



Easing Loneliness and Social Isolation

Nicola Frost

Devon Community Foundation

Understanding, enabling and challenge

Miriam is a woman living with a range of social and emotional issues, along with some financial pressures. Home and personal hygiene are an issue, contributing to her social isolation. She is well-known to her GP practice and was referred to Wellbeing Exeter. She and her Connector discussed the aspects of her life she wanted to change, and developed an action plan. Miriam said she'd like to join a knitting group. Her connector identified one based at a local charity shop, and accompanied her for the first time. Miriam now goes every week on her own, and feels comfortable and accepted there.

She also explored some more ambitious plans:

"...during that conversation I said I wanted to do GCSE maths as I find maths really calming...the [Community connector] said 'that's something we can do, its not beyond reality to do that, why don't you try?' I walked around for a few days asking myself 'why not?'...I'm now coming up to GCSE exams now. Also, because I was at a class, I didn't 'have' to socialise...so it was getting me out but not 'out' if you know what I mean. It was a really good step in the right direction for me."

She was also introduced to Transitions to secure a longer term mentor.

Miriam explained she feels less anxious and able to go out more. She has got a puppy, and bought a trike so she can exercise it properly, so is becoming more physically active. She has also decided to reach out to an elderly neighbour who lives alone.

- The power of holistic conversations to understand the root causes of loneliness, and obstacles to engagement; gentle challenge and a focus on people's strengths and passions shifts the focus from a narrative of lack or need.

Practical Action

- Steve is a man in his 50s who lives alone. He has mental health problems – is socio-phobic, with chronic anxiety and depression. He is very lonely, and wants to be more active, but lacks energy and motivation.
- Conversations with his connector revealed that Steve plays guitar, and would like to meet with someone to play together. His house is poorly built and very cold, with inadequate storage heaters, such that Steve says he often goes to bed in the afternoon as he's so cold.
- A is helping him liaise with the council to get central heating installed, but also arranges to be present in the house when tradesmen visit, as Steve is anxious about having strangers around.
- Once the heating issues are resolved, A plans to link Steve with someone else he knows who plays guitar.
- Loneliness can result from practical circumstances, which need to be addressed first, *alongside* an understanding of the emotional side of things.

Collective Solutions: building interdependence

Philip lived in a supported housing complex in Exwick. He was referred to WE as he was lonely, and wanted to find ways to get out and about – he was especially keen to do some gardening at his housing development.

Philip's connector put him in touch with the Exwick community builder. She listened to all the residents talk about their different interests and ambitions. Over time, she developed a broader picture of residents wanting to get together more, and make more of their communal space. Community Builder mediation between residents, managers, and local organisations has resulted in:

- A series of intergenerational creative workshops organised jointly by residents and Exwick Youth Council and hosted at the complex. One of these, a drawing class, is being led by Philip.
 - Agreements with the complex managers about the use of communal garden space by residents.
 - Further collaborations with a local church and volunteers from The Princes Trust to build and plant raised beds.
- **It took time:** eight months from the original WE referral to the workshops.
 - **A stone in the pond:** what began as one person wanting to do some gardening, has resulted in something much more extensive. This process is unpredictable (and may move some distance from an individual's initial stated needs or aims).
 - **Person-centred, but also collective:** while the original connection was with an individual, the community builder approached it as a starting point for more general engagement. This was not a simple case of signposting an individual to a gardening club. It is the crucial difference between a standard social prescribing model, and WE's integrated approach.
 - **Place is where it's at:** a firmly place-based approach to community engagement, built on ultra-local knowledge and local relationships.

Outcomes can look different too

- *“It [first time community connector helped] gave me some sort of hope, information and insight into what sort of things are going on in the community...and [helped me] realise there are people out there who will listen and help.”*
- *“[Community connector] put me in contact with someone at transitions team and I went to meetings [community connector] recommended to me. I used to walk around the village and not know anybody and feel quite isolated but now I can say hello to people in the street which is nice.”*
- *“I’m still on my tablets for my depression but I’m not on beta blockers anymore for the anxiety.”*

DCF and thriving communities

- We fund many small community groups and organisations who run activities with the primary aim of bringing people together.
- Much of this work is done at an **ultra-local level**. This reduces the barriers to participation, especially in rural areas. It also increases the chances that social connections formed through the activity (for example, a senior's lunch club in a village hall) will extend beyond that context. This is particularly important in rural communities that have lost local points of social contact, such as shops, post offices and pubs.
- Many of the small and micro-organisations doing this work are formed largely or solely of **volunteers**. They are not professionals, paid to befriend people, but simply other people, and this can give relationships a more authentic and genuinely reciprocal flavour. Far less distinction between 'helper' and 'helped'.
- We recognise that lonely people have **plenty to contribute** to their community, and often relish an opportunity to be 'useful' to others (for example, through a 'knit and natter' group that makes clothing for premature babies). Participants might well develop into being volunteers themselves, if given the opportunity.