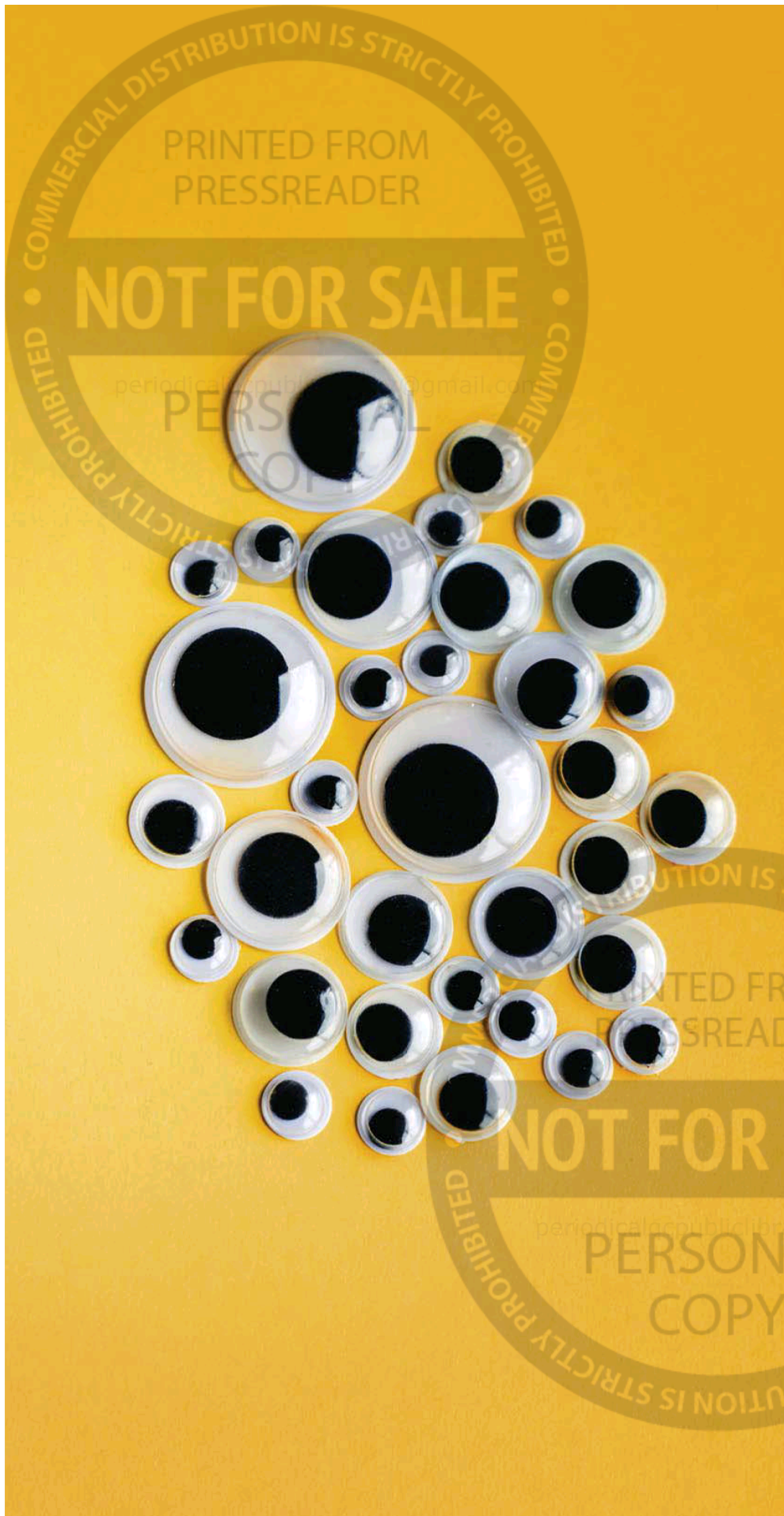
Why we're lonelier than ever

If loneliness is a disease, then it's one that's reached pandemic proportions – and that was before that other pandemic greatly exacerbated the problem. A growing number of Australians now live by themselves, which is one reason we're experiencing greater loneliness than ever before. Another factor is the lightning-fast evolution of technology. “We have had more change in the past 24 years than we did in the previous 2500,” says healthy ageing expert Dr Dilip Jeste. “Social changes have been dramatic, and loneliness is definitely a part of that.” This is related to – but by no means all about – social media. In fact, according to a recent survey of 20,000 US adults by Cigna, the loneliest members of Generation Z (people roughly between ages seven and 22) are evenly split between those who use social media and those who don't.

In general, young people and the very oldest are known to be the loneliest, with people under the age of 20 registering as the loneliest of all, according to the Cigna poll. Younger people get lonely when they don't feel they have many social connections; for them, it's often a numbers game, and making more friends is usually within

reach. The older adults, by contrast, opt for quality over quantity, and while saddened when loved ones die, they are developmentally better equipped to cope with that loneliness, isolation and loss. “They're actually happier than you think,” says Dr Jeste. That's why it's the people in the middle of this U-curve (the 30-to-60 crowd) who researchers are coming to understand may be the most vulnerable of all, due to a mix of factors.

Ironically, people in their middle years tend to be pretty busy with other humans – children, parents, coworkers, friends. We're often frustrated by our lack of 'alone time', and it's hard to imagine that people who are so busy can also feel lonely. But loneliness isn't simply about being alone. What it really hinges on is the quality of your relationships: The more satisfied you are with them, the less lonely you are. Midlife is when that dissatisfaction often runs highest – and when illness begins to brew. “The loneliness-related diseases old people get diagnosed with can take decades to develop, but often start to emerge on a cellular level in early middle age and even before then,” says professor of psychiatry Dr Steve Cole.



TACKLING LONELINESS

ALONE IN YOUR STRUGGLES

Unfortunately, when it comes to loneliness's effect on health, people in midlife are the least studied, Dr Cole says. What we do know is this: In her 2015 meta-analysis of 70 studies, Dr Holt-Lunstad concluded that midlife people who were lonely had a higher risk of death from any cause than those in other age groups. Lonely people tend to drink more, eat less healthily and engage in risky conduct, such as using drugs either to feel better or to numb themselves. Dr Holt-Lunstad's conclusion is ominous, especially for midlifers living solo: "Although living alone can offer advantages, this meta-analysis indicates that physical health isn't among them," she says.

Fortunately, loneliness is generally short-term and self-correcting. But the less resilient among us, people Dr Cole describes as "lonely day in and day out", are where, he says, "we see the most significant biological ramifications." The inflammatory signal can affect the brain and change behaviour in a way that potentially makes people even more socially sensitive and withdrawn and thus prone to loneliness, explains Dr Cole. Researchers say chronic loneliness triggers distrust of others and an expectation of emotional pain. And when someone is in that sort of anguish, his or her general demeanour can become repellent, as is often noted in mental illness. "It's a vicious cycle," he says. ►

TACKLING LONELINESS

PRINTED FROM
PRESSREADER

NOT FOR SALE

periodicalscpubliclibrary@gmail.com

PERSONAL
COPY

Why good midlife friendships matter

Loneliness is different in early age as opposed to midlife. Our younger years are a time when we spend happy hours with colleagues who can help us get ahead, but with whom we're also in competition. Childhood friends may be replaced with new 'mum friends', people with whom we have no history and little in common except parenthood. At work, we can "start doing what's expedient and profitable instead of what's the most nurturing," says Dr Cole. Having random people around – especially those who serve more of a functional purpose than an emotional one – is often not enough to stave off loneliness.

According to a 2016 study of 15,000 people, aged 18 to 79, those between 30 and 49 reported the deepest dissatisfaction with their relationships. Norwegian researchers Magnhild Nicolaisen and Kirsten Thorsen discerned that these were the ages filled with the most regret, a time when

memories of a more carefree life were still fresh in people's minds. Magnhild also points to the "sandwich squeeze", when many midlife adults are caring for both children and sick or elderly parents with a disability. She notes that limited time to just hang out with friends and have fun leads to disappointment and, ultimately, loneliness.

And as midlifers push through their 40s, the social scaffolding starts to collapse: Parents die, couples divorce, children move away, people lose their jobs, and we may be too busy to properly attend to the emotional fallout. Vulnerability to loneliness peaks in the 50s, according to Dr Jeste. "For the first time, you become aware of mortality," he says, noting that it's also a time when women enter menopause. It's also when many illnesses – arthritis, diabetes, high blood pressure – make their debut.

"It's a period when we can no longer count on perfect health as we could when we were younger," says Dr Cole. "Put that all together and you have a situational invitation to be lonely and socially dissatisfied."

“Having random people around is often not enough to stave off loneliness.”



6 WAYS TO FEEL MORE CONNECTED

1 Look up old friends They probably want to catch up too! If you don't have their email or phone number, scout around on social media for them and then send a nice message.

2 Talk to strangers Even 30 seconds of friendly conversation with a person in a checkout line or a taxi driver has a positive impact on mood.

3 Practise gratitude Focus on things in your life that make you feel fortunate, such as your family, pets, health, home, even a sunny day.

4 Exercise and get enough sleep Both of these contribute to mood regulation and overall good health.

5 Take a class Sign up for something you've never tried, like dance, art or meditation. Active learning exercises your brain, and you may make some new friends!

6 Volunteer Helping improve the lives of others is such a nice feeling. Indeed, data shows it gives people purpose, which raises their self-esteem and thus makes them feel less lonely.

PROTECTING YOURSELF

Wealth, education, community and a successful career are known to guard against loneliness. And a healthy marriage mitigates it. But that's not a shield. Nearly 30 per cent of people who are unhappy with their family life report feeling lonely, pointing once again to the importance of relationship quality.

Neuroscientist Dr Stephanie Cacioppo is an ardent proponent of relying on friendships and practising gratitude. She should know: In 2018, her beloved husband, John, who also happened to be a leading authority on loneliness, died unexpectedly. She says she is "living proof we can recover from loneliness". She and her husband worked across from each other in the same office. "[When he died], I never thought I'd survive, but thanks to sports and social support, I have a taste for life again," she says.

Like any disease, loneliness is easier to prevent than to treat. Dr Holt-Lunstad emphasises the importance of educational tools to guide school-aged children through the nuances of social interaction so they grow up with greater sensitivity to the impact of their behaviour and that of others. "The importance of social connections also needs to be part of medical training," she adds. "Doctors have to be part of the discussion around lifestyle factors that influence health."

The prescription isn't so clear for those of us who are long out of the classroom. Dr Holt-Lunstad has highlighted a need for large-scale campaigns, such as those that created awareness of the dangers of smoking, obesity and drug use. Others are trying to discover medicinal fixes. But, for now, the best thing you can do for yourself is to nurture your friendships. It just might save your life. **P**