



Reimagining social isolation

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The number of people feeling isolated and alone continues to rise. But in the era of social media and apps, we have new tools to create communities of interest and link neighbourhoods together. Andrew Webster argues that digital technologies could help address the loneliness epidemic and reduce unnecessary GP visits.

Social isolation is one of the invisible blights of our age. Millions of (mostly elderly) citizens live with little or no human contact. According to Age UK, some 360,000 people over 65 have not even spoken with friends or family for more than a week¹. Apart from the personal distress this causes, it also takes a huge toll on health. A recent study estimates that loneliness increases the risk of mortality by 26%, likening lack of social connections to 'smoking 15 cigarettes a day'².

Across the UK, GP waiting rooms are full of older people. And many of those are lonely, with socially isolated individuals almost twice as likely as their better connected peers to see their GP³. Many of these visits may be less about illness and more about having a few precious minutes of company. All of which contributes to the £2 billion or so the NHS wastes annually on unnecessary GP and A&E visits⁴ – not to mention other potentially avoidable costs like anti-depressant prescriptions.

But the answer to loneliness needn't be seeing the doctor, or having home visits from social care professionals, or even attending community support groups. What if it was about getting to know your neighbours a little better?

Friendship is the best medicine

One London GP applied this approach on a patient he'd been seeing quite a lot of. Suspecting that isolation was the main ailment, the doctor invited him to a session with the nurse and social care professionals to try to find a solution. It transpired that the patient's big passion was the game of chess, so the team introduced him to a local chess club and, more importantly, to an online game, both of which led to regular face-to-face and online interactions with other players.

The GP has probably not assessed this patient's loneliness quotient; but if he did, I'd vouch that it has fallen significantly, and would also predict that he's seeing rather less of him in his surgery these days.

In Leeds, some of the local businesses send volunteers out into the community to work with groups like churches, clubs and associations, to mentor members on how to reach out to local elderly residents living alone. The aim is to help them make better use of technology – for example WhatsApp and Facebook – setting up and/or joining groups and finding others with common interests.

GPs and social care workers could also recommend a growing number of 'neighbourhood' apps. These smartphone technologies connect people safely to other residents within the vicinity of their homes. Apps such as the hugely successful Nextdoor are designed to share local advice on babysitters, sports clubs and tradespeople, or report missing pets or burglaries.



From virtual to physical communities

Elderly, lonely people have a lot of time on their hands. They're around most of the day when others are at work, and they tend to see what's going on in their street. Which makes them ideal candidates to collect online parcel deliveries, hold keys for builders or plumbers, or pass on useful reminders about street cleaning or tree felling.

It's not much of a stretch to reimagine a lonely pensioner becoming the go-to person for these kinds of tasks, and in the process making new social contacts. First it might be a cup of coffee here and there from grateful neighbours; the next thing you know, she or he may be getting invitations to barbeques and dinner parties. On top of this, there's also the opportunity to receive a modest payment for taking others' deliveries.

And it's not just the elderly who suffer from social isolation. Those caring for them are often equally deprived of human contact, chained to the home and rarely able to venture out. Many find themselves neglecting friends, relatives and hobbies and becoming desperately lonely themselves.

Unpaid carers – representing 8% of the UK's private household population⁵ – are said to save the NHS £57 billion a year⁶. If anything happens to them, the NHS and social services must step in at considerable additional cost. Given their enormous value to society, carers could surely also benefit from mutual support groups – again, enabled by technology – helping them feel more integral and useful members of the neighbourhood.

A few years back, Professor Danny Dorling of Sheffield University said “Even the weakest communities in 1971 were stronger than any community now⁷.” Could these anecdotes and ideas for neighbourhood togetherness suggest a way forward to strengthen community ties, reduce the misery of social isolation – and save the NHS and social services a ton of money into the bargain?

“It's not just the elderly who suffer from social isolation”

Contact

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