

## LET'S TALK LONELINESS – 26<sup>th</sup> APRIL 2022

In the final session in our series Community: old paths and new directions, we discussed the issue of loneliness. Looked at in the context of our series of discussions over this year, we can think about loneliness in many circumstances, as a **loss or lack of community**. Though of course we can feel lonely in a crowd full of people.

### SLIDE 2 – WHAT IS LONELINESS?

So, what *is* loneliness? – an elderly gentleman being interviewed described it as a deep ache, difficult to find words for.

A good description might be 'a mismatch between the quality and quantity of social connections that a person has and what they would like to have'. A positive way of looking at it, is that it is our internal trigger, letting us know it's time to seek company, in the same way as hunger lets us know it's time to eat.

There are key life points which increase the likelihood of feeling lonely. They often involve change, for example, moving away from home; starting university or a new job; becoming a parent; a relationship break-up; suffering a bereavement; an illness or disability; retirement.

Recent research has shown that chronic loneliness is one of the biggest health concerns we face, and it's on the rise. The risk factor is similar to smoking and worse than obesity.

Loneliness can do much more harm than simply produce an unpleasant feeling. It has enormous impact on physical, as well as mental health. Chronic loneliness can drive up cortisol levels in the body. Cortisol is a hormone which your body creates when under pressure. This can lead to health issues – such as depression, cognitive dysfunction, high blood pressure, inflammation, altered immunity and can seriously shorten life expectancy. Older adults with the highest levels of loneliness are nearly twice as likely to die prematurely than those with the lowest levels of loneliness. There are said to be 9 million people in the UK currently suffering from loneliness and the situation is considered so serious as to be classified as a public health crisis. In 2018 a Minister for Loneliness was

appointed in Britain, the first in the world. A strategy to tackle loneliness was set out and funding made available for research into what has been termed the 'loneliness epidemic'.

The UK Government, including the NHS and many charities - such as the Jo Cox Foundation, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, the Marmalade Trust, Age UK, BBC Loneliness Experiment – have all produced helpful research and resources to help us understand the issue and to look at possible solutions.

Loneliness can affect any age group and everyone will have their own experience of being lonely. We have selected a couple of videos, so let us watch this first video clip of an older person talking about how it feels to be lonely.

SLIDE 3 - VIDEO 1

SLIDE 4 – PERSONAL REFLECTION

*Has anything resonated with you?*

*Take a moment to think about the specific times in your life when you may have experienced loneliness.*

*Or perhaps this is something you have witnessed in others and not known quite how to help?*

SLIDE 5 – BUILDING OUR UNDERSTANDING OF LONELINESS

**By building our understanding of loneliness, we can help ourselves and others to manage the feeling.**

Social media and the internet has had a profound effect on people's lives, particularly the younger generation. In a more connected world, some can feel more disconnected as a result. Studies have shown that excessive use of social media can affect our mental health and increase feelings of loneliness and that young people are more likely to be impacted. Social media can be used proactively but needs to be managed properly and is definitely not a substitute for physical company.

We are going to listen to some 'real' calls to a hotline which was set up for young people interested in contacting the Minister for Loneliness. The result was overwhelming and the mailbox was full within hours.

SLIDE 6 - VIDEO 2

SLIDE 7 - PERSONAL REFLECTION

It is powerful to hear these personal accounts.

LET'S TAKE ANOTHER SHORT PAUSE –

*What struck you about what those young people were saying? Does it surprise you to hear that young people (16-24) are the most likely group to feel lonely? Do you think it is harder to cope with loneliness when you are young?*

What struck me, was the sense of utter isolation. That until that point, those callers had not been able to share what they had been feeling. There was a sense of shame attached - they felt they were the odd one out, as they should be having the time of their lives "like everyone else". And there was a lot of reference to social media.

SLIDE 8 – HELP YOURSELF AND OTHERS TO FEEL MORE CONNECTED

So what are some of the solutions? Building our understanding of loneliness is key to managing it.

We should:

Acknowledge loneliness in ourselves or others

Accept that loneliness is a very normal human emotion

Identify what we or they need

Know the difference between being alone and being lonely

Take the appropriate action

Think about how we/they can build up the contact or the sense of community that we/they are currently lacking

Destigmatise the language around loneliness

The language we use is important. Managing the way we speak about loneliness can help destigmatise it, for example:

Swap 'suffering' for 'experiencing'

Rather than 'admitting' to feeling lonely, replace it with 'telling' someone.

Instead of using the term 'epidemic' in blanket terms, try using more relatable and fact-based language such as: 'Statistics show that lots of us are experiencing loneliness these days.'

Try to avoid using terms such as 'end' or 'got rid of' or 'tackling loneliness', as it can make people feel even worse. Instead, use practical and positive terms like 'helping' or 'improving.'

Reframe your language. Instead of talking about curing someone of loneliness, say: 'How can we build up your connections?'

Don't define a person by their loneliness. Avoid describing someone who is feeling lonely as a 'sad person' or a 'social misfit'. People might feel lonely but first and foremost they are a unique human being with different interests, talents and qualities.

#### SLIDE 9 – FOR DISCUSSION

In groups to discuss the following:

*Recent statistics show that 40% of young people (16-24) reported feeling lonely versus 27% of over 75s. What are your thoughts about this?*

*Do you think the COVID-19 pandemic has made people more aware and empathetic to those who may be experiencing loneliness?*

*What can YOU do to reduce loneliness or isolation? Yours or someone else's?*

## SUMMING UP

The COVID pandemic reminded us of our need for each other, of our interconnectedness. The experience of loneliness was brought closer to us – through lockdowns. Our connections with loved ones – our families, friends, work colleagues and so on, were disrupted. Perhaps the experience has helped us be able to talk about the issue of loneliness? - to stop stigmatising and to begin to understand it as a natural human emotion which we ALL experience, albeit on different levels and at different times in our lives.

The search for community is vital to thriving fully as a person. So what is community? Community is or will become the people who you see, interact with, and talk to most often. Based around interests, beliefs, political views, world view and so on. Humans are social animals and community & social interaction feature high up in the hierarchy of needs. When we feel lonely it is our internal trigger, letting us know it's time to seek company.

Our series of talks about community has given us much to think about – we reflected on the meaning of community with the help of Scripture, we considered faith-based communities through their stories and looked at community from a global & local perspective. We have also looked at how to be a truly inclusive community and from personal stories we have seen how not being inclusive can leave some feeling very lonely and excluded from our communities. True community we reflected is where people listen to each other; where the marginalised and excluded are included and so creating a society where we recognise that loneliness exists and supporting others to find new social connections, is fundamental.

Let us hope our discussions this evening have given us a better understanding and awareness of the issues around loneliness; that we can read the signs and help ourselves or others to take appropriate action. As Lea said at the start: “Being in community is being on a journey, open to surprise”. “We should dare to listen.” **“Ask ourselves, where do we place the emphasis, on the “I” or the “We”?”**

FINAL WORD FROM THE COMMUNITY (MOIRA)

## SLIDE 10 – PRAYER

We believe that flowers need the rain.

We believe that humans need **community**.

We believe that bodies need rest.

We believe that hearts need connection.

We believe that mornings need sunrise.

We believe that seasons need change.

We believe that grief needs space.

We believe that change needs time.

We believe that love needs security.

We believe that pain needs art.

We believe that joy needs company.

We believe that our spirits need God.

Again and again, our spirits need God.

Fortunately for us, we trust that

God is here.

God is at work in our lives.

God is a lighthouse keeper that never gives up.

**Thanks be to God.**

Amen.