

## Loneliness and Isolation

Before my partner and I moved in together, I lived on my own for a very long time. I never felt lonely and although I lived in a tiny, tucked away, detached cottage, I never felt isolated. I was much younger and had lots of friends, boyfriends, a job and a good social life. It sometimes got so hectic that when I saw people coming to visit up the long dirt track to the house, I would hide. Its hard work being vivacious all the time!

Those who know me, won't be surprised to learn that I'm an extrovert. When I first came to work in the NHS, I went on a residential leadership programme and came home fizzing with enthusiasm and announced to my partner, 'bla, bla bla and I'm extrovert!' 'Four hundred quid to tell you that', he said: "I'd have told 'em for three hundred and ninety"...

So, yes, I get energy from my surroundings and the people I'm with and the pandemic has had a profound effect on that. Sad to say that for the first time in my life, I have sometimes felt both lonely and isolated. My partner (now husband) had to shield from the offset. He is long-retired and had a routine. Every day he went to the local shops and bought fresh food for him to cook that evening. I hate shopping (for food that is) and I'm a rubbish cook, so that worked well. He knew all the shopkeepers by name and chatted to them and saw people that he had known since school-days and kept in touch.

That all changed, suddenly, we were reliant on a weekly Tesco delivery, often ordered by me and I always got it wrong! He missed the social contact, and his world grew smaller.

As well as that, my best friend who lives in the North East, but works in Leeds has stayed with us during the week for 12 years. Suddenly, we were both working from home and Teams is just not the same. She is a veggie, I eat fish and Bryan eats 'normal' food. So, for 12 years, three night a week, he cooked 3 delicious and different meals and we sat together over dinner, eating, and sharing a glass of wine, mulling over the issues of the day. We competed ferociously at University Challenge and only Connect, I always lost, they are much clever than me. We had fun.

We were all bereft.

Still, it's been a bit busy for Public Health since January 2020 when we got our first cases in Yorkshire and in the midst of the chaos, I foolishly agreed to help Chris Sharp, my pal from PHE and some colleagues from the Campaign Against Loneliness to develop a new e-learning for health course on tacking loneliness and social isolation. Being involved had a real impact on me. Hearing those sad stories made me realise how well-heeled and privileged my loneliness and isolation has been.

I live in a big comfortable house with a huge garden that I love. I quite like Bryan (!) and he has a studio way down the garden that he disappears to after lunch with his guitars and computers and wanders back to cook just two different meals now. We can afford the Tesco shop and to heat the house and have computers and I-pads and phones that allow me to work and socialise, albeit remotely. I have been able to take my dog for a walk to the local park each day and chat – socially distanced, of course – to other dog walkers and acquaintances.

And I have work. Even though I much prefer to be with people, I feel that I have made a contribution to the NHS response to the pandemic and been useful to and valued by my public health colleagues.

I am very lucky and know how difficult and different it has been for many people. Loneliness does not discriminate, and we can all find ourselves with this unwanted feeling, for me it will pass but for others it will be having a severe effect on their health and wellbeing. This brings me back to our new e-learning for health course on ‘tackling loneliness and social isolation’. The course is framed around the Jo Cox Commission’s Call to Action in that ‘We should also do more to equip people with information about the potential triggers for loneliness and ensure they know where to go for support.’ Loneliness is not new, but we all know that this unwanted feeling has been exacerbated by the Covid Pandemic.

I urge everyone reading this blog to undertake this new course, it’s really important that we all have the skills and confidence to talk to others about loneliness.

As we start to think about the recovery from COVID, those of us in public health are mindful of the tricky years ahead. Tackling inequalities in health and wellbeing will be our next big challenge and we need to make sure that there are the social infrastructures in place that support the lonely and isolated. People who feel engaged and in touch are happier and healthier.

I can’t wait to get back to something like normality. And after this year, I promise, I’m never going to hide from visitors again!

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