

Guide for individuals

What is in this guide?

The guide is split up into the following headings. Each area can help you overcome any feelings of loneliness, help make you feel more connected to your community and improve your overall feeling of wellbeing.

- General emotional health - a brief overview of emotional health and emotional distress
- Bereavement - some sources of support for people experiencing bereavement
- Parenting - while becoming a parent is generally a positive experience for most people, it can also leave you feeling quite isolated
- Changes in your working life - looking at the impact of changes such as redundancy or retirement on your emotional health
- Physical disability and mobility issues - looking at how to reduce the impact of physical limitations such as illness or poor mobility on your ability to access the community
- Transport - looking at options for reducing the costs of transport and improving your access to local transport facilities
- Financial issues - Financial issues can lead to people becoming isolated as they may feel that they cannot afford to get out or to take part in activities that they may previously have enjoyed
- Housing - where you live and how you live can have a big impact on how you feel. This section looks at getting the most out of where you live
- Technology and social isolation - some suggestions for how technology can reduce your sense of isolation and tips for accessing technology
- Befriending and mentoring - looks at services offering friendship and support to individuals
- Volunteering - volunteering can be an effective way of reducing isolation and can also give you a sense of purpose and fulfilment. This section looks at the many different ways you can be involved in volunteering opportunities
- Local groups and services - different ways to get involved with groups and services in your area
- Social anxiety - how to identify that you may be suffering from social anxiety and some tips on managing the thoughts and feelings associated with this

Introduction

Possible signs and symptoms that develop when someone is feeling isolated:

- Physical – general ill-health, increased risk of drug or alcohol misuse
- Emotional – reduced confidence, lower self-esteem, depression or anxiety
- Cognitive – shortened attention span or increased forgetfulness

A number of studies have shown that having a strong social support network has a significant impact on both emotional health and physical health.

There are a number of factors that may increase feelings of isolation and loneliness or that may affect your ability to socialise. These include:

- Bereavement • Relationship breakdown • Redundancy • Retirement • Being a lone carer • Having a baby
- Moving home • Disability • Poor mobility • Lack of access to transport • Discrimination • Fear of new situations • Social anxiety or shyness

If you currently experiencing any of the above or have experienced any of these in the past there are many simple things and resources you can utilise in order to increase your wellbeing.

General and Emotional Health

Your general emotional health is an important part of how well you get by on a day-to-day basis. Feeling emotionally and physically well may mean that you feel more inclined to socialise and spend time with others and that can reduce feelings of isolation and loneliness. We often say to ourselves that we will do what we enjoy when we feel better. More often than not, though, we feel better when we do what we enjoy. As part of this, it can be useful to look at your diet and exercise patterns. A balanced, healthy diet can make you feel better about yourself as well as being beneficial to your body and immune system. A balanced diet will help your body and mind work more efficiently. You could discuss this with your GP as they will be able to give you more information.

Try to incorporate exercise or physical activity into your routine. Exercise will help you to feel better, have more energy and can release chemicals in your brain that help to boost your mood. It may also improve your sleep patterns. The type of activity that you do will vary according to your physical health, fitness, the amount of time you have and how much you enjoy it. If you do little or no activity at present, you could try starting with activities such as gardening, going for walks or just taking the stairs instead of the lift.

If you suffer from a health condition such as high blood pressure, weight problem, have issues with low mood or are recovering from an injury, your GP may be able to refer you to the exercise on prescription programme to help you get started. Participating leisure centres offer a discounted rate on exercise for around 12 weeks and many also offer a tailor made programme to help you improve your fitness.

It is important to try to focus on things that you are able to do rather than the things that you cannot.

Bereavement

After the loss of a loved one it can feel harder to spend time with others. You may feel that they do not understand how you are feeling and that they might feel uncomfortable around you. Even if they do not know exactly what to say, it is likely that the people around you will want to offer support and to allow you to talk about how you are feeling. If this is not possible, it might help to look at local support groups.

www.cruselancashire.org.uk

Parenting

While becoming a parent is generally a positive experience, it can leave many people feeling quite isolated. There may be issues around giving up work or about taking on a new role and identity as a mother or father. It may cause a change in your relationship with your partner, friends and family, to which it will take time to adjust. Some people also find that money is a bit tight, because other priorities may come first like the need for finding childcare. Others may also feel that there is a stigma attached to them as a parent; for example, single parents and parents who are much younger or older than the perceived 'norm'. This may cause anxiety about fitting in and having things in common with other parents. However, there is a huge variety of activities in which parents can take part.

There are a number of groups available for parents across Lancashire. Some are very social and act as a way for parents to get together and have a chat, or a cup of tea. Other sessions are focused around playing with your child or children in the company of others, such as, Play and Learn or messy play sessions. You could also join a group based around fitness and exercise for parents. Most areas also offer play sessions that are just aimed at fathers, grandfathers or male carers. Many sessions are run by local children's centres or Sure Start centres, but local libraries often have activities going on as well, including Rhyme Time. Parents of older children could become involved in the governing body of their children's school or use the time to find activities that they enjoy away from being full-time parents.

<https://fisonline.lancashire.gov.uk/earlyyears/publicenquiry/Search.aspx?searchID=231>

Changes in your working life

Work transitions such as redundancy and retirement can also lead to people becoming more isolated, as they adjust to a new daily routine and a change in their roles and identities. For some people it can help to maintain their routine by setting an alarm and getting out of bed in the morning. You could also consider looking at opportunities for voluntary work that can occupy your time and keep you active and give you a sense of fulfilment and achievement. If you are in the process of looking for another job, it can also give a boost to your CV.

Physical disability and mobility issues

Physical limitations like *illness* or *poor mobility* can affect a person's ability to access the community. There are a number of things that you might be able to do to try and help you with this. For example, you could look at planning any journey before you set out, allowing for time and places to sit or rest. You could also look at local transport options, please see the following section on transport for more details.

Sensory impairment can also be a barrier to social contact as many people are concerned that they will not be able to communicate well with others or be understood or may think that they cannot fully participate in activities. Many venues now offer support for people with sensory impairments however, for example hearing induction loops, material printed in large print or Braille and also by offering awareness training for their staff. It may be worthwhile

Improving social isolation and loneliness contacting organisations or groups that you would be interested in attending to find out how they may be able to meet your needs.

Continence can also be an issue for some people. Also, though this can be a very sensitive topic, it may be helpful to speak to your local district nurse or continence advisory service for an assessment of your needs and advice on the best ways to meet them. For many people continence issues can be easily and discretely managed with the correct support. It can also be helpful to plan trips so that you know where the toilets are and ensuring that you are able to take regular comfort breaks.

Many support groups are available for people with disabilities and it may be that you feel more comfortable meeting with people who may have had similar experiences to yourself.

Transport

If *transport* is an issue in terms of accessing the local community, there may be options available that can help you. A disabled person's bus pass also gives free off-peak travel. You may be eligible if you are blind or partially sighted, are profoundly or severely deaf, are without speech, you have disability or injury that has a long-term effect in your ability to walk, have lost the long-term use of both arms or have a learning disability.

Senior and disabled person's railcards are also available, which give discounted off-peak rail fares. More information on this can be found on www.direct.gov.uk. Many rural areas have a local volunteer driving service that assists with transport to social events, GP appointments, to pick up prescriptions, etc. You could ask at your local Citizens Advice Bureau or library for further information about these.

Financial issues

Financial issues can lead to people becoming isolated as they may feel that they cannot afford to get out or to take part in activities that they may previously have enjoyed. It may be worth arranging an appointment with your local Citizens Advice Bureau to ensure that you are receiving all the benefits that you are entitled to or for some general advice on managing your money www.citizensadvice.org.uk. The Money Advice Service www.moneyadviceservice.co.uk is also a free resource which provides free, unbiased and independent advice on managing your money. It could also be helpful to look out for local free activities, such as community work or volunteering with which you could become involved as well.

Housing

Where you live and how you live can have an impact on how isolated you feel. It may be useful to become familiar with your local area and the resources that it offers. There may be community groups that meet to discuss improvements to the area or services such as assistance with prescription collection or attending appointments.

For some people, the area in which they live may be quite intimidating and may not feel very safe. It may be helpful to find out if there is a local Neighbourhood Watch scheme or you could discuss with your local council, about putting in additional security measures such as more lighting or street crossings. In some cases, this may not be possible, in which case, if you are in council accommodation you could talk to your local housing department about whether you could be moved and explain your reasons for requesting this. For older people, sheltered accommodation or supported living complexes may be an option. You may also be concerned that the condition or cleanliness of your house and garden could be a barrier to socialising. If mobility or other difficulties prevent you from carrying out household chores it may make you feel reluctant to have people visit you. Most areas have low cost care and repair services, often run by Age UK, Red Cross or other organisations who can assist you with this. It may be useful to discuss this with your local social care team who will be able to assess your needs and suggest ways of supporting you.

Technology and social isolation

More and more people now choose to communicate over the *internet* and use it to stay in touch with friends and family and also to meet new people. You can use web cams, chat rooms, Skype, social networks and many other electronic means to socialise. This may be particularly useful for people who are less able to leave their homes. It can, however, be a source of isolation for those who are lacking the means or confidence to access the internet or use computers. There are a number of organisations that offer support with this by offering computer training aimed at older people or assistance with purchasing computers and finding suitable communication packages for those on a low income.

While social networking can be a really useful tool, especially for those who are housebound or very anxious in social settings, it may not be advisable to use it as a complete substitute for seeing people face to face as it can be very limiting and you may end up feeling that you are no less isolated than previously. This will depend on your personal social needs and preferences.

Befriending and mentoring

Befriending services offer friendship and support to people in their own homes. Some services are aimed at specific groups of people such as the elderly or those experiencing mental ill-health but others are available for people who are feeling lonely and who feel that they would benefit from some companionship. Mentoring services are similar to this, but often are more focussed on people working with their mentor to help them achieve their set goals. Employment support services may provide a mentor service, as do some youth organisations and also probation services.

Volunteering

Volunteering can be an effective method of reducing loneliness and social isolation and can also give you a sense of purpose and fulfilment. Volunteering can help people to feel involved in their local community and can give routine and structure to those who are not currently in paid employment. For those seeking employment, volunteering can also provide valuable work experience. The sense of pride and achievement that often accompanies volunteer work can also provide a boost to self-esteem and feelings of self-worth. It may also assist you in building up a strong social network around yourself.

There are many different types of volunteer work from helping out in a local school with craft or gardening projects to becoming a regular volunteer for an organisation such as Samaritans. You could contact a local charity that interests you or contact an organisation that holds a database of national volunteering opportunities. Volunteering does not have to involve a huge time commitment and can even be done from your own home. Micro volunteering is a way that people can do something to help others in whatever time they have available, for example by knitting hats for premature babies, filling out surveys online, or just clicking on sponsored web pages. www.microvolunteeringday.com

Local groups and services

Joining local groups and accessing local services can be a good way of meeting new people and reducing your sense of isolation. Cafés, libraries and community centres can be useful places to make contact with others in your area and also to find about local groups or events that might be of interest to you. Examples of groups that you might wish to be involved with include: religious or spiritual groups, local history groups, exercise or sports groups or clubs, dance classes, art groups, drama groups, music groups or cultural or ethnic groups or organisations.

Social anxiety

Social anxiety is a common feeling to many people in relation to unfamiliar settings and often involves a feeling of nervousness or dread about social situations. For some people, it can be much more serious and can prevent them from carrying out their daily tasks or causes their social life to significantly suffer. People who suffer from it often feel extremely self-conscious and believe that other people will view them negatively or think badly of them. There may also be physical symptoms such as sweating, rapid heartbeat, blushing and stammering. It is often linked to low self-esteem. In such circumstances, people tend to focus on negative thoughts and experiences and ignore the positives. For example, when going into a new situation they are likely to be thinking thoughts such as 'I know I'm going to make a fool of myself and say something stupid', which has a very different impact than if we say 'I am able to talk confidently and well with my friends, so there is no reason that I would say something stupid now'. It may also be useful to use some relaxation techniques such as deep, controlled breathing, muscle relaxation or distractions, such as concentrating on certain objects in the room.

Talking therapies can also be beneficial if you are suffering from anxiety or depression to the point where it is having a significant impact on your day to day life. It may be best to discuss this with your GP.

Useful Links

<http://lancswellbeing.wixsite.com/lws2016>

www.lancashirewellbeing.co.uk