

Loneliness in the time of Covid-19

Lessons from lockdown

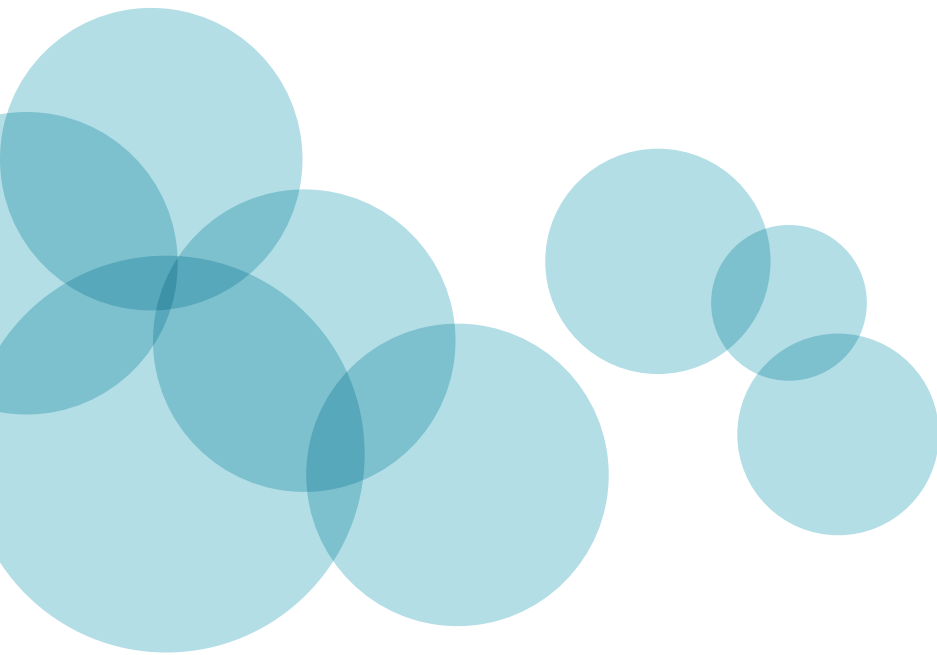
Conversations through Covid-19

#LonelinessInCovid

**Campaign to
EndLoneliness**

About us

The Campaign to End Loneliness believes that people of all ages need connections that matter. Having the friendship and support we need is a fundamental part of our wellbeing and when loneliness becomes entrenched it can be hardest to overcome. We work to support evidence-based campaigning, facilitate learning on the front line and connect different parts of the loneliness community such as academics, front-line practitioners, decision-makers and businesses.



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Dan Jones and Kate Jopling

Introduction

At the Campaign to End Loneliness's recent *Loneliness in the time of Covid-19* session organisations working to address loneliness and social isolation came together to share learning around supporting people to keep up conversations. This was a challenge that people had encountered as they worked to support people remotely through the pandemic lockdown of 2020. Having positive conversations became increasingly challenging as more people were struggling, and many had less to talk about.

Polling during the event confirmed that as the pandemic has continued people are finding it harder to make conversation. More than two thirds of our attendees recognised the issue – with 53% saying they had encountered issues keeping people talking during the pandemic to some extent, and 15% saying it had been a big issue for them. Insights from the event were supplemented through follow up interviews with organisations who had found interesting ways to address this challenge.

Lockdown has forced rapid adaptation and learning, but as organisations look to the future they told us that they will continue to draw on the lessons they've learnt from this period.

In this report we set out the hints, tips and tactics that organisations have found helpful in keeping keep people talking.

“More than two thirds of organisations said that they had encountered issues keeping people talking.”



Keeping talking

Organisations are doing a range of things to help people start and sustain conversations – including:



Conversation openers, prompts and ideas



Alternatives to conversation



Activities to stimulate conversation – things that people can do and then talk about



Distanced face-to-face conversations

Conversation openers

What are you most looking forward to doing after lockdown?

Where is your favourite place to go on holiday?

What makes you smile?

Tell me about your favourite object in the room you're in.

What can you see out of the window today?

What are you watching on TV / reading at the moment?

Never in a million years would I....?

Did you see that David Attenborough programme the other day?

What are the first three things you'll do when lockdown ends?



Activities to stimulate conversation



Activity packs – crafts, baking, plasticine landmarks, bird seed, knitting

Lots of organisations had produced activity packs which were either posted or delivered to people's doors (allowing for a brief chat on the doorstep). These were then used as the focal point for conversations with volunteers – sometimes through sharing pictures or just asking how the activity had gone (see case study below).



Activities – quizzes, bingo, singing, cook-along sessions, book reviews

While activity packs enabled people to get on with an activity at any time and chat about it later, other organisations focussed on putting on activities that people could get involved with remotely. These worked better for people who were able to access online services such as Zoom, but remote book clubs and quizzes were also taking place via telephone conferencing.



Planning a newsletter

Working together to produce a newsletter was provided a helpful focus for conversations in many areas - both around discussing stories in previous issues and planning what might go into subsequent ones (see case study).



Celebrating community events e.g. St Patrick's Day

As well as day to day activities we heard that maintaining traditions, festivals and celebrations could be an important way to keep people talking. These community "moments" offered opportunities for people to get involved in ways that work for them – being part of planning and organising events as well as participating in them.



Reminiscence

For people with dementia, reminiscence could be a powerful tool to support people in carrying on positive and meaningful conversations (see case study).



Story telling

We heard that supporting people to create and tell stories had been an effective way of supporting people to keep talking through the pandemic.



Theatre and arts

We were joined by a number of organisations that had been supporting people to engage with the arts through the pandemic and had found that focussing conversations around shared experiences with the arts – whether having watched the same play, or heard the same music, or having created works of art around a similar theme – created opportunities for people to talk together in ways that were positive for everyone. Working with the arts also offered an opportunity for people to express complex and difficult emotions in a way that felt safe for everyone.



Armchair travel

Another idea shared in our session was helping people to engage in “armchair travel”. Some focussed conversations around discussing past travel destinations, bringing people together who had visited the same places to talk about their experiences. Others supported people to “explore” new places through sharing guides, and materials which were then offered a springboard to conversations.



Alternatives to conversation

Some people have not wanted, or been able, to engage in remote conversations. As an alternative many organisations have sought to keep in touch and help people stay connected in other ways. These include:

- **Sending letters and postcards** – including through letter writing schemes with local schools
- **Sending keepsakes in the post** – e.g. a ‘hug in a mug’, knitted hearts, cards with supportive slogans
- **Sending people things to do** – e.g. exercise packs with bean bags and resistance bands
- Offering sessions or resources around techniques such as **mindfulness**
- **Setting up scavenger hunts or trails** which people can get involved with while doing their daily exercise



Face-to-face but distant

Some people have missed face-to-face contact desperately. Some people struggle without the visual cues associated with face-to-face conversations, and for some people with conditions such as hearing loss, for example, phone conversations simply don't work. Organisations have been finding ways to give people some opportunity to keep up conversations face-to-face. These include:

- Garden visits
- Socially-distanced walks
- Dropping off a meal
- Park meet ups (in small groups when allowed)

Case studies

An A-Z of Conversations – from Time to Talk Befriending

At the beginning of lockdown in mid-March 2020, Time to Talk Befriending ceased all of its face-to-face activities and contacted all 357 scheme members by phone to identify their immediate needs.

As well as practical issues such as anxieties around food provision, a major concern for members was whether befriending would continue. By the end of March, Time to Talk had transitioned its service to provide befriending over the telephone.

Volunteers were given initial guidance on new ways of working through a 'TTTB Emergency Pack'. The scheme also developed 'top tips for befriending' as part of their volunteer induction process – which shifted online.

Time to Talk Befriending saw an increase in self-referrals and also in referrals for older people living with dementia. The team has developed guidance on 'How to Create Meaningful Moments' for people living with dementia. They also provide online training to volunteers, which is available every 4 weeks. This consists of one hour of Dementia Friends Training and a second hour learning creative ways to create meaningful moments of connection using [INGREDIENTS](#) Cards.

As the pandemic wore on conversations started to become more difficult and people struggled to keep conversations going. Volunteers were increasingly struggling to sustain positive conversations as the physical and mental health of many members declined. Volunteers found themselves

managing much more complex situations and conversations than before. At the same time calls from members to staff were increasing as many were feeling low.

It was clear more tools were needed to support befriending volunteers. Time to Talk laid on more workshops around bereavement, loss and dementia inclusive befriending and started to develop wellbeing workshops called 'What's on your Plate' and workshops on maintaining good brain health 'Use Your Marbles'. They also developed an ['A-Z of Conversations'](#) full of different ideas for keeping conversations going.

Volunteers have found these useful, with feedback confirming that having a simple guide to topics has helped keep things moving. One volunteer said: "I have been stuck in a loop. This has helped refresh the calls. Now we end on a more positive note".



Focus on activities: *b:friend*

b:friend aims to reduce exclusion experienced by older neighbours by connecting them with others in the community. Prior to the pandemic volunteer befrienders visited service users regularly for a cup of tea and a chat. *b:friend* also offered weekly group sessions covering everything from graffiti art workshops to learning to dance the Charleston.

When the pandemic struck befriending services switched to the telephone, alongside delivering essentials to people's gardens, and group activities were moved to telephone conference calls.

Over 730 volunteers stepped forward to befriend older neighbours over the phone or drop off items to the door. *b:friend* saw their role as facilitating connections to ensure people had someone to talk to, to laugh or cry with, and to connect with as the fear, confusion and boredom created by the pandemic took hold.

They decided to create Social Bundles for those living alone without friends or family to check in on them. The aim was to retain connection and help people feel they were part of something bigger. The packs (over 1,340) were filled to the brim with personalised activities, games and challenges – along with letters and cards from school children, cakes and treats, flowers and, when it came to Christmas, a little festive tipple too! *b:friend* also developed mixtape CDs with funny stories recorded by staff, primary school kids telling their favourite jokes, dance classes and sing-alongs.

The packs gave people something to talk about in regular befriending calls. For those attending telephone social clubs, *b:friend* produced a Session in a Bag. Each week they tackled a themed challenge and, by the time the next group conference call came around, they were able to compare notes and see how they did against their peers. Sessions included baking home-made pizzas, a virtual trip to the USA, and trips down memory lane.

Providing activities helped keep conversations focussed and flowing so that people didn't feel so disconnected from the wider world and had things to chat about.



Shine Magazine - Time to Shine

“How do I make sure I get every issue of this magazine? Because it is the best magazine I have read in years! I love that stories are about real people: this magazine has much more backbone than other magazines made for older people - no adverts! I have been so impressed by how positive the stories are and how they show that good things can come out of bad things and how people can turn their lives around.” (Shine reader)

As lockdown began, organisations in Leeds came together in partnerships to provide essential goods for older people and those shielding. Work began in earnest to keep people socially connected, and organisations started to create digital activities and provide telephone support.

Time to Shine’s ethos has always been to work alongside older people. Since its inception in 2015 older people have contributed 1000’s of hours to Time to Shine. However, the government advice to older people to stay at home left people suddenly feeling that they were seen as vulnerable not valued.

Shine magazine provided an opportunity to keep people connected and involved. Over the Spring lockdown, six magazines were created fortnightly, bringing the stories of older people together in a high-quality publication. The magazine is now produced monthly.

The magazine has provided an opportunity for older people to share their experiences; call outs are made in the magazine such as ‘view from my window’ or ‘did you work in the textile industry?’. Older people without internet connections can tell their stories over the phone, others write submissions and send them in by post. The value of working on Shine magazine is that it has enabled conversations in which older people are involved rather than supported.

Copies of the magazine can be found here: <https://timetoshineleeds.org/projects/shine-magazine>



Sporting Memories

Sporting Memories' work was built on the insight that talking about sport could be a powerful way of connecting people. Over the years they've seen the power of talking about this emotive and joyous topic, to engage people at every level, including many older people with dementia. Since their launch, Sporting Memories' network of groups coming together each week to talk about sports had grown to over 130 clubs.

When the Covid-19 pandemic hit, groups had to stop meeting, but Sporting Memories recognised that the opportunity to talk about memories that sparked joy and connection would be needed more than ever. Over the past year they've supported hundreds of people to connect in conversations through their #TalkAboutSport campaign. The campaign has encouraged more people to connect over memories of sport – whether that is through several hundred online Sporting Memories sessions that have taken place to date, through their KITbag service which offers people resources delivered to their home which are then used in regular keeping in touch conversations over the phone, or in their own communities. The organisations' website is also full of people sharing their memories – from famous names to everyday people - that can be used as a resource for others to pick up conversations about sport.

Reminiscing about past times, particularly ones that are filled with joy and meaning for the individual, can provide a powerful anchor for people with cognitive impairment – offering them an opportunity to connect in the moment. These moments of connection have made all the difference, as this testimony from one member shows:

"I have really enjoyed the Zoom club; we have become like a second family supporting and encouraging each other whilst talking about my passion for sport"



Tips for a meaningful conversation

Organisations shared their learning around what helps to ensure conversations are positive both for volunteers and people being supported.



Involving people – It's easier to have a good conversation if it's based around something you are involved in, whether that's writing a magazine, organising a celebration or sharing a skill. Approaching people to get involved rather than to receive support is always better.



Connecting peers – Linking people with people who share similar characteristics, experiences or circumstances can be a powerful way to enable people to have good quality conversations.



Actively listen – Conversations are better when people feel they are being listened to. We heard that taking notes and picking up themes across conversations can help build meaningful conversations over a number of weeks.

Talking about difficult things

As the pandemic has gone on, conversations have got tougher. At our event more than half of attendees had seen the need to have conversations about difficult subjects increasing during the pandemic – with 27% saying it had increased a lot and 38% seeing it increase somewhat. People have found the isolation and uncertainty of lockdown very difficult, and this is reflected in their mood and wellbeing.

The **challenges** we are facing include:

- Anxiety
- Bereavement
- Low mood, sadness and deep loneliness
- Depression and suicidal ideation

This presents a number of challenges for organisations working with people who are experiencing loneliness and isolation, particularly for those whose models are based on volunteers offering support. The challenges we heard included:

- **Burnout**

The strain of dealing with difficult conversations could lead to people feeling over-burdened and unable to continue

- **The “Rescuer” mentality**

It can be hard for volunteers to know when to step away from supporting someone – they can get stuck feeling they need to “fix” issues that they are not qualified to manage

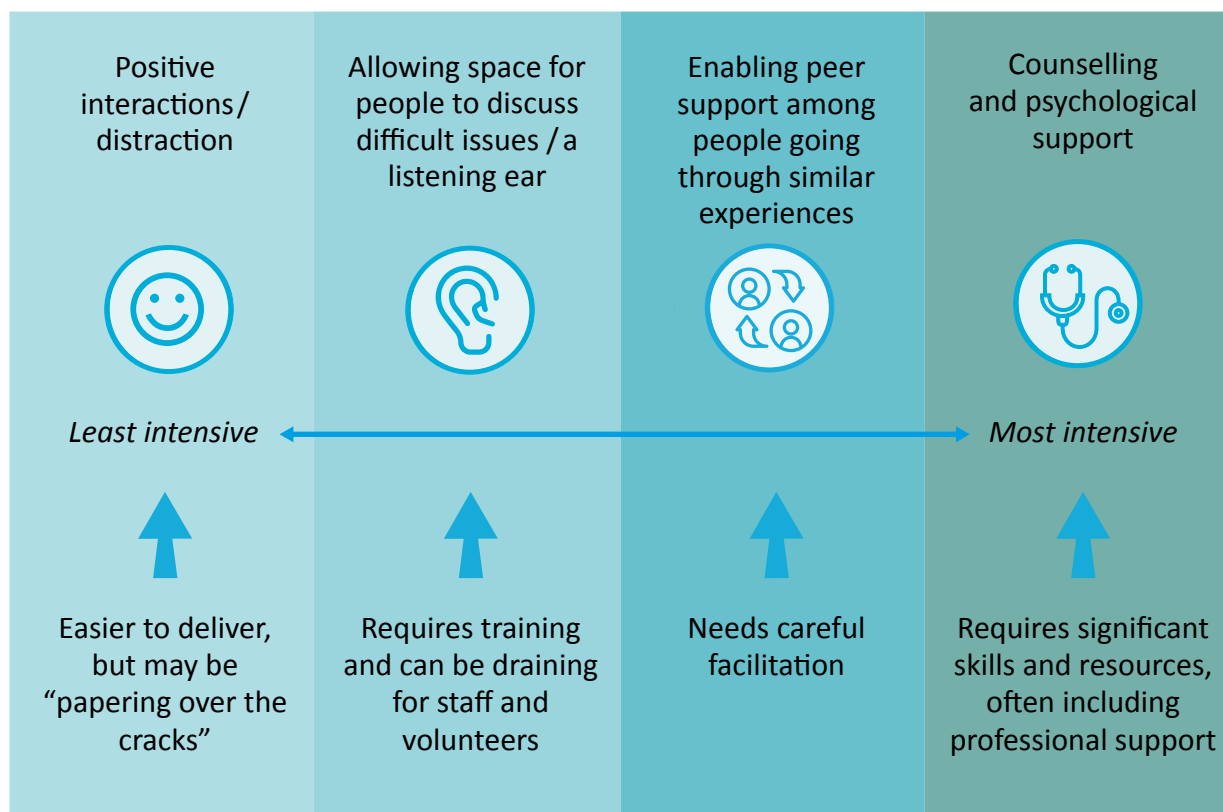
- **Managing risks**

Staff can struggle to manage the risks associated with talking to people going through difficult times, especially when presented with issues such as self-harm and suicidal ideation



Spectrum of support

We identified a range of responses that organisations can offer to people experiencing these kinds of issues. While there is no 'right' option, it is important for organisations to choose the place on this spectrum that best matches their resources and capabilities. They should also ensure that staff and volunteers avoid getting into roles they're not well positioned to play.



Supporting the supporters

As well as providing resources to support conversations, organisations have recognised a need for additional training and support for their staff and volunteers. This has included:

- **Providing training in telephone support** – e.g. saying “Take your time, I am listening” instead of a touch on the arm
- **Peer support** for staff and volunteers – e.g. online peer-to-peer sessions and social events for volunteers, 1:1 buddying
- **“Supervision”** – ranging from formal and even clinical supervision after calls, to more informal debriefs or check in calls
- Offering **training in open questions and listening skills**
- Giving people more opportunities to **take a break** or change their patterns of volunteering if they need to
- **Mental health first aid** training
- Training in techniques either for self-care or to use with service users – e.g. **mindfulness / relaxation**
- **Bereavement** training
- Offering training around knowing when to **hand over** – so volunteers know about other support available

Sources of support

Organisations are drawing on a range of local and national resources and sources of support to help their volunteers and staff deal with difficult conversations. These include:

- Training from local mental health organisations e.g. from local branches of Mind
- Working with psychologists to provide training / supervision
- Accessing resources including:
 - Samaritans: [SHUSH](#) model and new book [How to listen](#)
 - The [Sage and Thyme](#) model
 - Much Loved’s [Grief Chat](#) service

The logo for Campaign to End Loneliness, featuring the text 'Campaign to End Loneliness' in white and green on a dark grey rectangular background. The background of the entire page is white with several overlapping circles in various shades of light blue and teal.

**Campaign to
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Campaign to End Loneliness

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info@campaigntoendloneliness.org.uk
or call us on 020 3865 3908
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