

Creating Connection Through Conversations: Tackling Loneliness and Social Isolation in the Howardian Hills

Welcome to our webinar on Creating Connection Through Conversations and how we can tackle loneliness and social isolation in the Howardian Hills.

This webinar will look at why tackling loneliness matters in our communities and how having connecting conversations can help them be stronger and more resilient. We will also look at the resources available to help start the conversation along with signposting resources.

When you think of loneliness, what do you think of? Often our image of loneliness is of someone who is elderly who may live alone and we forget that loneliness can affect anyone. Carers, those who are unemployed, young people or even those who are working and surrounded by people on a day-to-day basis.

In fact, loneliness is not about how many people you know but the quality and meaningfulness of those relationships. If there is a gap between your expectation and the actual quality of your relationships, you are at risk of loneliness.

However, there are some risk factors that increase the likelihood of someone experiencing loneliness. These included living in rural environments with poor transport connections, having a lack of family nearby, having a caring responsibility, living on a low income, bereavement, poor mobility, losing your hearing and/or your sight, and having certain long-term conditions (such as dementia), as well as a range of other possible characteristics, situations, or experiences.

Loneliness will affect most of us at some point in our lives.

In 2017/2018, the Office of National Statistics found through the Community Life Survey that 39% of adults experienced temporary loneliness. Perhaps more worryingly was that an additional 6% of those surveyed experienced chronic loneliness, where they were often or always lonely.

In June last year, the Office of National Statistics revisited the survey to understand the impact that Coronavirus had had on people's experience of loneliness. It found that while chronic loneliness had stayed the same, temporary loneliness had increased to 45%.

It also found that loneliness had increased significantly in younger age groups most significantly in 16-24 year olds, with up to 59.8% experiencing temporary loneliness.

But why does tackling loneliness matter? Loneliness is bad for both our physical and mental health. It not only causes physical health problems but it also affects our mental health, confidence, employment performance and overall resilience.

To tackle loneliness in North Yorkshire, The Loneliness Campaign has been working since 2019 across the county to develop a joined-up, shared approach bringing partners together to address the issues.

The primary work in the campaign has been around creating a countywide, multi-agency strategy to tackle loneliness. This was published in September 2020 and has five key strategic ambitions along with an emerging and evolving action plan, which will continue to be developed.

Research has found that if a person has a strong sense of belonging to their neighbourhood, they are less likely to feel lonely. Living somewhere with a strong sense of community is of great importance to North Yorkshire residents; however, we all know that developing neighbourhoods that are resilient, cohesive and sustainable is not always easy. That is why the campaign also created the Stronger Together Toolkit. We want it to stimulate a conversation about how to create better, more connected communities and neighbourhoods and inspire local action to achieve it.

The Toolkit has four sections covering resources and information for communities and professionals alike; the Making Every Contact Count resources and information on asset based community development.

A key component of the Stronger Together Toolkit is the Building Connected Communities poster, which offers suggestions and ideas on how communities can collectively build connections, develop relationships and be more inclusive of others. The poster is available as a download from our website or as a hard copy from the office.

A welcome pack template has also been developed, for parish and town councils to use to welcome any new residents.

But why is the Making Every Contact Count material part of the toolkit?

Talking about loneliness is often difficult – it is surrounded by stigma, is often seen as a failure in some way and it can be difficult to have an honest and open conversation with someone. Often individuals don't know how to approach the topic and feel like they do not have the knowledge or tools to start the conversation.

The Making Every Contact Count approach started a number of years ago by Public Health England. It recognises that small, brief conversations with someone can have wider implications for their health and well-being. Originally designed to address issues such as smoking, exercise levels, diet and alcohol use, the approach has been expanded to include mental health and wellbeing advice.

The Yorkshire and Humber Public Health Network have widened the material even further by incorporating information and conversation starters on loneliness. There are 3 parts to the approach – Ask, Assist and Act. This framework is designed to be utilised to start a conversation with someone who you may come in contact with who you suspect is experiencing loneliness. The approach is not designed to be a diagnostic tool or offer specialist advice, but rather offer a way of facilitating wider conversations as well as potential signposting.

Ask suggests a number of conversation starter questions to facilitate a conversation. It includes questions on hobbies, networks and support systems. The questions are brief and simple and are not designed to be prescriptive or asked in any set order.

Assist offers some additional questions around how someone might want to change their current situation. Again, the questions are brief and are not designed to be prescriptive or completed in any specific order.

The Act section is more about signposting and what the other person might do to help themselves. It offers a number of suggestions for self-care including organisations which can offer support. It will work in conjunction with the information which is available on our own resource sheet and is available on our website.

Working alongside the Ask, Assist, Act approach is a number of videos, case studies and presentations to highlight how they might be used in everyday conversation.

For those who want to learn even more on Making Every Contact Count, the NHS e-learning platform has additional training available for anyone, not only NHS and social care staff. No account is required, although there is no certificate of completion if you do not have an account. There is additional information on the Five Ways to Wellbeing - five steps anyone can take to improve their mental health and wellbeing.

However, none of these conversations matter unless residents are able to find support to combat loneliness. Living Well, a service provided by North Yorkshire County Council, provides intensive support for people who are at risk of loneliness and social isolation. Anyone can self-refer through the county helpline and they support individuals to connect with local organisations, groups and activities that alleviate loneliness. The North Yorkshire Connect website is the local directory service for groups and organisations in North Yorkshire, while the Community Smart Toolbox on the Community Smart website, is the Ryedale specific page for mental health services, organisations and other support. Working alongside this presentation is a resource sheet bringing together all the links in one place as a quick reference guide.

We hope you have enjoyed this webinar on the Making Every Contact Count resources. We encourage you to visit The Loneliness Campaign website for more information on the Stronger Together Toolkit, the Be Social, Be Well strategy and our range of other campaigns.

Thank you.