

Loneliness is not just an issue in old age – young people suffer too

6 March 2018, by Katie Wright-Bevans



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In old age, many people experience a decline in their physical health, which can mean they are less confident about getting around and socialising as they used to. Loneliness affects over [a million older adults](#) across the UK; [over half](#) of people aged 75 and over live alone, and [one in ten](#) people over 65 say they always or often feel lonely. And there's evidence to show that feeling lonely can cause existing physical health problems such as [frailty or chronic pain](#) to get worse.

But while [awareness has grown](#) about loneliness among older [people](#), far less attention is given to how it affects [young people](#). [An NSPCC report](#) revealed that in 2016-17, Childline counselled over 4,000 young people about loneliness. [Students are affected too](#), with almost half admitting to feeling lonely during their time at university. Indeed, a [recent survey](#) of university students suggested that

loneliness is the leading predictor of mental distress.

A social issue

Loneliness is not only a health issue, but a social issue. That's why social psychologists like myself set out to explore the social causes of loneliness, and understand why people may begin to feel lonely in the first place. People of all ages can face difficulties when adjusting to life's changes, or seeking a sense of belonging among others who share similar goals and interests.

Young people experience periods of transition, just as [older people](#) do. Whether they're facing changes at school, college, university or work, or difficulties with friends or family, most young people need to readjust to big changes at several points throughout their teenage years or early adulthood.

Transitioning from one stage of life to another often means a shift in identity, which challenges our sense of self. Establishing a new identity can take time, as can finding and connecting with others who seem to think like us, or share similar interests and goals. Whether old or young, most people have a strong need to feel a [sense of belonging](#), and a connection with like-minded others.

A social solution

Communities can provide the sense of identity and belonging, which protects people from feeling lonely in times of change. Whether it be a physical community, such as a neighbourhood or campus, or a community of people with shared experiences, passions or culture, having a hub of people to connect with is good for our [health and well-being](#).

Fostering community is one way to take action against loneliness. Bringing older and younger people together can help to tackle loneliness across the course of life, by identifying common

interests shared across the generations. Activities such as gardening, photography or simply sharing a cup of tea can spark friendships which span the age gap, and foster a sense of belonging.

For example, the [eScouts](#) intergenerational learning exchange, which took place in several countries across Europe, had almost 100 young people teach 420 [older adults](#) skills needed to access digital technology and the internet. The exchange improved quality of life and social inclusion among young and old. And London-based charity [Magic Me](#) runs intergenerational arts projects and works with schools, care homes and communities to bring people of all ages together in creative activities.

These sorts of projects are promoted as a way of reducing loneliness and isolation in older people. But younger people can benefit just as much, given the chance to connect with a community and forge rewarding friendships. Still, community projects alone will not solve the problem of loneliness in young or old. To truly succeed, projects need to be built with older and younger people and not simply for them, they need time and space to develop and appropriate resources such as accessible community centres and equipment.

Beyond that, bigger factors such as [poverty and inequality](#) can fuel [loneliness](#) in both younger and older people. Community projects alone cannot address these causes, though they do provide opportunities for young and old to connect and build a [sense](#) of belonging. For that reason, youth groups, schools, colleges and universities should create as many opportunities as possible for young people to connect with older adults – after all, both will benefit.

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