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When Andrea Mara had her first child, she was prepared for most eventualities, like how many babygrows to bring to hospital, or the ongoing lack of sleep. "But nobody ever mentioned that it could be lonely," admits the mother of three and blogger behind OfficeMum.ie.

"You go from having constant interaction, busy days at work, going for lunch, to suddenly being at home and the only other person to talk to is a small baby who can't talk – and sometimes isn't even in the mood for smiling. At the beginning, it can be very much a one-way relationship. And yeah, you have the radio for company, but that's also a one-way relationship. I used to go to the supermarket whether I needed stuff or not, just because it was a way of having some adult interaction."

It wasn't just the isolation that surprised Andrea, but that nobody had warned her. As a society, are we reluctant to talk about loneliness? While Age Friendly Ireland says more than one in three people over 65 feel very lonely – and a recent Trinity College study revealed that Irish mothers who had seen at least one child emigrate reported increased symptoms of depression, self-rated emotional/mental health and loneliness – broader statistics are hard to come by.

Across the water, the UK Mental Health Foundation's 2010 report *The Lonely Society?* revealed that 48% of people believed we are getting lonelier. However, only 11% had sought help, with almost a quarter saying they'd be too embarrassed to admit loneliness.

"There is a stigma," says Dr Claire Hayes, clinical director of Aware. "People think: 'If I say I'm lonely, then I'm very needy,' when actually it's a very human instinct to spend time with other people."

Loneliness doesn't necessarily mean being alone. Claire describes observing two teenage girls chatting on a bus recently, except one wore headphones and played on her phone throughout.

"She didn't look at her friend at all," she remarks, adding that multitasking and a loss of basic communication skills have much to answer for.

"It's very easy to send a text to somebody, but to actually speak to somebody and have a conversation where they're not doing other things, it's very rare now," Dr Hayes continues. "A bit like eating fast food, it keeps us going – but it doesn't nourish us."

Loneliness is also a concern for psycholo-

gist Owen Fitzpatrick. While noting several contributory factors – from couples forced into commuter towns during the Celtic Tiger, to emigration – he believes social media leads to more shallow relationships and, often, alienation.

"They talk about having Facebook friends but a Facebook friend isn't like a friend," he says. "A lot of your Facebook friends you might have met once; you might not have met at all. When people measure their popularity in terms of likes, when they see people posting pictures on Instagram, on Facebook or interacting on Twitter, we create this illusion that everyone else has more friends than us, everyone else is more popular than us and everyone else has a full life going on."

FIGHTING LONELINESS

Of course, there are online communities actively helping to fight loneliness. Mairéad Cahalan, content manager for Eumom.ie, says the topic emerges repeatedly among new mothers.

"You have everybody telling you what type of pram to buy," she says, "but nobody really discusses what it's actually like being at home by yourself with the baby."

Eumom encourages mothers to communicate online and off, whether it's through their birth club forums, or attending mother-and-toddler clubs. Indeed, for Andrea Mara, outlets like baby massage classes proved vital while on subsequent maternity leaves, though it took some courage initially.

"The notion of chatting to people I didn't know was quite an alien concept," she recalls. "Before you have kids, you have your people that you know at work, you have your social life with your friends, you have your family and you don't really get to know new people. It takes a while to adjust from that notion of: 'I don't need to get to know new people', to: 'This is of huge benefit to me.'"

Eumom isn't the only online community promoting real-life interaction. Meetup.com began in New York after 9/11 to get people to connect in their communities through shared interests. Today, there are 20 million members worldwide, including 100,000 members and 1,200 groups in Ireland.

"To use the internet to get off the internet," says Meetup's Odile Beniflah of their mission, reporting a 25% growth in Ireland in the last 12 months.

READER'S VIEW

Left behind

Communications officer Aisling Twomey (24) shares her experience of watching many of her friends emigrate.

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The vast majority of the people I went to university with are gone; Canada, Australia, New Zealand, England, Scotland and America came for them one by one. Among them, my best friend lives in the Scottish Highlands, teaching primary school, while others have trekked to China. The most remote is living on Bird Island, near the Falklands.

In the months before I left Cork for Dublin, it was noticeable that the city had gotten quieter. I was no longer a student, no longer surrounded by the young people who were just starting out. Every party was in a different city, birthdays became by-words for goodbyes, and goodbye parties were the most common of all.

It's hard to describe what it's like to see your friends fly to the far corners of the world with so much courage and hope, while you stay behind. In as much as I know I've learned and grown, I only get to see key moments of their lives – engagements, births, deaths, career changes – on Facebook. I don't regret staying behind but it is sad to see so many of my friends wandering the earth when I loved them ever before they left.

I still have a large number of connections in Dublin and my emigrant friends and I make efforts to spend time together when we can. But when I go back to Cork, I notice that it's quiet – people in bars are either noticeably younger or older, with fewer in the middle. In all our talk about emigration, nobody really mentioned what it would be like for those left behind, taking new steps without the friends who have left, as surely as they had to take new steps of their own.

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