



The complexity of loneliness and the importance of meaningful relationships

**Time to Shine report
September 2019**

About Time to Shine

Run by Leeds Older People's Forum, Time to Shine aims to reduce social isolation and loneliness of the older population in Leeds.

Our vision is that older people need not experience loneliness and social isolation as an inevitable consequence of ageing but that our project will offer opportunities for fulfilment by breaking down barriers and building strong communities.

Time to Shine is one of fourteen areas which form Ageing Better; an ambitious, large scale programme funded and developed by The National Lottery Community Fund. Ageing Better aims to improve the lives of people aged 50 and over by reducing social isolation and loneliness.

Introduction

Developing meaningful relationships can take time, commitment, effort and perhaps a bit of luck. Through Time to Shine we've learned that this is key to reducing loneliness in the longer term.

This report focuses on loneliness not social isolation; although the two words are often used interchangeably they mean different things. The simplest definition is:

"Isolation is being by yourself. Loneliness is not liking it" (Beach and Bamford 2015)

A person can be busy all week with hobbies, social events or group activities but still feel lonely in a group, or when they're on their own.



Evidence

Time to Shine has funded over 90 projects (2015-2019). Delivery partners collect case studies, quotes, insight and learning from participants, volunteers and staff.

Research is integral to the Time to Shine programme. So far 1,600 participants and volunteers (aged 50+) have completed an evaluation questionnaire, covering a range of topics including social and emotional loneliness, social contact, social participation and wellbeing.

The average loneliness score on entry is 3.3 out of a maximum of 6 on the De Jong Gierveld loneliness scale. This indicates that, in general, many people experience some feelings of social or emotional loneliness when they join a Time to Shine project.

To date, over 700 people have completed a second questionnaire to help us measure change over time; 35% are feeling less lonely and 66% have improved feelings of wellbeing. From these interim results we can see that involvement in Time to Shine activities has a bigger impact on wellbeing, within a particular time period, than on feelings of loneliness.

From speaking to older people we've learned that feelings of loneliness can be deep-rooted and can take much longer to change. It takes time for people to cross over from acquaintance to friend and develop meaningful, lasting relationships.

Insight from a Time to Shine delivery partner

“ One participant lost her husband over a year ago and has found it extremely difficult to come to terms with the loss and void which it had caused.

She explained [to me] how she would feel extremely lonely at times and would drive to a nearby supermarket car park, park her car and watch people walk by.

This would help pass her time and get her through the day. She had stopped cooking and had lost interest in everything. ”

The complexities of loneliness

Care Connect is the local evaluation partner for the programme. Much of the evidence for this report was collected from questionnaire responses and during individual interviews and focus groups involving participants and older volunteers across a range of projects.

Of the interviewees who felt lonely, a range of reasons were given including:

- Separation from family (through being busy or distant)
- Loss of an existing social network
- Retirement
- Having no relationship with neighbours or people in the local neighbourhood
- Difficulty getting outside due to a disability or health condition
- Confidence issues (sometimes triggered by bereavement, disability or identifying as LGBT+)
- Bereavement (normally a partner, but also loss of a friend was referred to)

The suggestion that loneliness is time and context specific came across strongly in the focus groups; some experienced loneliness at particular times, with evenings and weekends being frequently referred to.

In one focus group the general consensus was that people experience loneliness in different ways, that it is an internal 'personal' experience which means different things to different people. A few identified with the experience of feeling **'isolated in a crowd'** and another that **"I feel out of tune with the room"**. One beneficiary stated that at times she enjoyed her own company at home but that after a period of time it can become difficult:

"I know I'm lonely when I am looking forward to my carers coming, but they are paid, they have to come to me, they are not my friends"

The above quote draws attention to the importance of the 'quality' of relationships and 'who' the relationships are with. It is important to distinguish between the value that people may place on particular relationships and the importance of the 'range' of relationships that people may have. Linked to this, it was felt important by interviewees to have a 'personal connection' to someone.

Bereavement was viewed as a significant cause of loneliness. One person stated that she felt that something had been 'torn away'. A number of poignant examples of how this bereavement made people feel was provided:

"I didn't know what loneliness was until it happened, it tears you up, I can't describe it"
"I have family, but I still feel lonely inside, it is hard to describe, I feel very empty...I miss the one person who matters most, they are not there, I can't get away from that"

Based on the evidence gathered over the first two years of Time to Shine, one of the 18 recommendations in Care Connect's interim report was to **support project approaches which foster friendships**. "This requires potential delivery partners to show ways in which their approach will help beneficiaries to foster relationships within the activities run, that can ideally continue outside the project boundaries."

Developing meaningful relationships

Meaningful relationships can be interpreted in different ways, depending on the individual:

- **Familiarity:** having a staff member or volunteer to greet you and take time to talk, listen and share a joke
- **Acquaintance:** having a number of people to stop and chat with whilst out and about, or one or two familiar faces to sit with in a group
- **Friendship:** finding people who share the same interests or outlook and who can be relied upon when times are good or bad
- **Love:** a deeper connection with a loving partner

In April 2018, in response to Care Connect's recommendation, the Time to Shine programme commissioned four projects under the theme of 'connections'. All new and existing Time to Shine projects were encouraged to consider how their approach could help people to develop meaningful relationships and friendships.

Each delivery partner interpreted the brief in different ways. Staff spent time and effort in creating opportunities and the environment in which friendships could develop. Here are some examples:

"The social element has grown well with people offering peer support around issues in their respective lives and acting as an extended support network"

(The Great Outdoors, The Conservation Volunteers)

"C joined the weekly craft group that we set up at the home and, like the others who attended, seemed to really enjoy the social aspect of gathering together and taking part in a common activity" (Cara Too, Leeds Irish Health and Homes)

"A volunteer with an interest in art was matched to a participant who was a retired art teacher. Although the project was related to sharing meals the emphasis shifted towards sharing skills" (More than a Mealtime, Cross Gates and District Good Neighbours' Scheme)

"Our guests have the opportunity to reconnect with old friends face-to-face by using the free weekly bus pass" (Out and About, Leeds Asylum Seeker Support Network)

"Many customers come in to the cafe often start off sitting alone, but quickly respond to conversations and introductions where we sense this may be needed and appreciated. We measure the success of this by the fact they regularly return or directly tell us" (TLC Community Connections, Toast Love Coffee)

"Part of our session includes technical support to help people use WhatsApp to keep in touch with family and grow the group's social circle" (Bollywood Dance, D Dance Theatre)

"Service users have established friendships within the 'After Hours Saturday Social Group'. People are feeling confident enough to meet up to attend exercise sessions together in their own time" (Choices, Feel Good Factor)

A separate 4-page toolkit - 'Developing friendships' - accompanies this report.

Outcomes

Here are some examples of meaningful relationships developed by older participants and volunteers involved in Time to Shine:

“I have got to make new friends and have got to know my neighbours better. One of them calls in to see me at least once a week as she is also a member. I feel like I have things to say now, new experiences to talk about. I have a social life now and seem to get on better with my family. They seem less worried about me now.”

“I feel more active and a bit more positive about my life. I have made friends with other volunteers and have a purpose.”

“I feel very happy now. I am not depressed anymore. I have learnt a new way of living life. I look forward to attending the group. I also help out in the group as a volunteer now. This has given me courage to come out of grieving.”

“Four years ago I lost my husband [so I joined Shared Tables]. Most weekends I went out for lunch with what very quickly became good friends - to eat with, to have a laugh with or shed a few tears, as most were in the same position as me. On one meal out I went to ask a chap if all was OK; he said yes but looked really down. I made some enquiries and found he had lost his wife and was struggling. We continued to go to Shared Tables, he sat with the men and I sat with my friends. Then he invited me out for a meal and to cut a long story short, we celebrated our first wedding anniversary recently!”



Case study: Don't Call Me Old (Armley Helping Hands)

A man was referred to 'Don't Call Me Old', a Time to Shine project, after he had been diagnosed with terminal cancer. He explained that although he and his wife loved each other very much they didn't really have much to talk about as they didn't go out often and were together 24/7 apart from his appointments at Wheatfields hospice.

He met with the project worker at Don't Call Me Old and on Monday night he came to the men's club and was introduced to the other members. He played pool, dominoes and cards and talked all the time to different people. He obviously enjoyed the company and the chance to forget about his cancer and just enjoy mixing with people again.

On Tuesday morning his wife called to say how much he had enjoyed the club and in just the space of a three-hour session he felt that he was part of a group.

A trip on a canal boat was the first of many outings and activities which followed with new friends from the project. After a while he didn't feel well enough to come to the Monday men's club and some of the group went to visit him.

When they got to the house and went in, he was so happy to see them but it was clear that he was physically shattered. The project worker kept in touch over the next two weeks and then received a call from his wife saying that sadly he had passed away at home. This was a very sad day for the group.

The project worker and some of the members attended the funeral to pay their respects to their friend. They printed out photos of him taking part in outings and put them into a photo album to present to his wife at the funeral. She was really pleased as she hadn't seen any of the pictures before. She particularly liked the one of him steering the canal boat as he had a big smile on his face and was clearly enjoying the experience.

Don't Call Me Old helped to create some lovely experiences and memories for this couple during very challenging circumstances.



Recommendations and references

Creative resources:

- Loneliness and me: film
- Lychee Red Chinese Seniors: film
- 'Looking at Life' poem portrait (for Dorothy)
- 'Talking' poem portrait (for Tony)

Learning resources:

- Developing Friendships: toolkit
- Case study on Cara
- Case study on Shared Tables

Academic resources:

Time to Shine Evaluation Interim Report: The Beneficiary Experience
by Sarah Alden and Andrea Wigfield
(Care Connect, University of Sheffield)
2016

Evaluation of Time to Shine: Year 2 Interim Findings by Sarah Alden and Andrea Wigfield (Care Connect, University of Sheffield) 2017

I want to thank you from the bottom of my heart for giving me my life back by showing me I could have friends and enjoyment again, for waking up each morning with a smile on my face. ... People like you, in my opinion, don't get the recognition you deserve, but I'm giving you it, from me at least. I can honestly say you've helped me get out of a black hole in my life into the sunlight. God Bless

Further learning from Time To Shine

There are additional resources created by Time to Shine which touch on the topics of loneliness, meaningful relationships and friendship.

Find these reports and other resources on the Leeds Older People's Forum website
www.opforum.org.uk/resources

