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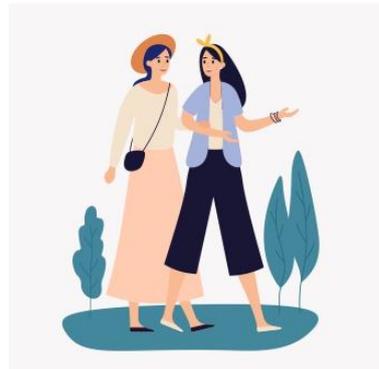
Opening Doors to Connection

How to help someone to develop friendships and connection

ACHIEVING INCLUSION

Kirklees COUNCIL

Contents

Opening Doors to Connection

How to help someone to develop friendships and connections

1.1. Introduction

This guide has been developed to support young adults and adults across Kirklees.

It has been developed based on engagement findings and evidence from frontline workers, Kirklees residents, local and national good practice.

It is a quick guide to:

- raise awareness of the impact of loneliness and living in isolation
- improve awareness of the importance of social connection
- offer tips on how to have conversations about social connection and loneliness
- offer practical tips on how people can be supported
- signpost to services if needed

1.2. Definitions of loneliness

When people do not have quality social connections, they can feel lonely.

Loneliness can be described as a **subjective**, unwelcomed feeling of **lack or loss of companionship**. It happens when we have a mismatch between the **quantity and quality** of social relationships that we have, and those that we want.

People's experience of loneliness is very personal but three different types of loneliness have been identified:

Emotional loneliness – the absence of a meaningful relationship.

Social loneliness – a perceived deficit in the quality of social connections.

Existential loneliness – a feeling of separateness from others and the wider world.

Loneliness is not the same as social isolation. People are not necessarily lonely in social isolation, if they are happy in their own company, they are more introverted or can maintain meaningful connections virtually. However, social isolation may create a risk to loneliness for some people.

Loneliness is not the same as being alone - some people are very happy in solitude. Although being isolated can cause loneliness, it's possible to be surrounded by people and still feel lonely.

1.3. Triggers to loneliness

Most people feel a lack of social connection sometimes.

People can feel a lack of social connection at any age and at different points in their life. It's a very personal experience and some people may not recognise that they are feeling lonely or that the emotional pain they are feeling is a lack of social connection.

People may start to feel lonely when their life changes, or during challenges in their life, such as:

- health conditions, disabilities, hidden disabilities (such as mental health) or illnesses that limit mobility and social interaction

- feeling low, depressed or anxious

- moving house or moving to a new area

- changing school, starting college or university, new employment or retirement.

- bereavement or loss

- relationship problems with friends, families, divorce and separation

- children leaving home and perceptions of 'empty nest'

- being in a caring role that makes participation in social activities challenging

- living alone

- being unemployed

- not having enough money to socialise

- discrimination or exclusion and bullying

- language, cultural and identity issues

National and local research (Current Living in Kirklees Survey 2021, National Community Life Survey tells us that people are more likely to experience chronic loneliness if they are children, young people or young adults, are disabled, living with long term conditions, LGBT Plus or living in deprived areas.

Poverty can lead to social isolation, lack of social connection and loneliness as people may lack resources to participate in social activities or maintain relationships. There is a reciprocal relationship between mental ill health and financial hardship.

Some recent local research by Healthwatch Kirklees in 2023 suggests that bereavement particularly in men, has an impact on loneliness.

Sometimes loneliness can lead to drug and alcohol use as a short-term escape or as a crutch for social anxiety. Drug and alcohol use can also impact on maintaining meaningful relationships and support networks.

However, anyone can experience severe loneliness depending on their specific circumstances.

Older people are **not** more likely to be lonely just because of their age. As people age, they may become more vulnerable to multiple triggers as listed above. Improving and maintaining good quality social connections supports healthy ageing.

For more information:

- [Current Living in Kirklees Survey 2021](#)
- [Campaign to End Loneliness Stats](#)
- [National Community Life Survey](#)

1.4. Spotting the signs

It may not be obvious that someone is feeling a lack of social connection. Loneliness is a very personal experience. Signs might include:

- changes in behaviours or mood
- someone not feeling their usual self or behaving differently
- low confidence, self-esteem, anxiety, or depression
- withdrawal from social situations
- someone sharing that they don't go out, see people, or join in activities
- verbal outpouring or keenness to keep talking
- changes in eating and sleeping
- changes in routine
- spending a lot of time on phones and online
- relationship conflicts
- where a person mentions 'nothing happens round here', such as not knowing neighbours, or people who are not talking to each other in their local community

Don't make assumptions that because someone spends a lot of time alone that they are lonely. Also don't assume that someone who has a lot of social interaction is not lonely. Loneliness is subjective and is about a person's perception of the quality and quantity of their social connections. This varies from person to person and cannot be objectively measured.

1.5. Minority Ethnic Communities

The way that some services and activities are set up may not be as inclusive as they can be. This impacts on some people's ability to make meaningful connections. Local engagement with members of local South Asian and Black African Caribbean communities has highlighted some stereotypes.

Be aware of some of the stereotypes around some minority communities and keep an open mind. Common myths include:

Myth: Minority communities are close-knit and immune to loneliness. In reality, some minority communities emphasise strong connections but not everyone will have the same level of social support due to factors such as generational gaps and changing lifestyles.

Myth: Minority individuals do not seek help for loneliness. In reality, people from minority communities do reach out for support but cultural stigmas around mental health may affect help-seeking behaviour. Open conversations and culturally sensitive approaches help to redress this.

Myth: Loneliness only affects minority immigrants. In reality, loneliness can affect both minority immigrants and people who have lived in the community for generations.

For more information: [Engaging Ethnic Minority Communities in Conversations about Loneliness](#)

1.6. Older people

National evidence suggests:

- some older people may not consider themselves 'old', therefore avoid labelling groups and activities for 'older people'

- some older people may have low expectations and discount themselves from social activities, 'I don't go out, that's the way it is'

- being part of groups or formalised activities may not be part of their life experience. Attending some venues, such as community centres may be described as 'not for me'

- as with any age group, many people fear taking a social risk and feel anxious about having to make 'small talk'. They may worry about having nothing in common with others, being ignored or rejected, not fitting in or being labelled as vulnerable or isolated

- some practice evidence has suggested that older men prefer informal activities or drop-ins, and meeting in neutral places e.g., pubs, cafes or libraries

1.7. Physical, sensory and learning disabilities

People with disabilities are more likely to experience chronic loneliness. Evidence suggests that disabled people can face challenges to daily activities that can put them at more risk of loneliness. Being aware of these challenges can help with identifying ways to ensure that they can stay socially connected. The organisation 'Sense' highlights the importance of inclusive communication and paying particular attention to making all activities and services inclusive. Tips include:

- speaking clearly and straight to the person being addressed (not the interpreter or guide)

- ensuring adequate space for wheelchair users, making places easy to navigate

- keeping spaces well-lit for people with visual impairments, think about lighting

- turning down background noise, watch the volume

1.8. LGBT Plus communities

People who are LGBT Plus are more at risk of hate crime and are more likely to experience discrimination in all aspects of their lives due to homophobia, transphobia and biphobia. As a result, they may not feel confident to join local activities.

Trans people can experience discrimination for being Trans from within the LGBT Plus community.

Some members of the LGBT Plus community can be disconnected from their families and may also feel distant from heterosexual friends, if they cannot relate to their experiences.

Marginalisation can create worry about negative judgment and lead to inhibition and social anxiety.

All these factors can compound a sense of isolation or loneliness.

Things that can help include:

- safe spaces that are accessible for likeminded people to meet up
- creating a supportive environment to support confidence building
- supporting local services or groups to become LGBT Plus friendly via appropriate training
- access to online activities for self-exploration, education and support
- access to buddy schemes

1.9.   Adults at work

A recent report published by British Red Cross (January 2023) found that:

- almost half of workers felt lonely some of the time at work
- 10% of workers felt lonely often or always
- higher levels of loneliness were experienced by workers who are disabled, live with long-term conditions, minority ethnic groups and senior managers
- there was no simple link between home working and increased loneliness at work

The British Red Cross report (2023) recommends:

- increasing awareness amongst employers about the impact of loneliness and the importance to acting on it in the workplace
- employers listening to what works for employees
- addressing loneliness among managers and supporting them to build connections with and across their teams
- inclusive working practices to create a sense of belonging at work
- support home, onsite and hybrid workers to develop and maintain meaningful connections
  loneliness at work

1.10.   Young adults

Local engagement suggests that:

- young adults can find it challenging to talk about loneliness openly, due to the stigma

- activities and games were seen as useful in creating social connections, but young adults were unlikely to try a new activity

- building confidence and skills in socialising and connecting were seen as important to help to 'bridge' this gap

- websites and self-help resources were not popular

- there is a desire for others to 'notice and act', to help them to access social activities or connect to others

- young adults felt that it was important that people understood what might be preventing them from connecting.

- young adults mentioned a range of challenges such as anxiety, mental health, wellbeing, financial barriers, not feeling welcome and included in activities

- 'missing out' or not being part of social media, contributed to feelings of loneliness

   For more information: Loneliness Guidance 2025

1.11.   Having sensitive conversations

Asking direct questions may make some people uncomfortable. Loneliness still carries a stigma. Some people feel embarrassed and are nervous talking about loneliness.

Also, we know from local engagement with young adults that some young people do not identify with the word 'lonely'. It was more commonly framed as 'not being part of the crowd/ clique or group'.

Direct questions can be asked, if the topic is explored sensitively and positively, and where people are reassured, that loneliness is experienced by many people for a range of reasons. Using positive language can support this.

1.12.   Positive language and approach

Marmalade Trust stress the following:

- feeling lonely is part of the human condition and should not be seen as wrong or shameful

- avoid words like 'suffering' and use 'experiencing' instead. Also try not to imply that it's something that people have to 'admit' to

- talk about 'building up connections' rather than negative terms like 'tackling' or 'curing' loneliness

- don't define a person by their loneliness. Instead, focus on the person's own strengths, talents and qualities

1.13.   Building rapport and trust

Building up trust can help people to open up. You can do this by:

- keeping things informal, starting with general 'chit chat' and have some safe conversational topics such as weather, food, pets, news etc.
- taking time and go at an individual's own pace
- showing active listening (by giving feedback, summarising and clarifying).
- showing empathy and no judgement
- acknowledging and validating feelings and not dismissing them e.g., 'that must be difficult'
- normalising what a person has shared with you e.g., 'that's something many people experience'
- listening to understand rather than to respond
- sharing your own personal experiences or challenges, which can help create connection
- creating safe spaces where people can freely express themselves without fear of judgment
- being culturally sensitive, mindful of cultural norms, customs, communication styles and use of translation tools
- finding people who can help facilitate communication where there are language barriers

1.14.   Ideas for introductory questions

Try to start with open questions. These help a person to tell their story. Examples include:

- what do you like to do with your time?
- how do you feel about the way you spend your time?
- do you feel like you are meeting enough people?
- how would you describe your network of friends and family?
- which friends or family members could you turn to for support if you needed it?
- would you like more opportunities to meet local people?
- where and how would you like to meet people?
- do you know your neighbours?
- do people say hello and chat to each other?
- what's the local transport like?
- is it easy to get around?
- where are the best places to go shopping locally?

Engagement with local young people suggests asking question like:

- who do you hang around with or spend time with?
- what do you do with your friends?
- where do you go out with friends?

1.15. How to respond if someone opens up

If someone opens up about feelings of lack of social connection or loneliness:

- keep things informal and be mindful of barriers to participation
- try not to give immediate advice or solve the problem e.g. 'You should join this group or access this service'
- be empathetic and try to support people to come up with their own ideas that might help because some people with chronic loneliness develop negative thinking patterns
- encourage people to reflect on their situation by explaining that changing the way that they think can help change the way that they feel
- try to introduce positive ideas or nudge people to expanding their social opportunities by encouraging them to take small steps like talking to a neighbour to help 'brighten' their day
- encourage people to think about what skills or gifts they can share in their local community
- offer to help via practical tips listed below and by signposting people to support if they need it
- bear in mind that many people do not need formal services
- for many, gradually working to build up their social interactions can be a catalyst for change and this can lead to a new sense of purpose enabling people to build up meaningful connections naturally

1.16. Practical tips to offer people

You can offer a range of practical tips to people to consider for themselves before offering signposting to activities or support. This includes:

- 'acknowledge how you feel' as most people feel a lack of social connection or lonely at some time in their life
- you can support them with this using open questions or prompts:
  - identify what you need or what would make a difference
  - imagine what an improved situation might look like
- Some questions you could encourage them to think about:
  - How would you like things to be?
  - What would you like to be doing that's different?
  - What would make a difference to you?

- What needs to happen to make this happen?
- Is there anything that stops you making the change?
- think about your own qualities and strengths and what you can offer other people
- take action based on your own personal situation and goals
- take it slowly if needed, start to interact in a small way and build up daily connections if it's a big step to take
- make connections by simply calling someone you have lost contact with or planning to meet up with someone over a 'cuppa'
- join local classes or groups of interest or via volunteering (e.g. local community group or via local libraries)

1.17.   Things that can help to build connections

Tips to offer people when they would like to start to build up their connections include:

- try to open up and reach out
- don't be afraid to show vulnerability even if it makes you feel uncomfortable, because this will help to build empathy and make connections
- take an interest in other people's lives and they will be more likely to do the same
- be the organiser by arranging a small get together as many people appreciate this when they have busy lives
- offering kindness to others helps to build connection
- think about any skills or gifts you can offer others in your community

1.18.   Self-care

In addition to some of the practical tips highlighted in the previous section, 'Mind', the national mental health charity suggests some ways for people to take care of themselves by boosting overall mental wellbeing. This could include physical activity, spending time in nature, with animals or accessing talking therapies.

Learning to be comfortable in one's own company is a positive step. It's possible to identify enjoyable things to do at home whilst alone, whether it's getting out and about in the local community, watching TV, listening to the radio or home-based projects. Learning the types of activities that boost individual wellbeing will help people to do these more frequently as part of self-care in times of isolation. Tips to manage loneliness - Mind

1.19.   Creating or signposting to an activity

When setting up new activities or signposting people into activities remember to:

- be person centred and ensure this meets with the person's interests e.g. cultural activities, workshops, groups

- respect their choices as not everyone wants or needs the same amount of social interaction

- plan activities that promote inclusivity and take time to educate yourself to ensure that activities are inclusive especially for minority communities

1.20.　People who are not ready to connect

Sometimes people may not be ready to start connecting. The following tips can be suggested:

- try and distract yourself from the feelings of loneliness by getting out and about, getting involved in creative activities, gardening etc.

- plan activities to look forward to during the week

- spend time outdoors either with nature or in your local community to help you feel connected your neighbourhood and local environment

- concentrate on the positive memories or experiences

- practice self-care by looking after your wellbeing e.g. sleeping, eating well and being active

Supporting meaningful connection doesn't always mean signposting people to more formal support. However, there are times when someone may need extra help to get them back on track or to improve their wellbeing.

When sharing opportunities, try to keep it informal and casual as you would, when talking to a friend. Instead of telling people that 'you should go' try:

- someone told me about…

- it sounds like something you might enjoy…

1.21.　Signposting links and resources

- Community Plus – One to one support to help people to connect to local activities and reduce loneliness.

- Social Prescribing Link Workers - Request a referral to a social prescribing link worker via a local GP - they work alongside GP's and in the community to support people to enjoy activities of interest to them in their local community. There are Mental Health Social Prescribing Link workers in GP practices in Kirklees too.

- Kirklees Libraries - Offer a range of activities in your local community that support wellbeing and social connection.

- Give A Few Words - Sharing letters, arts and crafts to reduce loneliness and improve wellbeing

- Kirklees Wellness Service – One to one support for over 18s to improve health and wellbeing.

- Welcome to Age UK Calderdale and Kirklees – services and activities.

- NHS Talking Therapies – Support for adults with stress, anxiety or depression including Cognitive Behaviour Therapy.
- Calderdale and Kirklees Recovery and Wellbeing College - Workshops and courses that promote wellbeing, connection and good mental health.
- Get help with loneliness – Things you can try yourself to help reduce feelings of loneliness.
- Mental Health Support – For urgent support or self-help.
- Working Together Better Partnership - taking care of minds in Kirklees. – Specific community activities that support mental health and wellbeing. Many of these services offer 'drop in' sessions where you can just go along and observe what happens, before actually 'signing up.'

Befriending services

- Age UK befriending service
- Befriending Services for Older People | MHA
- Re-engage: Charity Supporting Older People Through Volunteering

Bereavement Support

- The Kirkwood – Counselling team
- Suicide Bereavement Services - Leeds and West Yorkshire - Leeds Mind
- Cruse
- Marie Curie
- The Compassionate Friends
- Marigold Café
- Talkthru – baby loss
- The Good Grief Trust
- Mencap– bereavement support for people with learning disabilities.
- At a loss - Helping bereaved people find support and wellbeing.
- Suicide Bereavement UK
- NHS - Get help after bereavement or loss.

Cost of Living support

- Cost of Living – signposting, guidance and advice from Kirklees Council.

Community directory

- Community directory for activities to join in the local area.

Volunteering

- [Third Sector Leaders Kirklees](#)

Support for parents

- [Home-Start Kirklees](#)

Community wellbeing projects

- [Timestep Community Dance (TCD) -](#) Tackling social isolation in the community through diverse activities.

Men's mental health and wellbeing

- [Andy's Man Club -](#) Supporting mental health through peer support.
- [CLEAR - Men's Talk - Inspire North](#)– Performing arts group for men with experience of mental health issues.
- [Luke's Lads](#) – Men only fitness training sessions for mental health support.
- [Men's Sheds](#) – Connection, conversation, creation.

Activities for young adults

- [Conscious Youth -](#) Conscious Youth CIC is an award-winning youth-led social enterprise based in Kirklees.
- [Kirklees Youth Alliance](#) - For a vibrant community youth sector in Kirklees
- [Kirklees SEND Local Offer](#)
- [Yorkshire Sport Foundation](#)
- [Find Football - West Riding FA](#)
- [LGBT Youth Service | The Brunswick Centre](#)
- [RAF Air Cadets](#)
- [Army Cadets UK](#)
- [Sea Cadets](#)

[Elevate with Fresh Futures -](#) Peer to peer and group activities young adults – developing confidence and social connections

[Kirklees Keep in Mind - Helping young people improve their mental health (kirklees-keep-in-mind.nhs.uk)](#)

- [Kirklees Young Carers | Barnardo's (barnardos.org.uk)](#)
- [The Base - Kirklees | Change Grow Live](#)

1.22.   References and acknowledgements

This resource was put together using a range of existing literature and good practice evidence from the following sources:

British Red Cross – Let's Talk About Loneliness

- Let's talk about loneliness: part one (redcross.org.uk)

Marmalade Trust

- Marmalade Trust talking about loneliness

Campaign to End Loneliness

- Home | Campaign to End Loneliness
- Campaign to End Loneliness - feeling lonely
- Campaign to End Loneliness - Lessons from lockdown

Mind

- Mind - Tips to manage loneliness

Age UK

- Age UK -How to overcome loneliness
- Age UK - caring for someone who is lonely

Identifying and responding to isolation during day-to-day interactions – learning from Ageing Better Programme via Good Practice Mentors

- Ageing Better in Camden

Tackling loneliness and social isolation programme (Office for Health Improvement & NHS England)

- Loneliness and social isolation training

This training resource was developed in partnership with Campaign to End Loneliness, Public Health England, Haylo Theatre, and NHS England.

Telephone Conversations Guide used During the Covid- 19 Pandemic in Leeds

- Compassionate and informative telephone calls during COVID-19

What Works for Wellbeing: A Brief Guide to Measuring Loneliness

- [Brief Guide to Measuring Loneliness](#)

Sense – campaign to support loneliness and isolation.

- [Left Out of Life: tackling loneliness among disabled people - Sense](#)

Key LGBT Plus references

- [Combating loneliness amongst older LGBT people | Age UK](#)
- [About LGBTQIA+ and mental health - Mind](#)
- [Marginalization and loneliness among sexual minorities: How are they linked? | Campaign to End Loneliness](#)
- [WCPP REPORT Loneliness Inequalities Evidence Review](#)

This guide was also based on local insights from professionals and community members in Kirklees.

1.23. Appendix – sample questions

Below is a list of key questions for front-line workers, when they come into contact with people who may lack social connections. These questions could be used to create small, laminated cards for frontline staff or volunteers to keep with them when out and about in the community, as a reminder.

Conversations about social connection

1.23.1.1. Introductory questions

- What do/ would you like to do with your time?

- Would you like more opportunities to meet people? Where and how would you like to meet people?

- Which friends or family members could you turn to for support if you needed it?

- Do you know your neighbours? Do you find people say hello and chat to each other?

- What's the local transport like? Is it easy to get around? Where are the best places to go shopping locally?

1.23.1.2. Generating ideas for change

- How would you like things to be?

- What would you like to be doing that's different?

- What would make a difference to you? What needs to change to make this happen?

- Is there anything that stops you making the change?