Being Single in Britain Today

What it’s like to be single in Britain today
Being Single in Britain Today asks single people in Britain what it is like to be single today, to find out how it feels, what their experiences are and the positives and negatives of singledom. It shows many single people in Britain today enjoy the time and freedom to focus on themselves and pursue hobbies, value their independence, and enjoy focusing on nurturing other (non-romantic) relationships, with friends and family. The research also throws light on the challenges that some single people can encounter, including the pressures (both self-inflicted and from others) to find a relationship; the challenges around navigating the digital world of dating; and the minority of single people who experience fears of rejection, being single long-term or the anxiety around becoming close to someone.

With the Christmas holidays approaching, the research also highlights how this time of year can throw into sharp relief these experiences for single people. Finally, it examines the extent to which singles feel lonely; their confidence around flirting, initiating conversations and dating, whilst also exploring the areas where single people would like more support to deal with any challenges and navigate the modern dating landscape.
Methodology

- We polled a nationally representative sample of more than four thousand people across Britain - more than 1,400 of whom were single. The national polling was undertaken by ICM, with a total sample of 4,054 people - 1,418 of whom were single. Fieldwork was undertaken between 1-3rd November 2017.
- In addition to the national polling, we ran an online survey of 666 eharmony users. Fieldwork was undertaken between 11th October and 6th November 2017.
- To add insights from Relate’s counselling rooms from the work we do to support individuals across the country, we also undertook qualitative research (online focus group) with Relate counsellors to supplement the quantitative data.

Experiences of the single/dating landscape

Our findings suggest that a significant minority of the single population feel relatively exasperated with their experience of the dating scene. We found that 15% of single people in Britain feel overwhelmed by the current dating landscape, and one in ten say they feel burned out by dating.

The reasons as to why some single people feel this way are varied and difficult to determine. However, our findings suggest that the role of technology is significant in relation to how people experience dating and relationships. Although we know technology serves an important role within the modern dating world (such as enabling new ways to quickly connect us with people with whom we share things in common), our findings suggest some singles have an ambivalent approach. Though many actively use online dating to find a partner, one in ten (9%) of singles think technology has made it harder to make real connections with others.

- Interestingly, this was highest among 18-24 year olds (and twice the national average) at 18%.
- 7% of singles said there are so many potential partners it is hard to choose one.
- Only 5% of British singles said that people’s online personas usually reflect their genuine selves.

“I’ve learnt, talking to different clients, that there’s a distinction in the websites that have predominantly got the reputation of being ‘friends with benefits’ or looking for sex, compared with other dating websites that might be more geared up for long-term relationships.” - Relate counsellor
Our findings also show the prevalence of some negative dating trends. One in seven (14%) British singles said they had experienced being ‘breadcrumbed’ (being strung along by someone who had no intention of being tied down). 13% of singles nationally had experienced being ‘ghosted’ (had someone they were dating/speaking to disappear on them without warning). And, as well as being on the receiving end of this dating behaviour, one in ten (9%) of British singles admitted to having ‘breadcrumbed’ and/or ‘ghosted’ someone else in the past.

“There was a twenty-something male I was speaking to just the other day who had experienced this idea of ‘ghosting’, where they might be engaging in a relatively new relationship and the other person ‘drops’ them quite instantly with no more contact. And that seems to be quite a common theme that’s emerging.” - Relate counsellor

One in ten (10%) reported they have been ‘benched’ - had someone send just enough messages to keep you interested but always as a back-up they’re not prepared to cut ties to, and 7% admit to ‘benching’ someone else.

Feelings about being single

Despite the clear indications that many single people feel burned out and overwhelmed by the dating landscape and have experienced being ‘breadcumbled’ or ‘ghosted’, it’s by no means all doom and gloom. On the contrary, many single people clearly enjoy being single and value their freedom and time for themselves.

We asked respondents to select up to three from a list of possible positive things about being single, or to write their own. The top positive identified was independence, with 61% of British singles saying this was a positive thing about being single, followed by time to focus on yourself (45%), time for hobbies (33%), and more time to spend with friends and family (30%).

This pattern was almost exactly mirrored by eharmony users, who similarly identified independence (62%), time to focus on themselves (53%), time for hobbies (34%) and time to spend with friends or family (33%) as positives.

Almost a quarter (24%) said that being free to do what they want on a night out (19% of eharmony users) and having sex with whoever you like (10%; six per cent of eharmony users) were among the top three positives about being single.
eharmony’s users gave some further insights into what they valued about being single:

“I’ve used this time to become happy with myself and love who I am, which has actually now put me in a better frame of mind to date again” - eharmony user

“Being free to change my life’s direction without it impacting anyone else around me” - eharmony user

“I can be more relaxed about my appearance especially in the morning!” - eharmony user

That said, following the findings above that show that many single people can feel burned out or overwhelmed by dating, single people also identified a number of negatives to being a single person. Top of the list was feeling lonely, with close to half (45%) identifying this as a downside to singleness, followed by not having someone to always spend time with (38%), lack of intimacy (32%) and not having a deep emotional connection with someone (31%).
Again, the survey of eharmony’s use mirrored these findings, although singles using eharmony’s online dating services identified these negatives in higher proportions: 65% of eharmony’s users identified feeling lonely, 59% said not having a deep emotional connection to someone, and 52% said lack of intimacy were downsides to being single.

Free text responses from eharmony users also highlighted how difficult some people can find being single:

“Stigma you should not be single” - eharmony user

“There is nothing good about being single” - eharmony user

We found some notable differences between particular demographic groups regarding the positives and negatives of being single. Single women were more likely than single men to identify independence (65% compared to 58%), time to focus on themselves (49% compared to 40%) and time to spend with friends/family (38% compared to 21%) as positives of being single. For men, being able to have sex with whoever you like was more of a positive than it was for women - one in six men (16%) identified this as a positive, compared to just four per cent of women.

On the other hand, single men were more likely than single women to identify feeling lonely (47% compared to 43% of women) and lack of intimacy (38% compared to 26%) as negatives about being single. This is perhaps consistent with the finding that single men were more likely than
women to say that they enjoy dating for its own sake, even if it doesn’t go anywhere in terms of a relationship - 14% of men said this compared to eight per cent of women.

Younger single people were also more likely to identify being able to have sex with whoever they like as a positive: one in six (16%) of those aged 18-24 identified this as a positive, whereas one in ten (10%) people across all age bands did so.

**Under pressure to find a relationship**

We found many single people experience pressure to find a relationship. Overall, we found 64% of British single people said they ever feel this pressure to find a relationship, and 17% do so often or all the time.

![Pressure to find a relationship](image)

eharmony users were slightly less likely to report ever feeling pressure to find a relationship than the national sample: 52% of eharmony users said they never feel this pressure.

There were some notable differences in terms of how people experience this pressure. Interestingly, men were more likely than women to report feeling pressure to find a relationship - 71% of men said they feel this pressure, compared to 58% of women. Younger respondents were also more likely to report feeling pressure to find a relationship than older ones - around a third of those aged 18-34 (30% of those aged 18-24 and 32% of those aged 25-34) said that they feel this often or all the time. The survey of eharmony users also showed that longer-term single people felt less pressure to find a relationship than those who had only been single for a shorter while, and singles without children appeared to feel more pressure to find a relationship than those with children.

eharmony users in our survey identified keeping up with friends and social circles, the desire to start a family (hence, presumably, why younger, childless respondents in the national polling were more likely to report feeling this pressure), and to make parents/family happy as the top reasons for feeling this pressure:
eharmony users also identified both ‘external’ and ‘internal’ sources of pressure they perceived to find a relationship. Many identified others as the source of their feeling under pressure to find a relationship, including societal norms, expectations from others that they would be in a relationship, stigma around singleness, and wanting to ‘fit in’:

“People just ask, why are you single and I just don’t have an answer”

“Because everyone else I know is in a long-term relationship and people think there is something wrong with you if you’re not”

“Other people are often dismissive of single people”

“Friends asking all the time why I’m still single”

“I want to fit in society”

“Family expectations”

“Only one single in friendship group”

“Because people find it strange that I have been single for so long and some must think I’m a weirdo!”

“To not be viewed as a failure or unworthy”

“It is the assumed social norm”
Many other eharmony users, however, identified the source of the pressure to find a relationship as being closer to home - as pressure they were putting on themselves, deriving from a fear of loneliness, a desire to be happy, or just a feeling of missing out on a relationship:

“Self-inflicted pressure to be with someone to prevent loneliness”

“Pressure from myself, age and feeling like if I don’t meet someone soon I will miss out on having a family”

“Sheer loneliness (pressure from self)”

“Because I put pressure on myself to find someone and be happy”

“I don’t want to die alone”

“My own expectations and loneliness”

“I hate living alone”

“To live a full life - my own pressure”

“Just someone to share life with”

“To find a relationship and have children before I get to old”

“To be happy”

“Hate feeling lonely”

“Feel like I’m missing out”

Psychologies around singleness and dating

We also asked single people about their psychology around dating and being single. Positively, in the national sample 41% of single people said being single is preferable to being in an unsatisfactory relationship. Women were more likely than men to agree, with 45% of women saying this compared to 38% of men. Younger respondents were less likely to say this, with just 24% of those aged 18-24 saying this applied to them, and 38% of those aged 25-34, compared to over half (51%) of those over 45. This coheres with reports of pressure to find a relationship above. Respondents to the eharmony survey were also clear that being single is preferable to being in an unsatisfactory relationship: 86% agreed, and almost half (48%) strongly agreed with this.
This preference for being single over unsatisfactory relationships is supported by research. While studies have shown that single people on average have slightly lower life satisfaction and poorer physical and mental health than people in relationships, single people have better health than people in poor quality relationships. Research on the impact of relationship quality on people’s blood pressure, for instance, has concluded that people are better off in health terms single than being unhappily in a relationship.1

We also found many single people are happy by themselves, and while they might like a relationship, do not necessarily feel they require one to define them. In the national sample, 35% said they were in no rush to find a relationship, 28% said they don’t need a romantic partner to make their life feel fulfilled; 20% said they have bigger priorities than finding a long-term relationship, e.g. career, friendships; 25% said it wouldn’t worry them if they remained single for the next 5 years; and 24% said it wouldn’t worry them if they remained single for the next year. Similarly, over two-thirds (68%) of eharmony users agreed that ‘being single gives me time to focus on myself’.

However, a significant minority of single people also reported more negative feelings and fears around being single, worries about being single long-term and anxieties around getting close to other people or being rejected by others. In the national sample, over a fifth of single people (21%) said that the statement ‘I worry I will be single forever’ applied to them, while one in five (20%) said that the statement ‘I fear being rejected’ applied to them. In the eharmony user sample, 40% agreed that ‘I fear being single/alone’ (11% strongly agreed), and 63% agreed that ‘I worry I will be single forever’ (28% strongly agreed). Recent research from the US has indicated that people who fear being single may ‘settle for less’ and cling to an unhappy relationship and be less selective in choosing potential partners.2

Relate counsellors told us how they work with single clients in counselling who are struggling with their being single:

“I’ve got one client who’s not in any relationship at all and has been unsuccessful in any relationships in the past and is very definitely single, and is really starting to struggle with that now. And then other clients that I’ve experienced who have been looking for a possible long-term relationship and come looking for advice and guidance about how wise or not it might be to pursue the relationship that they have in mind”

“I would say we see more younger people – say late teens, early 20s – online, especially in the last five years I’d say. I think with that comes, sort of looking for that expectation of how do you progress a relationship – what stage are they in, pursuing somebody in mind. People who have been single for quite some time noticing patterns that maybe they’re not able to get into the kind of relationship they want or maybe they’re having difficulty communicating their feelings or looking at how to take things to the next stage. Sometime there’s an idea that there’s something wrong with them if they’re noticing the series of short-term relationships for example”
“We see single people who may have had bad experiences in relationships in the past and they’re feeling quite mistrustful entering a new relationship and they’d like to know how they can address that, how they can become more trusting.”

In the national sample, just one in seven (14%) said that ‘I feel confident about committing to a long-term relationship’ applied to them, Over a third (36%) agreed that ‘I feel anxious about being intimate with someone’, and while 41% said they agreed that ‘it is very easy for me to become emotionally close to others’, almost a third (31%) disagreed with this.

Although time to focus on oneself was identified as a positive to being single, we found that few people appear to use time being single in the aftermath of a relationship break-up to reflect on it and understand why the relationship ended before beginning another one. Only one in ten British singles (10%) say that ‘If a relationship ends, I tend to spend time understanding why it ended before beginning another relationship’. eharmony users, however, appear more likely to do this, and 60% said they agreed that the statement ‘If a relationship ends, I tend to spend time understanding it before beginning another relationship’, and 22% strongly agreed. Relate counsellors told us how this kind of self-reflection can be very beneficial, and counselling can help people to develop their understanding of previous relationships to take forward lessons into new ones.

“One guy [through Relate counselling] started to realise there wasn’t a magic formula or magic wand he could take away, but if he was able to reflect on the relationship he’d been in and how his behaviour had been and if he was able to really honestly say to himself had that contributed to the end of the relationship, and what would he do differently.”

“I think a lot of people are looking for more awareness – I think that’s what we do, we raise awareness of where relationships are going wrong or might go wrong and what aspect of themselves is unhelpful in relationships and could be worked on, like low self-esteem or anger or depression or negative thinking.”

“I notice single people coming [to Relate] wanting to recover from the ending of a relationship – the ghosting thing, or not knowing how to progress a relationship, the expectations of the ‘right’ way of meeting someone or the ‘right’ way of doing a relationship. I think some quite common themes are underneath that are strongly self-esteem, looking at the impact of one’s upbringing on the adult you become and how that influences how you communicate and how you do these things and how you approach them.”

Beliefs and attitudes around relationships

What are single people looking for in a potential relationship? What does a good relationship look
like? We asked single people about their beliefs and attitudes towards being single and relationships.

In the national sample, one in six (16%) single people said that they believe in the concept of ‘the one’. Younger respondents were more likely to believe in this than older respondents - one in five of those aged under 35 said they believed in this, dropping to closer to one in ten for those over 55.

eharmony users were more likely to disagree that ‘in a good relationship, partners naturally see things the same way’ (41% said they disagreed) than to agree with this (30%), and more than half (55%) disagreed that ‘if a relationship is ‘meant to be’ it will work out without much effort’, while 28% agreed. We found 65% agreed that ‘a successful relationship is mostly a matter of learning to resolve conflicts efficiently with a partner’. These beliefs about relationships, research shows, can have implications for how people act within them. People with more ‘developmental’ perspectives (who believe relationships change over time; conceived of themselves as active agents; and put in ‘work’ to make relationships stronger) are more likely to be motivated to maintain and improve relationships, including seeking out support, than were those who have more fatalistic views.  

Feelings about being single at Christmas

With the festive season approaching, we asked singles how they felt about the prospect of not being in a relationship over Christmas. Almost three in ten (28%) single people expressed negative feelings about it, with the top reasons being ‘lonely’ (63%), not having anyone to ‘stay in with on cold nights’ (36%), ‘seeing family and friends happy in relationships’ (33%), ‘romantic songs and films reminding [them they’re] single’ (22%) and ‘attending Christmas parties alone’ (14%).

Free text responses from eharmony users shed light on the reasons why some singles feel negatively about being single over Christmas:

- **Because it's a time for sharing and now the kids have flown the nest being alone in the evenings and early morning make me sad.**
- **It's the worst time of year to be single, especially when friends and family are all couples and spending time with each other. It just seems to really highlight the loneliness.**
- **Because I will be the sad lonely person. All movies/series are all about love and happiness. There's no escaping.**
- **The rest of my family are in relationships and this leads to the usual questions about why I am still single.**
Despite these negative feelings, almost three in ten (29%) singles expressed feeling positive about the prospect of being single at Christmas - such as ‘looking forward to it’, and feeling ‘happy’, ‘excited’ and ‘hopeful’.

Free text responses from eharmony users demonstrate the reasons behind such positive outlooks:

- **Don’t have to buy expensive gifts and get to focus on me and do what I want.**
- **Christmas is ace whether you’re in a relationship or not. A relationship does not define my sense of happiness or self-worth.**
- **I have loads of plans to see friends and family. A few parties where I can flirt without feeling guilty!**
- **It means I can do exactly what I want to, without worrying about someone else.**

**Loneliness and single people’s wellbeing**

We saw earlier that loneliness was the most-identified downside to being single, and was identified by a fifth (21%) of those who felt negative about being single at Christmas as the reason for feeling this way. Unsurprisingly, then, a significant minority of single people report feeling lonely. In the national sample, we found 77% reported ever feeling lonely, and 14% reported feeling lonely often or all the time.

![Feelings of loneliness](chart)

However, this is actually a lower level of feeling of loneliness than Relate’s previous research has found for the UK population as a whole: Relate’s research last year found that almost half (45%) said that they felt lonely at least some of the time, and almost a fifth (18%) said that they feel lonely often or all of the time. Other research has similarly found that single people can enjoy
richer social lives than those in relationships: studies have found that single people are more connected to their parents, siblings, friends, neighbours and co-workers.\textsuperscript{4}

We found single women were more likely than single men to report ever feeling lonely (82% compared to 73%), and younger single people were also more likely to report feeling lonely than older single people - 88% of those aged 18-24 ever feel lonely, compared to less than 70% of over-65s.

Relationships with friends and family can be key determinants of people’s wellbeing, so it was encouraging that 88% of eharmony users reported having good relationships with friends and 81% have said they have good relationships with family. Studies show that the size and quality of a person’s social ties affects people’s health\textsuperscript{5} and people who have strong social relationships are 50% more likely to survive life-threatening illness than people with weaker social relationships.\textsuperscript{6}

Our data similarly showed the importance of good quality social relationships for single people’s wellbeing. Singles in the eharmony survey who reported very good relationship with friends were significantly more likely to report rarely and occasionally feeling lonely than those who reported only average quality of relationships with friends. They were also less likely to report feeling lonely all the time or often. Similarly, those who reported very good relationships with friends were significantly more likely than those with ‘average’ friendship quality to report feeling extremely or fairly happy, and less likely to report feeling fairly or extremely unhappy. Those who reported average friendships, meanwhile, were also significantly less likely to report feeling fairly happy and more likely to report feeling extremely unhappy than those with very/fairly good friendships. In a similar vein, those with very good or fairly good relationships with family were significantly less likely to say they feel lonely all the time than those with only average relationships.

**Single people’s confidence**

In the survey of eharmony users, people who had been single longer-term appeared to face greater challenges around their confidence flirting, being sexually intimate, and initiating intimacy. Those who had been single for more than two years were significantly more likely to agree that ‘I feel anxious about being intimate with someone’ than those whose last relationship ended up to six months ago, and those whose last relationship ended over a year ago were significantly more likely than those whose last relationship ended less than a year ago to say they felt ‘not at all confident’ flirting in person, and those who has been single more than two years were significantly more likely than those whose last relationship ended less than two years ago to report feeling ‘not at all confident’ flirting online.

Likewise, people single for more than two years were significantly more likely to report feeling ‘not at all confident’ being sexually intimate, whereas respondents whose last relationship ended 1-6 months ago were significantly more likely to report feeling confident being sexually intimate than those whose previous relationships ended one, two, or more years ago. People whose last
relationship ended over two years ago were significantly more likely to feel ‘not at all confident’ initiating sexual intimacy than those whose last relationship ended up to six months ago.

## Support single people would like

Encouragingly, over two out of five (41%) British singles said they would welcome personal support to help them develop their relationship skills, and 63% of eharmony users said they would benefit from support to understand more about themselves, what they want from a relationship and what it means to be in one, and/or the skills and behaviours needed to foster good quality relationships (30% said this would benefit them ‘a lot’, and 33% said it would benefit them ‘a bit’).

There was a variety of support that British singles thought would benefit them: such as building confidence (22%), building self-esteem (20%), managing conflict constructively (14%), making better relationship choices (12%), developing listening skills (10%) and committing to a relationship (7%).

There were some interesting variations of these figures when cut by age and gender. For instance, younger respondents were much more likely to welcome such support - 65% of 18-24 year olds and 56% of 25-34 year olds, and were also more likely to say they would welcome support to build their confidence and self-esteem. Similarly, women were more likely than men to say they would benefit from support to help build their self-esteem (24% vs 16%).

A focus group with Relate counsellors explored the ways in which relationship counselling can help single people: identifying that the opportunity to work on things such as one’s self-esteem, relationship expectations, conflict and communication skills, and develop understanding of previous relationships to take forward lessons into new ones can greatly improve people’s confidence surrounding building new relationships.

> “I think if you're a single person in counselling you can wholly work on yourself, you can explore yourself and what your needs are – improving your own self-esteem.”

> “[In relationship counselling] you learn how to relate to other people and that’s not just relevant in a romantic relationship but it’s relevant in friendships and other relationships – we’re social animals aren’t we. You learn a lot in terms of relating to other people and getting a lot back from that.”

> “I think of the people I see on their own, probably three-quarters are people who are benefitting from work on themselves – on self-esteem, anger issues perhaps, confidence, all that sort of thing.”

> “We see single people who may have had bad experiences in relationships in the past and they’re feeling quite mistrustful entering a new relationship and they’d like to know how they can address that, how they can become more trusting.”

Relate provides counselling and support to single individuals as well as to couples and families. A focus group with Relate counsellors highlighted the need to make relationship support more
accessible and appealing to single people, to ensure that single people are aware that such support is available to them - not just couples.

Conclusion

While many single people in Britain today appear to be doing well enjoying their experiences and the freedom and independence singleness affords them, a significant minority of them appear to feel burned out by dating, overwhelmed by the modern dating scene, and can experience loneliness, negative dating behaviours, feel pressure to find a relationship, and/or struggle with confidence. Through looking at our research, it’s clear that younger people in particular appear to face the most pressure. They were more likely than older respondents to feel overwhelmed and feel the pressure to find a relationship and yet were also the most likely to believe in the idea of ‘the one’.

Positively, the research sheds some light on what single people would like more support around – chiefly, developing relationship skills, self-understanding, and building confidence. eharmony provides advice to users around dating (https://www.eharmony.co.uk/dating-advice/), and Relate similarly offers tips and online support around being single and dating (https://www.relate.org.uk/relationship-help/help-relationships/being-single-and-dating). Relate also provides counselling and support to single individuals as well as to couples and families. A focus group with Relate counsellors highlighted the need to make relationship support more accessible and appealing to single people, to ensure that they are aware that such support is available to them - not just couples. The findings indicate significant numbers of single people may benefit from more advice and support. This suggests that there is considerable merit in both dating and relationship support services. These can help singles who have less positive experiences of the dating landscape to overcome the challenges of being single and instead enjoy the benefits of singleness, leading to improvements to their wellbeing.
Notes


5 Bartley, M.P (ed). (2012). Life gets under your skin. UCL Research Department of Epidemiology and Public Health


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About Relate

Relate is the UK’s leading relationship support organisation, serving more than one million people through information, support and counselling every year. Our vision is a future in which healthy relationships are actively promoted as the basis of a thriving society.

We aim to develop and support healthy relationships by:

- Delivering inclusive, high-quality services that are relevant at every stage of life
- Helping couples, families and individuals to make relationships work better
- Helping both the public and policy makers improve their understanding of relationships and what makes them flourish.

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More research reports dealing with other relationships issues can be downloaded from www.relate.org.uk/research

For further information on the issues raised in this report, please email policyandresearch@relate.org.uk

About eharmony

eharmony launched in the UK in 2008 with a clear vision: to create more lasting love in the world. The experts behind eharmony are committed to helping singles find the best possible partner, using science and psychology to determine key personality traits. Prior to launch, the brand invested in further extensive research into love and relationships, conducted in partnership with Oxford University's Internet Institute to develop UK relationship-compatibility models. Today eharmony, fondly know as ‘the brains behind the butterflies’, proudly serves almost 60million members globally, and has amassed 5m registered users since launching in Britain. Find out more at http://www.eharmony.co.uk/tour.