One in four Gen Z would rather talk to AI than a real person as concerns about loneliness soars

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- ***New research reveals rising loneliness among young people, with many choosing 'digital comfort' over human connection***
- ***One in four (25%) young people find it easier to talk to an AI than a real person and 14% would turn to an AI when feeling lonely***
- ***65% said they'd cancelled social plans to spend time online instead***
- ***Nearly half (48%) say home is where they feel most lonely, whilst one in five (19%) feel unsafe or unwelcome in public spaces***
- ***58% of Gen Z are worried about loneliness affecting Gen Alpha***

A new UK?wide study of Gen Z shows loneliness is becoming an everyday experience for millions of young adults, and one in four are now looking to artificial intelligence (AI) for companionship.

The survey, commissioned by Marmalade Trust ahead of Loneliness Awareness Week (June 15-21) reveals how loneliness is increasingly shaping young people's day-to-day lives, relationships and wellbeing. The research, based on a survey of 2,000 18–29?year?olds, sheds light on how many Gen Z are choosing digital substitutes over human connections.

Two-thirds (67%) of Gen Z say they feel lonely at least once a week, while more than one in four (28%) experience loneliness several times a day. Based on national population data, this equates to around 6.9 million[1] young people experiencing loneliness at least weekly. The research also shows loneliness rates amongst young adults are increasing, with 44% feeling lonelier than they did a year ago and 72% believing it is more common among their age group than among older generations. Just 33% say they feel less lonely than they did 12 months ago.

While the triggers are varied, digital life sits at the heart of the issue. Almost half (48%) of respondents say social media makes them feel lonelier, compared with only 30% who feel it helps them connect. One in three women (34%) attribute their loneliness to comparing themselves to others online, far higher than the 22% of men who said the same. What's more, basic social interaction is becoming harder for some young people. More than four in ten (42%) say they feel intimidated by small talk with someone they don't know, while 27% say making or answering a phone call makes them anxious.

Yet despite this, many young people are using technology itself to ease their social isolation. One in four (25%) say that talking to an AI chatbot feels easier than talking to a real person, and 14% confess they would turn to an AI or a virtual assistant when feeling lonely. Around one in five (18%) say these AI conversations actually make them feel less lonely, with the top reasons being that AI is always available, never judges, and feels easier to open up to.

Even in social settings, a sense of disconnection persists. Nearly three quarters of Gen Z (74%) say they sometimes feel lonely when surrounded by others, and 41% often do. Almost half (48%) say home is where they feel most lonely, underlining how hidden loneliness can be even in familiar spaces. 65% admit they have at times cancelled in-person plans to spend time online instead. Notably, almost one in five (19%) say they feel unsafe or unwelcome in public spaces, rising sharply among certain groups, such as non-binary young people. This suggests the issue is not only about too much time online, but also about whether young people feel they belong in real-world spaces.

Despite loneliness being so widespread, it remains difficult to talk about openly and continues to carry stigma. A significant proportion of Gen Z say they would rather admit to feeling anxious than lonely (45% v 26%). Meanwhile, only 28% feel comfortable discussing loneliness with a partner.

According to Amy Perrin, Founder and CEO of Marmalade Trust which runs Loneliness Awareness Week: "These results highlight a growing shift in how young people cope with feeling lonely or isolated, with technology playing an increasingly prominent role. For some this compounds their emotions, whilst others find genuine connection through online communities and interactions.

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“Feeling lonely is nothing to be ashamed of. It’s an entirely natural emotion, but the high rates of everyday loneliness amongst Gen Z is concerning. There is no one size fits all answer to loneliness, but if we talk about it more we can work out what works for us as individuals. It’s why our campaign this year is ‘Giving Loneliness a Voice’. On our 10-year anniversary, Loneliness Awareness Week aims to reduce stigma by encouraging people to share experiences and start conversations that replace isolation with connection.”

The consequences of loneliness for Gen Z are already visible. Nearly half (45%) say their mental health has suffered, 42% report lower confidence or self-esteem, and 30% link it to physical symptoms such as sleep problems and poor diet. For others, the impacts are more practical. 18% say loneliness has affected their studies, and 16% - equating to over 1.5 million[2]
Gen Z - believe it has hindered their career prospects. This underlines that loneliness is not just a feeling, it can also shape people’s futures.

Even so, young people have clear ideas about how to rebuild connection. More than a third (37%) want more free and welcoming spaces where people can meet face-to-face, while 33% call for better access to mental health support, and 22% believe stricter social media design rules could make a difference.

Many are also looking beyond their own cohort. 58% worry that loneliness will be even worse for Generation Alpha, with nearly one in five feeling “very worried” about the future for younger children. Their advice to Gen A - spend more time with friends, less time online, get outside into nature, or take up hobbies that bring joy and belonging.

Marmalade Trust is encouraging people to use Loneliness Awareness Week to start conversations, reach out to someone who may be struggling and help give loneliness a voice. Full details on Marmalade Trust’s Loneliness Awareness week can be found
here: https://www.lonelinessawarenessweek.org/take-part

[1] ONS Population and Migration figures mid 2024 (table 3) shows 10.3m people between 18-29 years old (67% is 6.9m)

[2] ONS Population and Migration figures mid 2024 (table 3) shows 10.3m people between 18-29 years old (16% is 1.648m)

Company Contact:

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Marmalade Trust

E. info@marmaladetrust.org
W. https://www.marmaladetrust.org/

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