

A First Steps guide to

Improving social isolation and loneliness

“No one to call a friend”

“I’m surrounded by people but feel so alone”

“I feel so isolated”

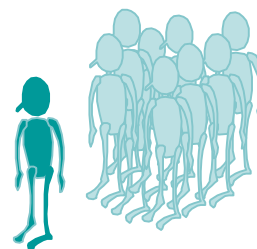
“There is nobody that I can relate to”

“I’m sick of my own company”

...are just a few of the comments from people who are feeling isolated and alone.

Feeling isolated and alone can cause emotional distress. Likewise, the symptoms of emotional distress and poor mental health can also result in people feeling lonely and isolated. A little like the chicken and the egg, which came first is largely irrelevant. The important thing is to begin to take steps to reduce isolation and loneliness and improve emotional health.

No two people are the same and everyone will cope differently. This is not to say that one person is any better or worse than another but just that what you are feeling is probably normal. This does not mean that we have to accept that this is the way life is. When talking about managing emotions there are very few right or wrong ways of coping. However there are some strategies that can help a person to feel better in themselves. This booklet provides some ideas to try if your current way of managing is not working for you as well as you might like.



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Introduction

Social isolation refers to a lack of contact with others and a lack of integration with the wider society. We are social creatures by nature and feeling isolated can often be detrimental to a person's well-being. It is important to remember that there may be a difference between feeling alone and feeling lonely. Some people prefer to be more solitary than others and this is unlikely to impact on their emotional health in the same way as someone who is feeling very alone. The suggestions in this booklet are aimed at those who are experiencing feelings of loneliness and isolation.

It is also important to keep in mind that activities to reduce isolation must be appropriate for each person and not just based on contact with more people. It is possible to feel lonely even when surrounded by others. This may be the case for someone living in a residential or nursing home, but equally may also be the case for someone who is part of a happy family or friendship group. Some people prefer face-to-face contact, while others may prefer meeting people online. Similarly, some people are happier in larger groups while others are more comfortable with a smaller number of close friends.

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.

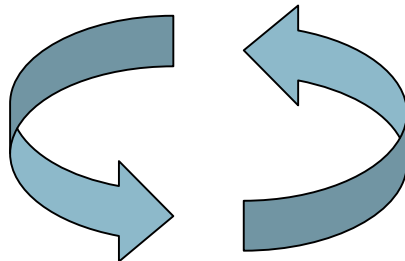
There are a number of factors that may increase feelings of isolation and loneliness or that may affect your ability to socialise. These include:

- 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

This list is not exhaustive and there may be a number of factors affecting you, or it may be that you cannot pinpoint a specific reason for the way that you are feeling.

General 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 you their 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 or contact CRUSE who offer telephone and face-to-face support for anyone who is grieving.



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. 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.

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

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. If you were born before 5th April 1950, you are likely to be eligible for free off-peak travel on buses; anyone born after that is likely to be eligible when they reach the age where they start to receive their pension. 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. Most towns have a Dial-A-Ride service that provides low cost transport to those eligible to use it.

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. 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. There are also a number of local interest groups, such as walking clubs or local history groups running throughout Surrey, details available at www.surreycc.gov.uk or through local libraries.



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. Please see the contacts section for further details.

Local groups and services

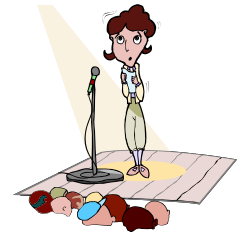
Joining local groups and accessing local services can be a good way of meeting new people and reducing your sense of isolation. Cafés, libraries and community centres can be useful places to make contact with others in your area and also to find about local groups or events that might be of interest 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.



You may find it more interesting or useful to join a specific educational class; adult learning can be accessed at centres throughout Surrey (see www.surreycc.gov.uk) or through University of Third Age for older people. See contacts section for more details.

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.

More information on social anxiety and self-help techniques are available from the First Steps website at www.firststeps-surrey.nhs.uk or by contacting the phone line.

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.

Resources

MIND factsheets – ‘How to cope with loneliness’, ‘How to stay socially involved’

www.mind.org.uk

www.surreycc.gov.uk

www.social-anxiety.ork.uk

www.firststeps-surrey.nhs.uk

Useful contacts

First Steps

0808 801 0325 - Monday and Wednesday 10am to 4.30pm and Thursday 11am to 5.30pm.

The helpline will be open on a Tuesday following a Bank Holiday

www.firststeps-surrey.nhs.uk

first.steps@nhs.net

Black and Ethnic Minorities

Surrey Minority Ethnic Forum

www.smef.org.uk

Bereavement

- Cruse
0844 477 9400
helpline@cruse.org.uk
- Survivors of Bereavement by Suicide (SOBS)
0844 561 6855
www.uk-sobs.org.uk

Parenting

- Surrey Family Information Service
Information on your local sources of support including local Sure Start Centres
0300 200 1004
surrey.fis@surreycc.gov.uk
<http://www.surreycc.gov.uk/fis>
- Family Lives
A national charity providing help and support in all aspects of family life
0808 800 2222
www.familylives.org.uk
- Gingerbread
Provides advice and support for single parents
0808 802 0925
www.gingerbread.org.uk

Transport

Dial-a-Ride is a specialist door-to-door transport which caters for people, often disabled, who are unable to take advantage of traditional buses which do not have, for example, room for wheelchairs or tail lifts. Dial-a-Ride services now cover most boroughs and districts in Surrey and are detailed below:

Area and telephone details:

- East Grinstead Dial-a-Ride - 01342 305275
- East Surrey Dial-a-Ride - 01883 349001
- Elmbridge Dial-a-Ride - 01372 474551
- Epsom and Ewell "Route Call" - 01372 732000
- Guildford Dial-a-Ride - 01483 458052
- Mole Valley Buses 4 U - 01372 204540
- Mole Valley Dial-A-Ride - 01372 383333
- Reigate and Banstead Buses 4 U - 01372 204540 or 01883 732791(to register)
- Runnymede Dial-a-Ride - 01932 425875
- Spelthorne "Spelride" - 01784 446253
- Surrey Heath Community Transport - 01276 707655
- Tandridge Buses 4 U - 01372 204540
- Waverley Hoppa - 01428 681701
- Woking Community Transport - 01483 724433

www.directgov.co.uk

Housing

- Information for older people on Surrey regarding housing issues and options
www.housingcare.org

0800 377 7070

- Assisted living in Surrey
<http://www.housingcare.org/assisted-living-extra-care-housing/area-1-surrey.aspx>

- Friends of the Elderly – Surrey

02077308263

www.fote.org.uk

Friends of the Elderly provide direct services including residential care homes, nursing homes and dementia care homes. Our day clubs, home support, home visiting, telephone friendship and grant-giving services help older people live independently at home.

Technology

- Digital Unite – Promotes older people's access to technology for digital inclusion.

<http://digitalunite.com/>

0800 822 3951

Digital Unite Limited
Unit 2B Poles Copse
Poles Lane
Otterbourne
Winchester
SO21 2DZ

- Saga zone – social networking site for over 50's.

www.sagazone.co.uk

Mentoring and befriending

- Friends of the Elderly

Charity offering support to older people to stay living in their own homes through a range of community services including day clubs, home support, home visiting and tele befriending.

020 7730 8263

www.fote.org.uk

- Age Concern Local Offices

Epsom: 01372 732456 - office open from 9am - 1pm
Ash: 01252 331352
Guildford: 01483 503414
Spelthorne: 01784 444200
Surrey Heath: 01276 707585

- Tandridge Befriending Scheme

Provides volunteer befrienders who visit and offer companionship to lonely adults in the Tandridge area who feel isolated. Contact your local volunteer centre in Caterham, Oxted or Lingfield and Dormansland Volunteer Centre or email:

info@tvscbefriending.org

Volunteering

- Volunteering England

Regents Wharf
8 All Saints Street
London N1 9RL

0845 305 6979

volunteering@volunteeringengland.org

www.volunteering.org.uk/

Volunteering England is committed to supporting, enabling and celebrating volunteering in all its diversity. Their offices are normally open from 9am to 5pm during weekdays, excluding public holidays

- Do-it

A database of volunteering opportunities throughout the UK

www.do-it.org.uk

- Time bank

A national charity that supports individuals and businesses with volunteering
0845 456 1668

info@timebank.org.uk

- Help from home

A micro volunteering site that allows you to volunteer your time in bite sized chunks, from your own home

www.helpfromhome.org

Adult Education

- University of the Third Age

U3As are self-help, self-managed lifelong learning co-operatives for older people no longer in full time work, providing opportunities for their members to share learning experiences in a wide range of interest groups and to pursue learning not for qualifications, but for fun.

020 8466 6139

www.u3a.org.uk

- Adult Education in Surrey

www.surreycc.gov.uk

Pets

- Cinnamon Trust is a specialist national charity that supports elderly and terminally ill people with looking after their pets with the aim of keeping owners and pets together. Their services include things such as dog walking, cat care, short term fostering and any other pet related help.

01736 757900

www.cinnamon.org

ctadmin@cinnamon.org.uk

Counselling

- Counselling Directory

Aims to provide the UK with a huge counselling support network, enabling those in distress to find a counsellor close to them and appropriate for their needs.

www.counselling-directory.org.uk

- British Association for Behavioural and Cognitive Psychotherapies (BABCP)

0161 797 4484

www.babcp.com

Can provide details of accredited CBT therapists. Full directory of psychotherapists available online.