The quiet weight of loneliness

In this blog, Solace therapist Hillary Wadsworth explores the loneliness experienced by young people seeking asylum, and how small acts of welcome and understanding can help them feel less alone.

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Loneliness is best understood as the gap between the connection someone has and the connection they'd like to have. Seen this way, it isn't a flaw, it's a signal, one that tells us something needs attention. But loneliness carries a stigma, and that stigma often gets in the way. People assume it reflects something wrong with them personally, rather than recognising it as an ordinary, useful signal worth listening to.

A recent IPPR report, The Loneliest Generation, found that one in 20 young people in England now report having no close friends at all, up from one in 100 a decade ago. Ofcom's 2025 research adds further context: 15–17 year olds spend around six and a half hours online every day, mostly on YouTube, TikTok, Instagram and Snapchat. Taken together, this points to a generation that is more connected digitally, and less so in person.

A Loneliness That's Often Missed

At Solace, we work with children and young people going through the asylum system, and their experience of loneliness rarely gets the attention it deserves. It tends to sit behind more visible, more urgent concerns; safety, status, housing. But it's there, and for this group it runs deeper, for reasons specific to their circumstances.

For children, it can be as simple but vital as having no one to play with. We hear the same message often, in different words: I don't have even one friend. Many describe leaving friends behind and having to start again, repeatedly. For teenagers, the picture is more complicated, stigma attached to being in the asylum system, racism, and a lack of confidence that makes it harder to put themselves forward socially. Language barriers and trying to make sense of an unfamiliar culture can add to the challenge.

Ordinary teenage life is hard enough without any of this; working out who you are, trying to fit in, not having the money to do what friends are doing, the constant comparisons to others on social media. On top of that sits the practical reality of the asylum system: being moved without warning, sometimes overnight, and having to start again in a new area with no certainty about how long it will last. Just as a friendship starts to form, it can be pulled up again.

Racism is a significant part of this picture too. One young person we work with told us he receives racist abuse at school every single day, and the current climate is making this worse rather than better. Add trauma, disturbed sleep, separation from family, and a very grown-up instinct to protect parents from further worry by staying quiet about their own struggles, and it becomes clear why trust in people, in places, in the future doesn't come easily.

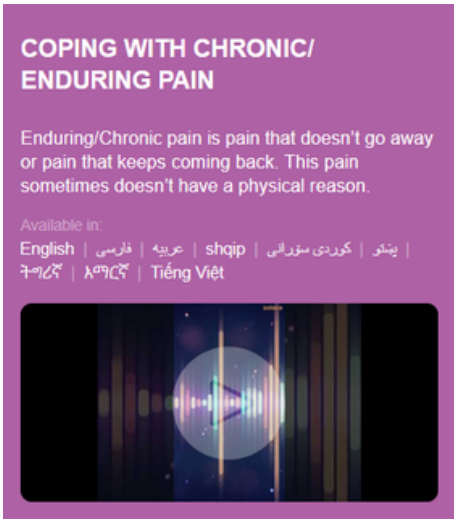
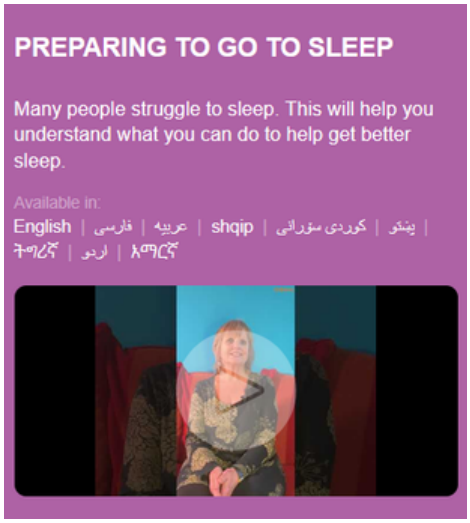
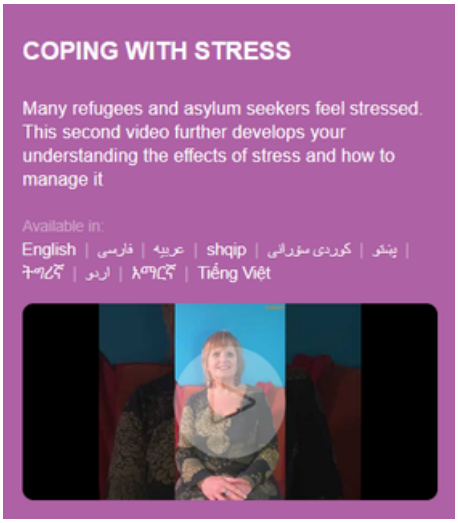
What Helps

We see loneliness come up regularly in therapy sessions, whatever the presenting issue happens to be. Integration is hard work, and it doesn't happen automatically just because someone is physically safe. It takes time, and it takes other people meeting young people halfway.

The encouraging part is that this doesn't require anything grand. Small, consistent gestures make a genuine difference a greeting, an invitation, someone taking the time to ask a real question and listen to the answer.

Talk to others about the needs of other children talk to your children about the needs of other children. Through compassionate and curious conversations, we enable an openness of the needs of others.

Understanding what young asylum seekers and refugees are carrying and choosing not to look away from it is the first step towards empathy. Empathy, in turn, is what makes room for someone to feel a little less alone.

Useful Resources

- If you work with children and young people think about signing up for the Healing Classrooms
- Encourage your school to sign up as a school of sanctuary
- Solace Webinars
- Solace FREE e-Learning for all helping professionals
- Solace Helpful video resources for refugees and people seeking safety in many languages