

**CONNECT FOR A KINDER
TOMORROW - NEW APPROACHES
TO LONELINESS**

*“I will not live in a country
where thousands of people
are living lonely lives forgotten
by the rest of us.”*

– Jo Cox MP

LONELINESS IS EVERYBODY'S BUSINESS

Loneliness can, and probably will, affect each and every one of us. Jo Cox, our colleague and friend, spoke out about her own experience of being lonely. She came into Parliament wanting to 'turbo-charge the public's awareness of loneliness'. In Jo's memory we have co-chaired the Commission that she set up and it is in her memory that we make this call to connect.

Loneliness is not the same as being alone. The long-distance runner, by herself for miles on end, may well not be lonely. One of the loneliest places can be in a crowd or even within a relationship. As the Oscar-winning actor, Tom Hanks, himself lonely as a child, has said,

*'Loneliness is to be avoided.
Solitude is to be sought.'*

Loneliness is a subjective experience of perceived social isolation. For some of us, its phases are acute but fleeting. For others, chronic and debilitating, they can last for years. Loneliness's triggers are often moments of transition: the birth of a child, retirement, redundancy, bereavement, a new foster placement or leaving care, a return from armed service, seeking asylum, coming out, starting a new job or going to university, changing schools, moving home, becoming homeless, becoming a carer, relationship breakdown, divorce. Which of us will never experience any of these?

Nor is loneliness an older person's issue, although too many older people in the UK do feel lonely and invisible, with the

TV and four walls for company and a phone that seldom rings. Jo said, 'young or old, loneliness doesn't discriminate'. Instead, it surrounds us, from the quiet child in class to the high-powered executive, from the new mum to the family carer, hiding in plain sight. It was when Jo, as a schoolgirl, accompanied her postman granddad on his Cleckheaton delivery round that she realised, for many, he was the only person with whom they would interact that day.

Loneliness is not then just someone else's problem. For a long time, we saw permanently positive mental health as the norm and mental illness as an aberration. It turned out that wasn't true. The same applies to loneliness. It may come and go, and most of us may not be lonely most of the time, but it can come to us all, even Paddington Bears and Big Friendly Giants. Everyone is likely to feel disconnected sometimes, at different stages of our lives. To answer The Beatles' twin questions in Eleanor Rigby's baroque pop: all the lonely people come from right here among us, and it's here that they all belong.

LONELINESS HURTS

The statistics betray an unseen epidemic, afflicting us at every level. As individuals, loneliness can be emotionally draining. There is a reason why nurseries send misbehaving toddlers alone to the 'naughty corner' and why solitary confinement is used on prisoners as a punishment and torture technique. Moreover, loneliness can stifle our creativity and productivity, holding our potential back and leaving us, as in Sinéad O'Connor's lyric,

'like a bird without a song.'

As Mother Teresa put it,

*'the most terrible poverty is loneliness
and the feeling of being unloved.'*

In Islam, for the same reason, smiling is charity. If someone does feel lonely, let us be patient and not rush to judge.

As families, loneliness can rob us of perspective and cause our closest bonds – and so our safety nets – to fray, leaving us cut out and cut off. In our communities, it can undermine integration as people disengage. Forgetting that we have more in common than that which divides us, we recede into our respective corners in a downwards spiral of withdrawal. Eating away at empathy, loneliness can erode solidarity in our society, supplanting it with a creeping sense of dislocation. And it can damage our economy, to the tune of £32 billion per annum, costing employers alone £2.5 billion a year.

The harm loneliness does to our nation's health is both physical and mental. Research suggests that loneliness is worse for us in terms of morbidity and mortality than obesity and as bad for us as smoking 15 cigarettes a day. Physically, it can lead to cardiovascular disease, stroke, diabetes and high blood pressure. Mentally, loneliness can lead to anxiety and stress. It creates a heightened sense of threat, which can cause insomnia. We end up sleeping with one eye hypervigilantly open, as if endangered at the edge of the herd. Loneliness can lead to depression, dementia and neurodegenerative disease. Lonely people tend to visit GPs

more often, stay longer when in hospital and find it harder to cope and heal. The evidence is clear: loneliness is toxic.

MEANINGFUL CONNECTIONS ARE THE SAFEGUARD AND RELATIONSHIPS THE ANTIDOTE

Hunger is a warning sign – nature's way of telling us that we need food. Thirst warns us to find water and drink. Loneliness is a warning signal that we need human contact. Our bulwark against loneliness then is meaningful connection. Aristotle was right when he wrote 2,300 years ago that human beings are social animals. The connections between us nourish our bodies, hearts and minds.

A requited relationship characterised by kindness and reciprocity confers a sense of value, visibility and worth. To do that, it cannot be one-way traffic: both parties must each put in and get out. Those are the egalitarian, mutually affirming relationships that prove fulfilling. That is why it is so important to focus on people's assets and resources – the time, energy, insight, experience and expertise they can offer – and not just what they lack. It is in the giving, not the receiving, that people find purpose beyond working and paying tax. More than the quantity of acquaintances, it is primarily the quality of those connections and a sense of contribution that matter. This cannot be just about befriending then, so much as being friends.

TECHNOLOGY IS A DOUBLE-EDGED SWORD

Such relationships are not to be found via idealised versions of ourselves posted on troll-ridden antisocial media, in Facebook status envy, nor in Twitter follows and likes. And yet British teens today have never known a world before Instagram and Snapchat. Permanently hooked up to the internet, some become hooked on it. We abandon a conversation in person at the buzz of a notification arriving on our phone. Caught in the world-wide web, real-life relationships grow stilted and stunted.

Beyond distractions like Tamagotchi and Pokémon Go, some technology does though have the power to help, not hinder, by connecting us across real divides. There are avatar-like robots, for example, which enable chronically ill children to be telepresent alongside their classmates at school from the safety of their hospital bed. Such automata do not replace human interaction, but instead facilitate or mediate it. This computer-aided contact – ‘comptact’, to coin a phrase – does have potential. It can play a valuable role, provided we remember that actual relationships are too complicated for even the most sophisticated chatbot or android. For all the advances in machine learning and artificial intelligence, the magic behind the gizmos is always human.

Virtual reality therapy can help people overcome isolating agoraphobia. Smart speakers can help people with learning difficulties become more independent. Online carers’ fora can be a lifeline

for those looking after housebound relatives. Skype and WhatsApp enable grandparents to speak freely to their grandchildren on the other side of the world.

Screen-free time though will always matter, as there is no substitute for human contact, face to face. Modern neuroscience shows that we experience unparalleled brain activity in response to a person’s touch. It makes sense then that in nursing homes, residents often ask quietly just to hold visitors’ hands.

NORMALISING EVERYDAY CONNECTIONS

We need to recreate for the everyday what has been called ‘the permission of snow’. It ought not to take an unusual event, such as snowfall, or an extraordinary misfortune, like a road traffic accident, before we feel we have permission to speak to one another in our daily lives. We must normalise such solidarity, not confine it to moments of meteorological curiosity or times of tragedy. Culturally, this may feel disruptive and contraflow. But once people do start talking and remember how good it feels, it is contagious. So, let’s reset our default to being ‘happy to chat’.

A ‘five a day’ approach to portions of fruit and veg, even if somewhat arbitrary, does seem to stand us in good nutritional stead. Maybe we ought to aim for ‘five a day’ in terms of conversations to keep loneliness at bay.

We all need to make fostering everyday connections between people central to what we do. In the teeth of what can

sometimes feel, particularly in our big cities, like a ‘Me, Now’ culture which prizes instant gratification over anything more profound, we need to sensitise people to loneliness. If we do that with a genuine sense of agency, we can choose to make a change for generations to come.

A sense of urgency is also needed, as loneliness besets us in modern Britain as never before. We are living alone more, moving away from friends and family, and working alone more, from the freelancer at home to the delivery driver in their van. We spend a greater proportion of our day by ourselves than we did 10 years ago. Many of the institutions that once brought us together are fading, as each week another church or pub is converted into flats. And yet, a recent survey of over a thousand English vicars showed that loneliness is the problem they most frequently hear about and act upon in their parish. Globalisation has dispersed communities, markets reduce relationships to transactions and technologies can end up replacing people with machines. Meanwhile, inequality divides us by status and wealth. When society exhibits all these isolating dynamics, it is time for us to change the way we live.

CITIZENS AND INDIVIDUALS

We urge our fellow citizens – as neighbours, commuters and colleagues – to make tackling loneliness their business, day to day. We could recognise being positively social as a sign of good character and talking to people as an aspirational thing

to do. Starting a conversation each day in your neighbourhood can be a radical act of community service. Arguably, we need to put down such roots in order to grow wings. We can change the world around us, one conversation at a time. Whether it be in the doctor’s waiting room or the supermarket queue, it really is good to talk. We walk the same streets, so let’s not live in different worlds.

National Rail, on whose tracks hundreds of people commit suicide every year, are clear that a fellow commuter saying hello or commenting on the weather can make a difference: small talk saves lives. So, those of us for whom the journey to work means headphones-in, scrolling down a screen, without a word from origin to destination, let’s try a break from our routine next time and have a word with a fellow passenger. Research suggests we might enjoy it, despite anticipating the worst. But if that seems a bridge too far, at the very least, when we get home, let’s phone our grandma or a friend we haven’t heard from for a while. They may be too proud or embarrassed to admit it, but perhaps they’re feeling lonely right now.

In fact, we could all check the balance in our figurative bank of friends and family every once in a while. As we meander through life, we all need a convoy or caravan of companions – fellow travellers who help to sustain us, on whom we can depend. But how many? Decades of research by Oxford University Professor of Evolutionary Psychology, Robin Dunbar, may help us hazard an answer. Prof Dunbar’s work, honed over time, demonstrates robustly that most of us have about four people in our

innermost layer of family and friends – four close confidants in whom we can trust.

Dunbar and an international team of scientists analysed six billion mobile phone calls made by 35 million people in an unnamed European country throughout 2007, before the pervasive proliferation of social media and smart phones. They screened out business and casual calls. Mining their massive dataset for patterns, what they found was that individuals on average had four people whom they called frequently and who called them back. Four people, that is, in their intimate, inner circle. Four people on whom they could count.

We say now then that everyone could 'Connect 4'. That is, we could all try to nurture a meaningful connection with four other people in our life, and recognise that we can, in turn, play such a role for others. In striving for four positive, stable relationships, we can connect for health and connect for happiness. We can even connect for Jo. She would be humbled and thrilled in equal measure by such a legacy.

VOLUNTARY AND COMMUNITY GROUPS

We encourage organisations throughout the voluntary sector to build trust and confidence between people in our society. That way they can be part of both prevention and cure. They can act as the 'brokers' and 'instigators' who bring people together and the 'welcomers' who help to crack cliques.

Charities can help older people to harness nostalgia and put reminiscence to positive ends. They can also enable older people to volunteer, rather than feeling like they no longer have a place in society, unable to keep up with the pace of change. Many who volunteer say it benefits them every bit as much as the people they set out to help. Community groups can foster resilience, not reliance, particularly among the most elderly who survive their friends and spouse. It can be hard at 80 to make new friends – we need to make them while we can – so a helping hand can make all the difference.

There are many examples of excellent practice in this field. The Love Your Neighbour scheme, coming soon to Manchester Cares, pairs over-65s and their younger neighbours for a one-to-one session each week. The Co-op and British Red Cross are recruiting Community Connectors to help socially isolated people reconnect with their community. London Independent Visitors provides children in care with volunteer mentors. FOCUS in Leicester brings disabled adults and disadvantaged teenagers together, shows them some trust, and watches them flourish in each others' hands.

BUSINESSES AND EMPLOYERS

As with the environmental sustainability 20 years ago, forward-thinking organisations are no longer framing loneliness as a charitable cause, but as a social issue they can influence directly by the way that they do business.

Employers can reflect on the way they organise and support their ever more remote and fragmented workforce. Home-working can be an isolating modus operandi, as can being an engineer or delivery driver, alone in a van with a stylus and tablet. Companies can provide space for staff to socialise and encourage them to phone each other rather than just using email. They can take steps to encourage workers to leave the factory, office or shop on time and to use their annual leave entitlement for the sake of work-life balance. They can enable peer-to-peer employee support, such as that provided by Transport for London's carers staff network. Directors can show leadership when it comes to creating an environment conducive to kindness, where displaying vulnerability is not seen as tantamount to weakness, and cultivating a culture of compassion where admissions of loneliness are not stigmatised. The most successful companies take a leaf from cooperatives' book by recognising the rich and unique life experience of each of their employees. From the cleaner to the chief executive, they encourage staff, as people, to open windows into each other's lives.

Some businesses rarely see their customers in the flesh. Perhaps the downsides of this too can be mitigated. Businesses can consider offsetting the antisocial effects of automation. Supermarkets with their self-service checkouts could consider introducing a slow lane or a café in store. Banks, alongside their automated telling machines and apps, could put on extra staff in branch to preserve a personal touch. When it comes to more peripatetic work – say, gas fitters or

home care workers – it could mean bosses allowing itinerant staff to spend a little time with each client, just talking.

By thinking and acting in more relational ways, businesses can augment connectedness in the communities in which they operate. At the same time, they can enhance their enterprise, because engaged colleagues and connected communities make for more and happier customers. To cite a simple example, many of us would walk a bit further to reach a shop or café where we are welcomed and friendly staff are happy to chat. A corporate drive for connection then has the potential to deliver a transformative win-win.

LOCAL AND REGIONAL AUTHORITIES

Local authorities, alongside others, could use their planning powers and associated levers to improve the architecture of public and private space. We can foster community spirit, not by accident but by design. The measure of a successful development would be one that makes it easy for people to meet and chat. This could mean widening hallways in apartment blocks, providing areas for children to play, or creating street corners where residents bump into one another. Our physical surroundings influence our ability to connect and help make our houses homes.

Planners could ensure there are adequate benches and toilets to enable older and disabled people to make better use of the public realm. And before we worry too much about the latest gadgets, let's get the basics

of Smart Cities right. Parks and pavements must be well maintained, streets well lit to deter antisocial behaviour and traffic must not be allowed to sever our communities. Crime ought to be designed out, because fear of it keeps people indoors.

Beyond the built environment, simple measures like waiving fees and minimising the bureaucracy required to close roads for street parties and play streets can help people meet their neighbours. Perhaps we could encourage landlords to be more relaxed about permitting pets, if animals can act as life-enhancing stress-busters and if walking a dog gets its owner out and about?

Councillors having to balance ever more precarious budgets should remember the importance of inclusive institutions which command public love and support. Libraries where people come together and lollipop men and women greeting schoolchildren as they cross the road should be appreciated for their social value, which may far outweigh their monetary cost. Councils could also support the development of shared living arrangements, such as the 'small household' model piloted by Evermore in Manchester and various intergenerational homeshare schemes. The likes of Fair House Care and Fair BnB give young people a place to stay whilst addressing older people's isolation. Such set-ups can help the hosts avoid skipping meals due to lack of company or falling whilst changing lightbulbs alone. We also encourage local authorities to assist those adults in receipt of direct payments for social care to spend them collectively,

should they wish. That way, affording independence won't inadvertently run the risk of abetting atomisation. Communal eating, for instance, has a proven, positive bonding effect. When push comes to shove though, the key point is that loneliness poses a major public health concern and yet half of all councils in England spend nothing on dedicated services to combat it. That needs to change.

CENTRAL GOVERNMENT

We exhort central government to make addressing loneliness a priority at the highest levels of the state. That will certainly mean offering strategic leadership and coordination. The United Arab Emirates, for example, has a Cabinet Minister for Happiness. The United Kingdom could designate a minister responsible and accountable for corralling the government's efforts to tackle loneliness. It will mean measuring loneliness nationally in a way that counts what counts, is actionable and doesn't denude the accompanying politics of passion. And it will mean making available much-needed streams of funding to finance the effort where it matters most, on the ground.

It will also mean recognising that loneliness in many ways is amenable to public policy.

In education, there is scope for greater focus on attachment in early years, when children's brains are being hardwired. More emphasis on positive relationships in the primary and secondary curricula could help. Wellbeing and mindfulness also merit class-time. Our ability to connect

with ourselves and with others, after all, is as important as our mastery of phonics or maths. Plus, further investment is needed in English language courses for immigrants, especially refugees.

In housing, policy could proactively support the development of lifelong neighbourhoods. A good example is New Earswick for All Ages, a generationally integrated Joseph Rowntree Housing Trust project where accessible and attractive homes are offered alongside care services fit for an ageing society. The idea is to enable residents to 'age in place'. Separately, with more and more families now living with the relative transience and limited security of renting privately, policy may need to play a role in supporting them to get involved in their neighbourhoods. As for social housing, it can be just that – profoundly social – if designed with neighbourly connections in mind.

Cohesion policy ought to recognise what research by the Great Get Together team at The Jo Cox Foundation has confirmed, namely that people are more likely to get involved in communal initiatives in the first two years after they arrive in a new place. In health, there is a strong case for more by way of social prescribing, as pioneered in Rotherham. Emphasis could also be put not just on financial planning for retirement, as is already the case, but on social planning for it too. Transport policy could do more to connect rural and seaside communities, as could better broadband, wifi and cellular networks.

No doubt in some cases at a national level too we need the state to do less. Endless efficiency drives through

centralisation, in the public as well as the private sector, can leave people stranded. Sometimes we need to spend time, not just save it. Indeed, where we have structured disconnection into society, mainstreaming loneliness, we may have to design connection back in.

THE WAY FORWARD

According to the Office of National Statistics, the UK is the loneliness capital of Europe. It doesn't have to be this way: the problem of loneliness is solvable, and we can each play a part. If we all adopt a 'five a day' rule of thumb for conversations, to bolster the thin ties between us, and a 'Connect 4' approach to meaningful relationships, to fasten the thick ties that bind, then we can build a less lonely nation, through thick and thin, ourselves. As a country, we can rise to the challenge of loneliness. Through a lasting nationwide effort, from coast to coast, isle to valley, village to town, we can help everyone to belong and leave no-one behind. Together, we can kindle a kinder tomorrow and craft a future that is better, connected.

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and Rachel Reeves MP
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on Loneliness**

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