

This is how it feels to be lonely



A report on migrants and refugees'
experiences with loneliness in London



The Forum is a registered charity that was set up in 1993 by migrant and refugee community leaders to address their communities' integration needs – ranging from lack of services to institutional discrimination in immigration, health, education, welfare and employment.

The Forum supports migrant and refugee communities and individuals in their integration into British society. We do this through initiatives that practically address their needs and the exclusion they experience, give them skills and knowledge that empower them to participate and facilitate inclusion, and provide them with platforms and opportunities to influence debates and decisions that affect them.

Do you want to know more about The Forum?

Visit us! <http://migrantforum.org.uk> 2 Thorpe Close, London W10 5XL

Call us! 020 8964 4815

Write us! info@mrcf.org.uk

Like us! <https://www.facebook.com/LondonMRCF>

Follow us! https://twitter.com/MRCF_London

Acknowledgments

Author: Panos Christodoulou

Research team: Heike Langbein, Cristina Patriarca, Nadia Sampong, Francesca Valerio and Panos Christodoulou.

The research team would like to thank:

Tish Kester, Sue Macmillan and Jeff Samuelson for their support and facilitation of this work through their workshops and educational activities with the Forum's clients

Anvita Madan-Bahel and Dr Hamodi Kayal for their advice and for sharing their professional experience in physical health issues

Jessica Kennedy and Zrinka Bralo for their critical revision of the manuscript

Last but not least, we are deeply thankful to all of those who gave their time and participated in the interviews. This research would not be feasible without their kind willingness to share their experiences.

Throughout this report, references are included as hyperlinks. If you are reading this in print, please visit <http://migrantforum.org.uk> for the online version, where you can access the hyperlinks.

*The title of the research (*This is how it feels to be lonely*) is inspired by the 1990 single “*This is how it feels*” by the alternative rock band *Inspiral Carpets*.

*“My loneliness was
a painful and
disturbing
realisation of being
unaccepted and
unloved, of being
alone and having no
other choice...”*

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Executive summary	6
Introduction	8
Policy context	10
Key findings	14
Conclusion	19
Case studies	21
Appendix	27

*“Here the culture
and the people are
different. I was
excited when I first
arrived in the UK
but soon I realised
how difficult
everything was...”*

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This paper analyses the views of refugees and migrants¹ who participated in The Forum's activities between September 2013 and June 2014, and finds that loneliness and isolation are the major challenges that they face in the UK.

Interviews were undertaken with people who participate in The Forum's New Beginnings mentoring project and stakeholders with experience in integration, health and social issues and services. Data were also drawn from information gathered by The Forum as part of its mentoring project and from its database. The research team participated with The Forum's members in activities and educational workshops, studied the policy context and conducted a modest review on previous research on integration issues, isolation and loneliness.

KEY FINDINGS

All our interviewees stated that they have faced or they still face problems related to loneliness. Moreover, 58% of them described loneliness and isolation as their biggest challenge in London.

Other challenges commonly stated and related with loneliness and isolation were:

- Loss of Family and Friends
- Lack of social networks
- Language barriers
- Lack of access to services and resources
- Loss of status
- Loss of identity
- Loss of job or career
- Cultural differences
- Discrimination and stigma connected to being a foreigner
- Isolating impact of government policies

These challenges are inter-related and overlapping, trapping those who face them into a vicious circle and leading them to more isolation and loneliness and further damaging their health.

Loneliness is extremely prevalent among migrants and refugees. Feeling of loneliness is associated with increased morbidity and mortality and reduced quality of life. The NHS would receive less pressure and save money if specific governmental policies, that affect migrants and refugees' lives, were amended.

IMPACT OF COMMUNITY-BASED INTERVENTIONS

The Forum, with its Mentoring Project, assists its member to overcome isolation and confront their loneliness. The Forum's experience has shown that:

- Keeping people connected and active in difficult times works well to tackle loneliness.
- Volunteering reduces exclusion, social isolation and loneliness.
- Practical support can affect attitude, since a positive change can have a positive impact on their physical and mental health.
- Isolated people tend to feel lonelier when they are distressed; building trust and relationships with others develop mentees' skills to manage stressful situations.
- Attending educational activities is beneficial for mentees' confidence and wellbeing.
- Developing community-based support networks keeps people active within the community.
- Giving people stability enables them to think about their future and maintain connections.

¹ Members of The Forum are migrants, refugees and asylum seekers.

"I never had big losses in my life.

Then suddenly I kind of lost everything – family, friends, a comfortable environment, a culture I understood and my identity.

From time to time I had moments when I thought of going back to my country of origin and regain all I lost.

But then you are just kind of getting used to being lonely."

INTRODUCTION

The Forum's members – vulnerable migrants, refugees and asylum seekers – represent an invisible population whose needs are not often discussed. Among their essential needs is to feel integrated: as our members state, to feel that the UK has become a “home away from home”².

This research aims to explore this process, in order to identify and overcome the barriers to integration that people face. During interviews with a random sample of our members, in reply to the question “*What is the major challenge that you face in London?*”, the majority (58%) used answers related to loneliness and isolation (“I am alone”, “I feel lonely”, “I have no one”, “I feel alienated”, “I am isolated” etc.). We therefore decided to focus this research on loneliness, as the major problem that our members face while settling into the UK. More specifically, we:

- Examine the experiences of loneliness in people who use The Forum.
- Identify their needs to better understand how we can tackle the feeling of loneliness and, subsequently, facilitate people’s integration.
- Make recommendations to improve practices that can contribute to loneliness.

METHODOLOGY

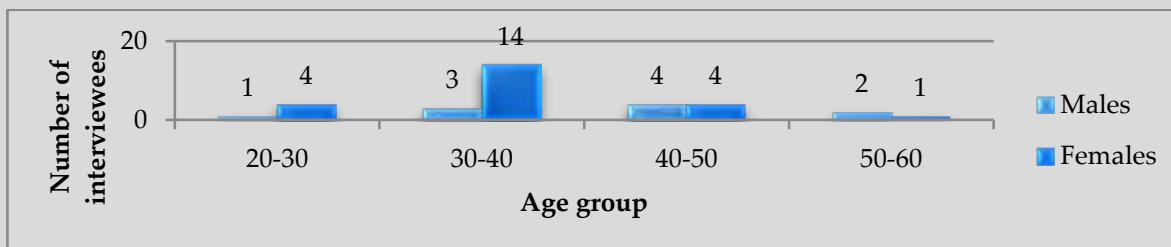
This research is based on interviews, data collected from individuals who use The Forum and a review of relevant literature. We started by exploring integration issues raised by our members. This allowed us to identify our main focus and shaped the design of interview questions.

INTERVIEWS

People who participate in The Forum’s New Beginnings mentoring project³ (mentors and mentees)⁴ and stakeholders with experience and expertise in integration, health and social issues and services (such as doctors, psychologists and social servants) were interviewed between May and June 2014. Participants of New Beginnings project also took part in semi-structured interviews about the experiences and challenges they have encountered since their arrival in the UK. Interview questions were designed to explore people’s overall experience of integration and to cover key integration issues raised by The Forum’s members, or identified by staff and from other research. Interviews were transcribed and analysed. This qualitative data enabled us to gain an in-depth understanding of how integration and health issues interrelate.

Interviews were conducted with 33 people (23 women and 10 men) of ages ranging from 25 to 60 years (median age 35 years) (Figure 1). Participants came from 22 different countries and all but one participant were living in London at the time. They had stayed in the UK between 3 months and 36 years (median 9 years).

Figure 1: Age and sex of 33 interviewees



Participants came from: Sudan (4), Iran and Nigeria (3), Afghanistan, Australia, Italy and Iraq (2 each) and Bangladesh, Cameroon, DCR, Egypt, Ethiopia, France, Kuwait, Morocco, Poland, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, Tanzania,

² See <http://migrantforumentoring.blogspot.co.uk>.

³ New Beginnings supports refugees, migrants and asylum seekers who are isolated or need support to build confidence, access services and develop skills so that they can build happier lives in London. Alongside mentoring, the project runs group activities including self-advocacy trainings, English classes, theatre workshops, knitting and sewing classes, digital drop-in classes, blog team, women’s group, men’s group, youth group and Cultural Friday.

⁴ All interviewees’ names have been changed for confidentiality reasons.

Uganda, Ukraine and Yemen (1 each). Most came from Africa, Asia or the Middle East (Figure 2). Participants' status varied: most were asylum seekers; others had been granted refugee status, had indefinite leave to remain, were European citizens, had UK citizenship, held spousal visas or family reunion visas. One was undocumented (Figure 3).

Figure 2: Region of origin of interviewees

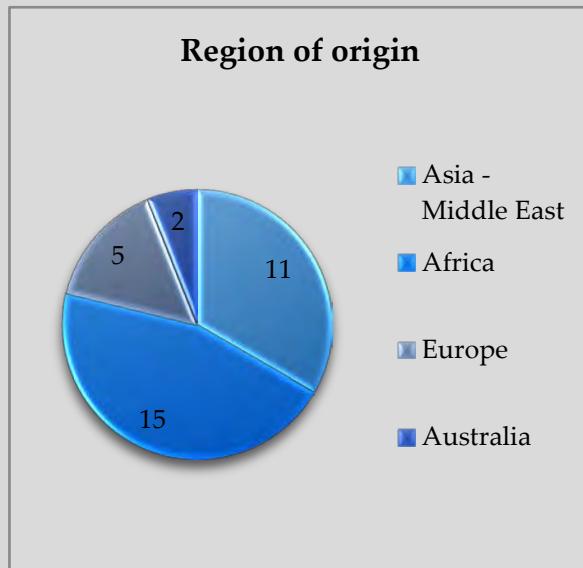
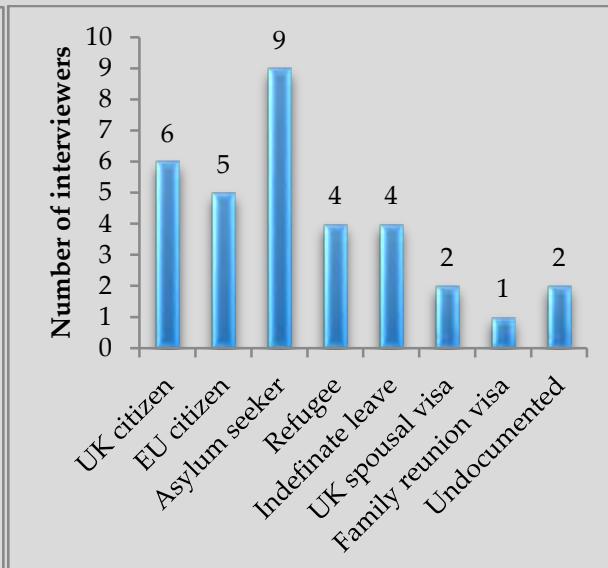


Figure 3: UK immigration status of interviewees



DATABASES

Data were also drawn from information routinely gathered by The Forum and from its database used by staff in their everyday work. This has been used to provide a quantitative background to issues raised in interviews and focus groups. The data cover the period between September 2013 and June 2014, relate to volunteers involved in the project and those who sought support. This included:

53 volunteers who support The Forum's mentoring project

70 participants in the mentoring project

412 hours of educational workshops and classes

108 migrants and refugees who received one-to-one support on matters such as housing, welfare, benefits and education

23 mentees who were supported weekly by their mentors.

Additionally, for a three-week-period we collected additional information by participating along with The Forum's members in different activities and educational workshops, such as English lessons, Cultural Friday sessions, outings and art classes. The activities were structured to enable participants to describe their feelings regarding their lives in the UK and the challenges they face. Participants also expressed how they felt about the support they received in the UK and how far this met their needs. This formed an important source of information for the report. Moreover, we studied the policy context and conducted a modest review on previous research. The review was focused on literature that highlights integration issues, isolation and loneliness.

CONTEXT

Migrants and refugees are among the most vulnerable groups in relation to experiencing loneliness. When they arrive in reception country, they face a completely different life in a strange new environment. This situation, in combination with government policies, can make migrants and refugees' journey traumatic and damaging for their well-being. Restrictions to entitlements to welfare services and exclusions in employment and housing, along with the possibility of detention and removal, are social disconnection factors that are associated with loneliness and can further impact on health and wellbeing. Because of these restrictions, migrants and refugees feel discriminated, excluded, unloved and lonelier.

Loneliness and social isolation have negative effects on health, particularly increased mortality and impaired quality of life. Increasing prevalence of loneliness is expected to increase costs of the NHS and social care systems in the UK. Promoting mental well-being and preventing mental health and other problems associated with loneliness is likely to significantly reduce the economic burden the NHS is facing due to these conditions.

POLICY CONTEXT

Loneliness affects almost all of us at some point during our life. According to a Mental Health Foundation survey only 22% of us never feel lonely ([Griffin, 2010](#)). The groups most vulnerable to experiencing loneliness are the elderly, the unemployed, people with long-term mental problems, people living in poverty and immigrants.

Moving country, regardless of why and how, can be a very isolating experience. Most migrants and refugees who come to The Forum are alone and unsupported in the UK. When they arrive, they are faced with a completely different life in a strange new environment. This situation, in combination with government policies and popular myths about immigration that create a hostile environment for migrants, can make the experience of migration difficult and potentially traumatic. This is particularly true for refugees who have been traumatised through experiences of fear, violence, torture or persecution. [Sinnerbrink et al \(1997\)](#) and [Porter and Haslam \(2005\)](#) have shown that, worldwide, displaced persons and asylum seekers report high rates of pre-migration trauma and that refugees present higher rates of psychopathological disorder compared with non-refugee groups. [Robjant et al \(2009\)](#) shows how asylum procedures lead to an increase in the mental health problems of already traumatised refugees who arrived in the West seeking protection.

In the UK, people who claim asylum have to deal with a strictly controlled, complex system that is based on tough decision-making: 60% of asylum initial decisions [in the first quarter of 2013](#) were refusals. Many asylum seekers struggle to access free, high quality legal advice, essential for those who are unable to work or receive benefits owing to their immigration status. Initial Home Office decision-making remains poor: [a 2011 Asylum Aid study](#) found 50% of negative decisions against women were later overturned by the courts. Many asylum seekers are denied legal aid to appeal a decision. Without proper legal support – or any support at all – claims may be wrongly rejected. Refugee Action's [Access to Justice Project](#) found that 64% of the asylum seekers it saw had been wrongly refused a legal aid lawyer for their asylum appeal.

In many cases, asylum seekers experience detention in the UK. Even when not detained, people are not permitted to work, and lack means to support themselves. Whilst claims are processed, people can access asylum support in the form of accommodation and/or cash support. These benefits are quickly lost if their claim is refused. In any case, levels of support are typically much lower than those provided through the mainstream benefits system, forcing asylum seekers into poverty. [A briefing from The Children's Society](#), highlighting the gap between asylum support and mainstream benefits, found that the UK asylum system forces thousands of children to live in severe poverty. Additionally, asylum seekers cannot choose where they live. The UK Border Agency (UKBA) makes only one offer of accommodation, which asylum seekers are expected to accept. Accommodation allocated is often outside London and the South East. Nearly always places offered are 'hard to let' in areas where other people do not want to live.

The situation for migrants is not better; the core of government policy is designed to make the UK a '[hostile environment](#)' and [prioritises border security and the reduction of immigration](#). Its principle tool to do so is the 2014 Immigration Act, which:

- introduces restrictions to the appeals system and changes to removals processes, affecting those who are already subject to poor Home Office decision-making;
- commences a [new charging regime](#) for migrants seeking to access UK healthcare;
- requires private landlords to check the immigration status of their tenants;
- requires banks to check against immigration offenders databases before opening accounts;
- introduces new powers to check driving licence applicants' immigration status before issuing a licence and revoking them where immigrants are found to have overstayed.

In addition, the government has [restricted migrant's access to benefits](#). These include restrictions and exclusions in accessing welfare, including housing benefit, Job Seekers Allowance (JSA), child benefits and Child Tax Credit.

IMPACT ON HEALTH, MENTAL WELL BEING AND LONELINESS

Immigration policies, [public hostility](#) and controversial government actions such as '[Go Home' vans](#) create a toxic atmosphere for all migrants that reinforces their vulnerability, isolation and loneliness. Loneliness and social isolation have negative effects on health, associated with increased mortality and impaired quality of life. [Griffin \(2010\)](#) shows that mental health problems occur more frequently in unequal societies that leave behind more vulnerable people. In particular, loneliness has its own set of characteristics that have specific implications on physical and mental health ([Griffin 2010](#)). [Hawley et al \(2010\)](#) and [Cacioppo & Patrick \(2008\)](#) have shown that loneliness exposes people to stress. Loneliness is related to sleep deprivation, leads to self-destructive habits and addictions (such as alcohol and drugs), weakens willpower and increases the likelihood that people indulge in behaviour that is damaging to their health. Lack of social networks and support has a significant impact on health since it produces long-term damage to physiological health ([Holt-Lunstad et al 2010](#); [Cacioppo & Patrick 2009](#)). [Steptoe et al \(2013\)](#) have also linked loneliness with increased risk of cardiovascular disease, elevated blood pressure and cortisol, and heightened inflammatory responses to stress.

[Paul & Moser \(2009\)](#), [Marcus \(2012\)](#) and [Griffin \(2010\)](#) have associated unemployment with poor physical and mental health, with major impacts on the loneliness of the individual and on their spouse and family. For migrants and refugees already facing higher rates of mental health problems, this poses an additional risk to mental health. Among Somali migrants in London, employment status was the strongest predictor of major depression and aggregated psychological disorder ([Warfa et al 2012](#)). Unemployment has many other health impacts including an increased risk of mortality and cardiovascular disease ([Siegrist et al 2010](#)).

Restrictions and exclusions in housing benefits can lead migrants and refugees to unsuitable accommodation, directly linked to health damage. Poor housing conditions are associated with increased rates of anxiety and depression among immigrants in London. Living in cold, damp, dangerous homes and/or in deprived areas, with no adequate access to green spaces, increases the risk of mental health difficulties, respiratory illness, cardiovascular disease and stroke ([Barton & Pretty 2010](#); [Thomson et al 2013](#)).

Immigration detention is an ongoing trauma for detainees. It can reactivate and exacerbate previous traumas and may create frustration and a sense of having no future. [Fazel & Silove \(2006\)](#), [Pourgourides \(1997\)](#) and [Keller et al \(2003\)](#) connect the experience of immigration detention to an adverse effect on mental health. Asylum seekers who have been detained have been exposed to an additional set of stressor experiences – loss of liberty, social isolation, or uncertainty regarding return to their country of origin. They are more depressed and suicidal, and face anxiety, extreme post-traumatic stress, panic, increased physical pain/discomfort and emotional distress. These harmful effects of detention remain, despite initial improvement following release, and can be further aggravated if there is continued uncertainty over their immigration status ([Steel et al 2006](#)).

IMPACT ON HEALTH SERVICES

Isolation and mental health problems are further exacerbated, as migrants and refugees often experience barriers to accessing health care. These include inadequate information, lack of interpreting services, lack of access to reliable transport because of poverty or poor services in areas of deprivation where many migrants live, and confusion amongst NHS staff around entitlement to some types of services ([Phillimore et al. 2010](#); [Johnson 2006](#)). A disproportionate number of migrants and refugees present themselves at hospital accident and emergency services

(A&E) as a first point of contact with the NHS, instead of primary care services such as GPs. From our experience, those who do attend health services do so because they have no one else to talk to. One of the main reasons for migrants and refugees' visits to A&E departments is for compulsory psychiatric treatment.

The increased prevalence of loneliness amongst migrants and refugees' and its associated health problems will increase costs to the NHS and social care systems in the UK. The economic and social costs of mental health problems in England were estimated at £105 billion in 2009/10 ([Centre for Mental Health](#)). This estimate is likely to increase when additional costs are taken into account, such as those due to chronic illness associated with mental health. The NHS spends at least £2.5 billion pounds per year in treating people with physical and mental problems associated with living in poor housing conditions ([Friedman 2010](#)). An additional £2 billion pounds of obesity treatment and reduced mental health admissions could be saved by increased access to parks ([Groundwork 2011](#); [Wheater et al 2007](#)).

Promoting mental well-being and preventing the health problems associated with loneliness is likely to reduce the economic burden of the NHS. The economic benefits of migrants and refugees' mental wellbeing have not been well studied. However, studies suggest that mental health promotion is associated with significant economic benefits. [Friedli & Parsonage \(2009\)](#) estimate that promoting mental wellbeing in a single year cohort of children in Wales could lead to benefits worth over £1 billion. [Robjant et al \(2009\)](#) argue that, since migrants and refugees face greater predisposition to these problems compared to other population groups, promoting mental wellbeing in migrants and refugees is likely to provide even greater economic benefits.

KEY FINDINGS

There are numerous reasons for migration, from seeking out better opportunities to finding a safer and more secure life. The people that we interviewed for the purpose of this research moved to the UK for different reasons: 14 of the 33 moved to seek international protection, 4 to find work, 3 for studies, 1 to avoid domestic violence, 1 for the experience of living abroad. The remaining 10 interviewees declined to answer this question.

All our interviewees, regardless of the duration of their stay in the UK, stated that they have faced or they still face problems related to loneliness. More than half (58%) of them described loneliness and isolation as their biggest challenge while living in London.

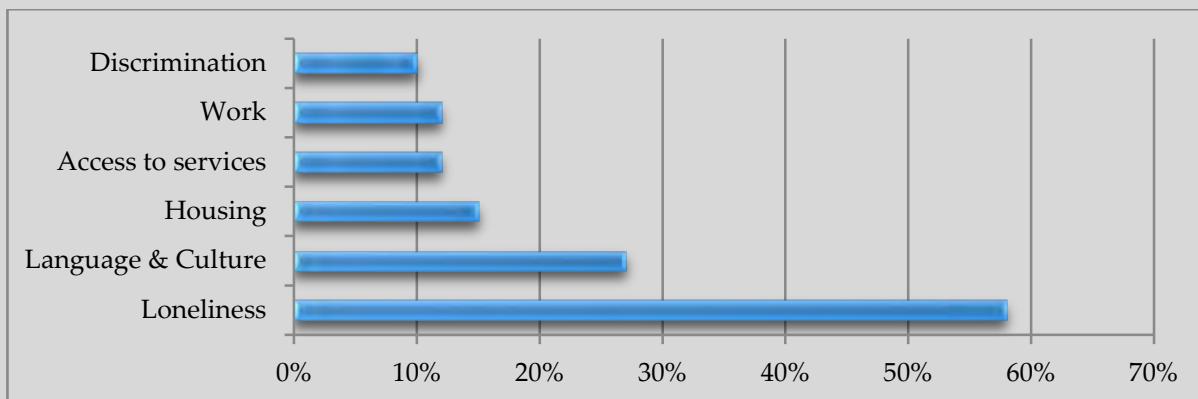
"I felt very lonely in London. Loneliness was a hard challenge for me..." - Assa

"I was feeling alienated. My loneliness was a painful and disturbing realisation of being unaccepted and unloved, of being alone and having no other choice..." - Jo

"I did feel very lonely in London. I felt quite isolated and was most relieved to return to live in my country of origin..." - Reta

Other common challenges were: language, culture, housing, discrimination, access to services and work (Figure 4). Data collected from the interviews and the Forum's database, it suggest that migrants and refugees face other issues, such as financial problems, bureaucracy relating to immigration claims, lack of legal aid and uncertainty and delays in gaining legal status.

Figure 4: Challenges to integration as reported by 33 interviewees



All these challenges interrelate and overlap, trapping those who face them into a vicious circle. The participants of the research in many cases mentioned that, due to language barriers and cultural differences, they were unable to navigate the UK systems and procedures. Additionally, they found severe difficulties in accessing services or resources, joining new social networks, finding employment and other amenities (such as housing) and making new friends. As a result they felt like outsiders, which further increased their loneliness.

Language barriers impede people from explaining their perspective. In regards to asylum claims, many of those who sought or were seeking asylum often felt like they are not listened to and not understood. They found it very difficult that they had to apply for permission to stay in the country. They often felt that people did not believe their story; that makes them feel even more alienated and alone.

"There was a language obstacle. Even I thought I knew English very well before coming to the UK I had to live there for a while to start to understand it well." - Assa

"My first year in the UK I had language problems. It was the biggest problem I faced..." - Jo

"The culture is different. People are different. All this makes me feel even more lonely." - Amira



Workshops at The Forum: During this particular workshop people have worked together and created fancy candles decorated with flowers they have picked in the park. The workshop was particularly enjoyed and was an occasion during which individuals have learnt some craft skills.

"Cultural barriers were a major challenge. I found it difficult to meet new people..." - Reta

"Here the culture and the people are different. I was excited when I first arrived in the UK but soon I realised how difficult everything was..." - Ramiz

There is a stigma connected to being an asylum seeker, a refugee, a migrant, or a foreigner. In most cases, participants stated that they did not feel welcome in the UK and that they had lost their identity.

"I feel lonely everywhere, not just in London. People don't like migrants, especially if you have the face of an Arab or a Muslim..." - Abdi

"I felt remarkably unwelcome in the UK. There was a distinct feeling that you, as a 'foreigner' were not welcome..." - Reta

"I was a victim of bullying at College because of my language. That situation made me feel more lonely than ever..." - Azela

"I never had big losses in my life. Then suddenly I kind of lost everything –family, friends, a comfortable environment, a culture I understood and my identity. From time to time I had moments when I thought of going back to my country of origin and regain all I lost. But then you are just kind of getting used to being lonely". - Amira

"The major problem that I faced here was the loss of my identity and the stigma of being different. I don't think people understand how traumatic and stressful it is unless they have personally gone through it..." - Kamil

"I left my country of origin and with that departure, an extended family, a career and a large group of good friends. I was left alone and powerless in the UK..." - Riana

The loss of identity that many migrants and refugees face is given little significance. Migrants might have never experienced something as life changing as this before. Often they cannot identify or understand the feeling and know how to deal with it, so they usually devalue or minimise its significance. This has a substantial impact on their confidence, competence and well-being. All the challenges that migrants and refugees face lead them to experience feelings of sadness, anger, anxiety and stress.

"Many times I wanted to cry. It is not easy feeling excluded..." - Maria

"I face physical and mental problems. My loneliness creates fear and sadness." - Abdi

"Every time I feel depression because of my loneliness, I take my medication and I get counselling. It is not so easy visiting the GP. Every time there is a different GP and I have to explain my problems from scratch..." - Azela

Nine of the 33 interviewees (27%) admitted that they face physical and mental problems that relate to their loneliness. Dealing with such problems is extremely difficult and can be even more difficult when there is no one to turn to for support. Migration means leaving behind friends, family and a support structure that has always been there. For most participants in the research this was important: most of their problems in their country of origin were dealt with by the help of familial and friendship networks. This is not the case in the UK. Here they are at a loss as to where to seek help.

"I left behind, in my country of origin, all of my friends. It's then I started to appreciate friendship more than before." - Assa

"Everyone here is busy with themselves. It is difficult to connect. It becomes more difficult because of the language..." - Safia

"The word 'friend' means a lot to me; A friend is someone that I can trust, I can share things, it's someone who encourages and supports me. People here tend to be reluctant to start new friendships. British culture is to be reserved and to not open up..." - Vera



Decorating "the refuge" - The refuge is a new place that has been created at The Forum in response to the need of mentors and mentees to have a safe place where to create positive connections. People were actively engaged in the decoration and organisation of the room, which gave them the feeling of a space that truly belongs to them, where to feel at home.



Live music session at the Forum - We believe in the effectiveness of providing people with a platform where to build skills and give expression through creativity. Music enables us to take a break from our constant worries and bring out enthusiasm and joy in a positive way.

Ten of the 33 interviewees stated that they turn to their family when they have a problem or have an important issue to discuss; 9 turn to friends. For both of these groups, communicating with friends and family is not easy or frequent because, in most of the cases, the people they trust are not in the UK. Three stated that they don't turn to anybody when they have a problem, while 9 use the Forum.

"When something bothers me I turn to the Forum. I consider the people working there as my friends." - Azela

"My case workers at the Forum and a friend of mine are the people that I turn to when I have a problem." - Abdi

"When I have an important issue to discuss I go to the Forum. There are people there that I know can help me and I can trust them." - Safia

Owing to their situation and experiences, migrants and refugees usually find it difficult to trust and to connect with other people. They don't easily share personal issues and often they do not know that other people are facing similar problems. Moreover they are anxious about being judged for any mental health conditions they may face. They prefer to turn to people in a professional capacity (such as their GP, solicitor, social worker or therapist) but in many cases they do not have social network of healthy relationships.

Support from organisations like The Forum fill an important gap in the lives of isolated, lonely refugees and migrants. The Forum recognises the fact that most of the people that turn to it do not have connections. The mentoring initiative developed by the Forum aims to make people more active, to help them meet new people and to facilitate informal relationships.

"The Forum people always welcome you with a genuine smile. Here, at the Forum, nothing is impossible." - Vera

"The Forum was with me in hard times. Its staff made everything easier for me without ever thinking about my colour, my religion or my gender." - Abdi

"...It is the family atmosphere around the Forum. Both mentors and mentees are quite caring, friendly and helpful. It is a nice and healthy community." - Mona

"The activities at the Forum, and the mentoring project especially, really make people feel less lonely and are of great support for their lives in the UK." - Safia

Through mentoring, The Forum supports refugees, asylum seekers and migrants who are traumatised, isolated and vulnerable, and struggle to access mainstream services in this country. Mentoring and group activities enables them to overcome isolation, develop relationships of trust to aid integration, resolve practical problems in accessing legal advice and development opportunities, build up confidence and skills, and participate in society. The Forum provides advice, signposting and support to secure access to mainstream services, whether housing, social care or benefits. English classes and other educational activities enable people to overcome language barriers and increase knowledge and confidence. Additionally, self-help support groups and health sessions help people to improve mental and overall wellbeing. Finally, through community organising and strategic advocacy and policy work, The Forum provides opportunities and support for individual mentees to speak out about their experiences and share their stories with the rest of society from which they gain a sense of empowerment and recognition.

"My house is far from here, but I come here because of the class. It takes me one hour and 30 minutes but this shows how important it is for me." - Daniel

"The project makes my life worth living by providing me a safe place where to talk." - Assa

"Before coming here I was so alone. I didn't want to go out, talk with people. But since I've been here my life has completely changed. They know what they are doing." - Safia

"The project is brilliant. It is proof that the Forum is different from any other organization I have been to. And I have been to many." - Ramiz

*“I was
left alone
and
powerless
in the
UK.”*

CONCLUSION

Humans are inherently social animals, meaning that loneliness and isolation have negative effects on health and well-being. Loneliness, in particular, has specific implications for mental, physical and societal health. Migrants and refugees are among the population groups on the margins of society who experience loneliness. Regardless of the reasons for migration, in many cases migrants feel isolated in the new country due to:

- Loss of family and friends
- Lack of social networks
- Language barrier
- Lack of access to services and resources
- Loss of status
- Loss of identity
- Loss of job or career
- Cultural differences
- Discrimination and stigma connected to being a foreigner
- Isolating impact of government policies

These challenges are inter-related and overlapping, trapping those who face them into a vicious circle and leading them to more isolation and loneliness, and damaging their health. It is evident that all the above places an extra burden on the NHS.

The Forum, with its mentoring project, fills the gap created by government policies and assists its mentees to overcome isolation and confront their loneliness. The Forum's experience has shown that:

- Keeping people connected and active in difficult times works well to tackle loneliness.
- Volunteering reduces exclusion, social isolation and loneliness.
- Practical support can affect attitude, since a positive change can have a positive impact on their physical and mental health.
- Isolated people tend to feel lonelier when they are distressed; building trust and relationships with others develop mentees' skills to manage stressful situations.
- Attending educational activities is beneficial for mentees' confidence and wellbeing.
- Developing community-based support networks keeps people active within the community.
- Giving people stability enables them to think about their future and maintain connections.

Improved access for migrants and refugees to primary care and to mental health services in particular is likely to reduce NHS costs significantly. Access to primary care will ensure that health issues are treated early, before any illnesses become serious, and thus more intensive and expensive to treat. The evidence outlined above suggests that NHS would be under less pressure and would save money if specific policies that affect lives of immigrants were adjusted to create fair and humane environment for all migrants.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The top five recommendations that come from our research are:

Better accommodation

Creating suitable accommodation, resulting in a better quality of life and reducing NHS costs.

Better welfare support

Better cash benefits - especially having cash to travel around the city and access green and open spaces alongside access to primary health services will reduce the costs of treating diseases, as disease is likely to be treated in early stages not yet requiring hospitalisation.

Permission to work

A change in policies restricting migrants' access to work could have a positive effect to their wellbeing and consequently reduce rates of diseases associated with unemployment and further decrease NHS costs.

Access to language and further education

Building adequate social relationships can increase wellbeing, reducing the burden to the NHS. Learning English and developing skills are essential not only for migrants to develop skills but also to develop social networks and integrate culturally.

Adequate advice and information

This should include representation and legal advice early in the process would prevent situations becoming complicated and would help deal with stress and anxiety and would end vicious circle for many migrants who can integrate very well with very little support at the right time.



CASE STUDIES

Oli's story

He was scared of people and, because of his torture experience, terrified by questions. Another distressing element were CCTV cameras that he found everywhere and reminded him of his past...

Oli arrived in Cardiff in 2006, flying away from Iran on political grounds. In his country of origin he was very active in the political sphere, advocating for women rights and fighting against the oppressive regime. Oli's activities made him a target for the authorities, who arrested, imprisoned and tortured him.

When he arrived in the UK, he applied for asylum but was refused. The immigration process was a traumatic experience for Oli, who was severely psychologically affected by the previous experiences in his home country. In the UK, Oli was confronted with new and unexpected challenges. Everything was different from his country; cities, food, language. He didn't know anybody and was emotionally bewildered. He was scared of people and, because of his torture experience, terrified by questions. Another distressing element were CCTV cameras, that he found everywhere and reminded him of his past. Among the major consequences he is still dealing with are depression, sleeping problems, flashbacks and anger management issues. He is taking medication but difficulties with his GP (lack of understanding and trust), make his treatment sometimes irregular and difficult. His situation has been aggravated due to the lack of direct contact with his family, which he has not seen since he left the country.

Before settling down in London, where he now has been living since 2010, he moved across Britain and Ireland, working illegally in an attempt to be self-sufficient. Gradually, he has built some personal connections and was able to rely on friends for housing and food. Despite this, Oli frequently still hides in his room for days, avoiding any sort of human contact and crying. Indeed, even though he can rely on people he has known in the UK over the years, he does not feel he has friends here, at least in the deepest meaning his cultures gives to this word. As he states, he does not feel that he has real emotional and psychological support that he can count on. Although he is in frequent touch with a couple of people, he feels unable to rely on them for his problems. Therefore, he says, he values the role of the church and The Forum in his life. The Forum in particular has come to be a second home to him, where he can find constant support and share his deepest secrets.

...He needs a logical explanation; why, despite everything life has put him through, is he still being denied some of the most simple and basic things life is made of?

But Oli still feels isolated. He blames the British system itself, which makes it difficult for him to access services and facilities that could make his life more fulfilling and less lonely. He is a former computer engineer in Iran, who has previously enjoyed an intellectually active life, but now he cannot enjoy the simplest of things such as loaning any books from public libraries. Being an asylum seeker does not permit him to open a bank account, which, in the UK, has come to be an essential requirement to access the majority of services. He feels he has been left out of the system and he is on the periphery of society, which reinforces his depression and loneliness. The frustration related to this condition leads him to sadness and anger. As he says, he needs a logical explanation; why, despite everything life has put him through, is he still being denied some of the most simple and basic things life is made of?

Heliana's story

She was a victim of violence by her partner during her late pregnancy. In order to save her life she had to call the police and leave her house but, since none of her friends or her sister was able to take her in, she ended up living in an empty near-derelict room, with no electricity or hot water...

Heliana is from Tanzania and she came to the UK in 2005 on a student visa. She initially pursued a MBA at Leicester University though she was forced to stop her studies to care for her sister who suffered from a mental breakdown. In 2010 she paid a solicitor to submit an application to extend her visa but later she found out that he didn't submit the application. This came as a shock to her. She then decided to instruct a new solicitor to submit a fresh claim on her behalf, based on her new condition as a mother and her established family life in the UK with a Jamaican national.

Life in the UK has not been easy for Heliana. She often feels home-sick and lonely because she is far from her family and the relationship with her only UK-based sister is neither constant nor supportive but rather creating some difficulties to her. Sometimes she is happy to be in the UK because living conditions are better than back home, but sometimes she questions her choices. Her feelings of isolation are also related to the fact that, since her pregnancy, she has been increasingly left alone by her friends, leading Heliana to a condition of severe depression and loneliness. In particular, this is due to the fact that she was left on her own in a moment of deep need, precisely whilst she was a victim of violence by her partner during her late pregnancy. In order to save her life she had to call the police and leave her house but, since none of her friends or her sister was able to take her in, she ended up living in an empty near-derelict room, with no electricity or hot water. Inevitably, this deeply affected her mental condition and caused severe depression.

This traumatic experience, as a consequence of the events she experienced over the past years, made Heliana deeply suspicious towards people. She admits she would like to have a person she could freely speak to and share her concerns. Indeed, Heliana has a deep need to speak with people but she has difficulties in approaching people and opening up to them. She feels uneasy with lots of questions and fears that people have bad intentions towards her. She also feels discriminated by the people around her because of her status and condition. Her mental condition has worsened with the birth of her child; she is constantly afraid that he will be taken away from her.

Heliana says that at The Forum she feels in a safe place and therefore she is more prone to relate with other women or men, express her feelings and engage in some activities. In The Forum Heliana became an enthusiastic member of the Music group and enjoys coming here to take part in the Cultural Fridays, in which she has the opportunity to meet different people, with different backgrounds and share their opinions and thoughts on life. Heliana says The Forum is the only place she trusts because people here are positive and fight for her.



A day out, a different workshop... Away from the nosy and frenzy London, through a story telling activity and a bread making experience, people who participated in this workshop had the opportunity to take a break from their daily lives and express freely their feelings.



English lessons to fight isolation - At The Forum we run 6 different English classes on a weekly basis. Having the opportunity to learn English has proven to be of outmost importance to asylum seekers and refugees. Language can be, indeed, a really strong barrier against integration. Being able to understand and speak English is essential to access the most basic services but also to engage with other people and therefore to fight against loneliness and isolation.

Anieta's story

Anieta describes herself as a happy person ... But while saying this she is crying. After 20 years in the UK, she has been through a lot. At the beginning she struggled with her sense of belonging...

Anieta has been in the UK for 20 years or more and she is a British citizen now. She came here alone from Ethiopia. She has been feeling lonely for a long time but she is now joining different groups and activities that are helping her to feel more happy and engaged in her everyday life. Anieta has been volunteering at the Soup Kitchen Project for three years now and this has made a huge difference to her life. There, as she states, she has the opportunity to meet and help different people, but also build long-lasting relationships. For Anieta, people working at the Soup Kitchen Project have a really important role in her life and have become her family. They call her to join activities and she has the chance to be out of her house, where she spends most of the time crying and feeling sad. Recently, she has also started English classes and a Card Making group, which enable her to develop new skills but also meet new people and practice speaking English. Although she has more than 20 years in the UK, English is still a barrier to her but thanks to the courses she is improving and feels more confident.

Anieta describes herself as a happy person and for that she praises God and the many groups of activities she has joined. But while saying this she is crying. After 20 years in the UK, she has been through a lot. At the beginning she struggled with her sense of belonging. She wouldn't have made it if she hadn't met all her friends while participating in all the above activities. They were and still are an important part of her life. They keep her alive.



Sewing classes at the Forum - This workshop has proven to be a great tool for empowering refugee and asylum seeking women. During the classes they have gained sewing skills and engaged actively on a four-months-long project together. The classes have enabled them to open up to other people and become part of a new community, helping them to demolish those barriers that reinforce feelings of loneliness and isolation.

Dana's story

Isolation, for her and her family, is not a matter of status rather a lack of consistent connections in the society around them...

She had an urgent need to get all of her problems, emotions and worries off of her chest, that she started speaking for a long time in her own language, although she knew that her counsellor could not understand her...

Dana is from Afghanistan but has received British citizenship. She experienced different traumatic events in her life, such as the terror of the Taliban regime, war, the loss of a family member and violence by her husband. She arrived in the UK to join her father, who moved here.

She has been diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and depression. Despite the fact that she is a British Citizen and entitled to work, she is not employed at the moment but rather lives a quite isolated life, which makes her feel very lonely. She is also the primary carer for her sister, who is also diagnosed with PTSD, depression and obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD).

Reuniting with her family in the UK was helpful for her to escape from the violence of her husband but is also a reason for her isolation from British society, and the difficulties she faces with the English language. Isolation, for her and her family, is not a matter of status rather a lack of consistent connections in the society around them. Even though she has been based in the UK since 2005, she has no close friends. She does not trust people, does not want to speak with strangers, especially about her past and, apart from her sisters and father, she has no contacts or connections. This, along with the fact that she still barely speaks English, reinforces her insecurity and loneliness.

The people she meets on a daily-basis are only the people she meets at The Forum. She likes going there because –as she says- the people at The Forum are friendly and energetic. According to Dana, The Forum is a safe place, where her and her family find support and psychological and emotional help to deal with the strong challenges they face.

Dana confides that she needs to talk with people who are not part of her family. As she states, when she first came to The Forum, she stayed there for long periods trying to speak as much as possible with someone. In her first counselling session at The Forum, she says that she had an urgent need to get all of her problems, emotions and worries off of her chest, that she started speaking for a long time in her own language, although she knew that her counsellor could not understand her.

Dana now joins several groups, especially the sewing classes, and hopes to be able to use the skills she acquired here to find a proper job and to be able to start her own independent life.

Baker's story

Baker says that life forced him to learn how to constantly fight for his existence and manage to survive.

Baker came here alone from Nigeria, unable to count on the support of family and friends. He had to face a new system and new challenges on his own, but during all the years he has been in the UK he got involved in a variety of organisations and built strong personal connections that helped him in times of need and difficulties.

Baker says that life forced him to learn how to constantly fight for his existence and manage to survive. He faced enormous difficulties; life threatening events back in his country of origin, which forced him to immigrate, his wife's severe depression and his daughter's down's syndrome. Despite these challenges, Baker has successfully become integrated in the community he is part of. He has joined several different activities and now he is trained to hold a poetry group. He states that thanks to The Forum he has been able to find some practical but also emotional assistance that has encouraged him and given him the confidence to try and accomplish his ambitions. Most importantly, the fact that he recently obtained legal status in the UK, has given him a new lease of life.



English lessons to fight isolation - At The Forum we run 6 different English classes on a weekly basis. Having the opportunity to learn English has proven to be of outmost importance to asylum seekers and refugees. Language can be, indeed, a really strong barrier against integration. Being able to understand and speak English is essential to access the most basic services but also to engage with other people and therefore to fight against loneliness and isolation.

APPENDIX

Table 1: Characteristics of 13 people that were interviewed for this project

ID	Age	Age group	Sex	Country of origin	Years in the UK	Status in the UK
1	49	40-50	Female	Morocco	36	British citizen
2	35	30-40	Male	Iran	10	Asylum seeker
3	39	30-40	Female	Nigeria	10	Asylum seeker
4	28	20-30	Male	Iraq	11	Refugee
5	31	30-40	Male	Sierra Leone	11	Asylum seeker
6	36	30-40	Female	Cameroon	0.25	Family reunion visa
7	38	30-40	Male	Iran	8	Asylum seeker
8	37	30-40	Female	Tanzania	9	undocumented
9	48	40-50	Female	Ethiopia	20	British citizen
10	32	30-40	Female	Afghanistan	11	British citizen
11	44	40-50	Male	Nigeria	7	Asylum seeker
12	32	30-40	Female	Sudan	2	Refugee
13	44	40-50	Female	Bangladesh	15	Asylum seeker
14	34	30-40	Female	Uganda		Asylum seeker
15	36	30-40	Female	Afghanistan	11	ILR
16	47	40-50	Male	Nigeria	15	Asylum seeker
17	26	20-30	Female	Kuwait	7	Refugee
18	32	30-40	Female	Italy	4	EU national
19	54	50-60	Female	Italy	7	EU national
20	44	40-50	Male	DRC	11	ILR
21	29	20-30	Female	France	6	EU national
22	34	30-40	Female	Ukraine	3	EEA family permit
23	46	40-50	Male	Iran	4	Refugee
24	34	30-40	Female	Yemen	10	British citizen
25	34	30-40	Female	Poland	11	EU national
26	57	50-60	Male	Sudan	24	British citizen
27	25	20-30	Female	Australia		UK spouse visa
28	32	30-40	Female	Australia	1	UK spouse visa
29	28	20-30	Female	Rwanda	13	ILR
30	34	30-40	Female	Egypt	3	ILR
31	32	30-40	Female	Sudan	2	UK spouse visa
32	60	50-60	Male	Iraq	6	Asylum seeker
33	44	40-50	Female	Sudan	6	British citizen

“I felt remarkably unwelcome in the UK. There was a distinct feeling that you, as a ‘foreigner’ were not welcome...”



The Forum

2 Thorpe Close, London W10 5XL

www.migrantforum.org.uk



info@mrcf.org.uk

Charity no. 1077116
Company no. 3673737

t. 020 8964 4815
f. 020 8968 1692