

# Having the Conversation

Scripts and prompts for the conversations nobody wants to start

---

This guide is provided by terminal2.org.  
It is not a substitute for professional medical advice.

## About This Guide

---

The hardest conversations about loneliness are the ones we never have. We don't want to admit we're struggling. We don't want to burden our children. We don't want our doctors to think we can't cope. We don't know how to tell a partner that something important between us has faded.

This guide is different from most. It doesn't just tell you what to do — it gives you the actual words. Research in communication psychology shows that having a prepared script significantly increases the likelihood of initiating a difficult conversation. You don't have to say these words exactly. But having them gives you a place to start.

### How to Use This Guide

- Find the section that fits your situation
- Read the context — understand when and why to use the script
- Practice the words out loud before the conversation (this matters more than most people expect)
- Adapt the language to sound like you — the feeling matters more than the exact phrasing
- Expect the conversation to be imperfect — that is normal and okay

## Section 1: How Do I Tell My Doctor I'm Lonely?

---

Many older adults feel embarrassed telling their doctor they're lonely — it can feel like admitting failure. But research published in JAMA found that when patients raised social concerns directly, physicians were significantly more likely to address them and make helpful referrals. Your doctor cannot help with what they don't know about.

### Before the Appointment

Consider writing it down on a piece of paper and handing it to your doctor or nurse when you arrive: "I want to talk about feeling isolated. I think it's affecting my health." This removes the need to say it out loud first.

### The Words:

"I've been feeling isolated lately, and I think it might be affecting my health. I'd like to talk about it if we have time."

When to use it: At the start of your appointment, or write it on the intake form.

What to expect: Your doctor may ask follow-up questions about your daily life, living situation, and social contacts. This is normal — they are trying to understand your situation, not judge it.

### The Words:

"I read that loneliness has real health effects — as serious as smoking. I think I'm experiencing that. What can we do?"

When to use it: If you find it easier to introduce the topic through information rather than emotion.

What to expect: Framing it as a health topic often makes it feel less personal and easier to discuss. Your doctor may screen you with a brief questionnaire or refer you to a social worker.

### The Words:

"I want to tell you something I haven't told anyone. I'm very lonely. Most days I don't talk to anyone. I didn't know who else to tell."

When to use it: If you want to be direct and feel ready to be vulnerable.

What to expect: A good physician will respond with warmth and take this seriously. If they don't, consider asking for a referral to a social worker or counselor. You deserve to be heard.

### The Words:

"One of the things I struggle with most is that my medications have affected my interest in intimacy. I haven't known how to bring it up."

When to use it: To raise medication side effects affecting intimacy — a topic many people never bring up.

What to expect: Your doctor can review your medications, discuss alternatives, or refer you to a specialist. This is a medical question, not a personal failing.

## Section 2: How Do I Tell My Kids I Need More Contact?

---

Adult children are often unaware of how isolated their parents are — not because they don't care, but because their parents have spent a lifetime not wanting to be a burden. That lifelong habit can now be working against you. Asking for what you need is not weakness; it is the most direct path to getting it.

### The Words:

"I love hearing from you. Could we set up a regular time to talk — maybe every Sunday at noon? It would really mean a lot to me."

When to use it: To request regular scheduled contact without sounding desperate.

What to expect: Most adult children will say yes immediately. The key word is "regular" — it turns sporadic calls into a reliable routine.

### The Words:

"I miss having company. Would you be able to come by this weekend? I don't need anything special — just your company."

When to use it: For a direct, warm request for a visit.

What to expect: "I don't need anything special" removes the worry that you're asking them to fix something. You're asking for presence, not problem-solving.

### The Words:

"I don't want to be a burden. But I've been feeling very alone lately, and I wanted you to know that."

When to use it: When you need to say something but aren't yet ready to ask for anything specific.

What to expect: Sometimes naming it is the first step. Your child may respond by asking what they can do — and then you can use one of the other scripts.

### The Words:

"I've been reading about how loneliness affects health in older adults. I want to be honest with you: I think I'm experiencing it. Can we talk about how to stay more connected?"

When to use it: If you prefer a practical, solution-oriented approach.

What to expect: Framing it as a health conversation — rather than an emotional one — can make it easier for both of you and may lead to concrete planning.

## Section 3: How Do I Talk to My Partner About Changes in Our Intimacy?

---

Physical and emotional intimacy often changes with age — due to health conditions, medications, hormonal shifts, grief, and the accumulated weight of years. Research published in the Archives of Sexual Behavior found that couples who discuss sexual changes openly report significantly higher relationship satisfaction than those who don't.<sup>5</sup> The conversation is worth having.

### The Words:

"I miss being close to you. Can we talk about what's changed between us and what we can do about it?"

When to use it: To open the conversation without blame or accusation.

What to expect: "I miss being close to you" focuses on longing rather than complaint. Expect some discomfort — that's normal. The goal is to open a door, not solve everything at once.

### The Words:

"I've been reading that physical changes are normal at our age, and that there are ways to adapt. I'd like to figure this out together."

When to use it: To introduce the topic through information and shared problem-solving.

What to expect: "Together" is the operative word. This frames intimacy as a joint project, not a problem one of you owns.

### The Words:

"Touch matters to me, even if sex has changed. Can we make sure we're still holding each other?"

When to use it: If sexual intimacy has decreased but physical closeness is still accessible.

What to expect: This acknowledges the change directly while offering a path forward. Non-sexual physical touch — holding hands, hugging, proximity — has independent health benefits including reduced cortisol and improved mood.

### The Words:

"I don't feel like I know how to talk to you anymore. I'm not blaming you. I miss us. Can we get some help with this?"

When to use it: When distance has grown and the direct conversation feels blocked.

What to expect: This opens the door to couples counseling, which has strong evidence for improving communication and intimacy in older adults.

## Section 4: How Do I Ask for Help Without Feeling Weak?

---

Research in social psychology consistently shows that asking for help is perceived as a sign of strength and trust by the person being asked — not as weakness. The feeling that asking makes us weak is a cognitive distortion, not a fact.<sup>4</sup>

### Reframing: What Asking Actually Communicates

- "I trust you enough to be honest with you"
- "I value our relationship enough to invest in it"
- "I know my needs and I'm willing to advocate for myself"
- "I believe connection matters and I'm going to pursue it"

### The Words:

"Hi. I'm calling because I've been feeling very isolated and I'm not sure what to do. I hope you can help me figure out some options."

When to use it: With services like 988, Eldercare Locator (1-800-677-1116), or AARP.

What to expect: Helpline counselors are trained for exactly this call. You don't need to be in crisis. Feeling lonely is enough.

### The Words:

"I'm trying to get out more and I'm looking for some company. Would you ever want to go for a walk or have coffee together?"

When to use it: When you've noticed a neighbor who might be open to connection.

What to expect: Most people are pleased to be asked. Worst case, they say no and nothing changes. Best case, you've started a new connection.

### The Words:

"I've been having a hard time lately and I would really appreciate a visit. Could you come by sometime this week?"

When to use it: With a friend, sibling, neighbor, or faith community member.

What to expect: Be specific about timing if you can — "this week" is better than "sometime."

## Section 5: How Do I Start Over After Losing Someone?

---

Grief narrows our world. After losing a spouse, a close friend, or a sibling, it can feel as though the social fabric of your life has been torn. The idea of forming new connections can feel disloyal, exhausting, or simply impossible. None of these feelings are wrong — but they can become permanent walls if left unexamined.

Research on grief and social reconnection shows that forming new connections after loss does not diminish the relationship you've lost. It honors it. The capacity for connection that your loved one valued in you does not expire when they die.

### Permission Statements (Read These Out Loud)

- It is okay to want company again.
- Laughing with a new friend does not mean you've forgotten.
- You do not need to be fully healed before you reach out.
- You are allowed to want more than grief.
- Starting over is not starting from scratch — you bring everything you've learned.

### The Words:

"I'm new here. I lost my spouse last year and I'm trying to get back out into the world. I'm a little nervous, but I wanted to try."

When to use it: When joining a support group, senior center activity, or community organization.

What to expect: This level of honesty typically invites warmth and connection immediately.

### The Words:

"Thank you for inviting me. I've been keeping to myself since my loss, but I'd like to come. I might need to leave early, but I want to try."

When to use it: To accept invitations even when you're not sure you're ready.

What to expect: Giving yourself explicit permission to leave early removes the pressure of committing fully.

### The Words:

"I've been thinking about you. I know I've been distant since everything happened. I miss you and I'm ready to spend time together again if you're open to it."

When to use it: For friends or family you've withdrawn from during a period of grief.

What to expect: Most people who care about you will respond with relief and warmth.

### The Words:

"I lost my partner some time ago. I've been isolated since then and I'm not sure how to begin reconnecting with people. Can you help me think through that?"

When to use it: With grief support services or counselors.

What to expect: Grief counselors can help you process the transition from bereavement isolation to renewed connection.

### A Final Note

- Every conversation in this guide was hard before someone said the words.
- Then it became real. Then, usually, it got better.
- You don't have to be ready. You just have to start.
- terminal2.org is here to support you.

## Key Resources

- 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline: Call or text 988
- Eldercare Locator: 1-800-677-1116 | [eldercare.acl.gov](https://eldercare.acl.gov)
- AARP Community Connections: [aarp.org/connect](https://aarp.org/connect)
- Crisis Text Line: Text HOME to 741741
- Grief Support: [griefshare.org](https://griefshare.org) | [griefincommon.com](https://griefincommon.com)

---

### Sources

1. U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory: Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation (2023)  
<https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/surgeon-general-social-connection-advisory.pdf>
2. National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. Social Isolation and Loneliness in Older Adults (2020)  
<https://www.nap.edu/catalog/25663>

3. AARP Research. Loneliness and Social Connections: A National Survey (2018) <https://www.aarp.org/research/topics/life/info-2018/loneliness-social-connections.html>
4. Nadler A. Inter-Group Helping Relations as Power Relations. Journal of Social Issues, 2002 <https://doi.org/10.1111/1540-4560.00272>
5. Metz ME, et al. Sexuality and Aging: Research and Clinical Practice. Archives of Sexual Behavior, 2017 <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10508-016-0903-6>
6. 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline <https://988lifeline.org>
7. Eldercare Locator, U.S. Administration on Aging <https://eldercare.acl.gov>
8. AARP Community Connections <https://www.aarp.org/membership/benefits/community/>