A Guide to Social Isolation and Loneliness

Key and Current Messages:
- Loneliness is linked to social isolation but it is not the same thing. Social Isolation is being alone, loneliness is not liking it.
- Research shows that loneliness and social isolation are harmful to our health.
- Loneliness can happen at any age, but one of the most at risk groups is the over 50’s.
- Anyone can experience social isolation and loneliness and particular individuals or groups may be more vulnerable than others, depending on factors like physical and mental health, level of education, employment status, wealth, income, ethnicity, gender and age or life-stage. Others could include new mothers, children or young adults who have experienced bullying and people living with long term health conditions.
- One of the most effective ways of combating loneliness is to combat isolation.
- People who have enjoyed friendship and companionship in the past are more likely to be lonely than those who have never had close ties.

How is health linked to Social Isolation and Loneliness?
Loneliness and social isolation are detrimental to health and can cause feelings of depression and anxiety as well as a number of other health issues.

Loneliness and isolation can lead to: high blood pressure, a greater risk of cognitive decline (James et al, 2011), a higher risk of the onset of a disability, a 64% increased chance of developing clinical dementia (Holwerda et al, 2012) and a higher chance of suicidal feelings in old age (O’Connell et al, 2004).

Lonely and older people are more likely to:
- Visit their GP on a frequent basis, have higher use of medication, be at increased risk of falls (Cohen, 2006)
- Undergo early entry into residential or nursing care (Russell et al, 1997)
- Use accident and emergency services independent of chronic illness. (Geller, Janson, McGovern and Valdini, 1999)

Key Facts:
- Lacking social connections is as damaging to our health as smoking 15 cigarettes a day (Holt-Lunstad, 2010).
- 17% of older people are in contact with family, friends and neighbours less than once a week and 11% are in contact less than once a month (Victor et al, 2003)
- Over half (51%) of all people aged 75 and over live alone (ONS, 2010)
- Many of the risk factors associated with social isolation are more prevalent among socially disadvantaged groups and accumulate throughout life; for example, social isolation in childhood is associated with isolation in adolescence and adulthood.
- A higher percentage of women than men report feeling lonely some of the time or often (Beaumont, 2013)
Statistics from a recent consultation carried out in Leeds during 2014 show an estimated 37,000 lonely and socially isolated people living across the city. According to this, the key groups in Leeds identified as being most at risk are:

- Those who rarely leave their home due to ill health, disability or dementia
- Carers
- Those who live alone and who are coping with personal circumstances which reduce their social networks eg bereavement, retirement or poverty
- Those who do not have their social or cultural needs fully met. For example, older men, older adults with learning disabilities, LGBT communities and black and minority elders.

What helps?

- Physical connections with others, be it family members, neighbours or others. Find out about local groups or cafes in your area via the Leeds Directory (leedsdirectory.org) or through the Leeds older people forum website (www.opforum.org.uk).
- Connecting with people through social media: this can be a great way to get in touch with old friends or make new ones. For information on local classes etc, use: www.leeds.gov.uk/leisure/Pages/Libraries.asp or by going to the Leeds Directory.
- Sharing your skills and time: become a volunteer or help out at your local club or group. Check out the Doing good Leeds website (doinggoodleeds.org.uk) for the latest opportunities
- Looking after yourself: simple things like getting out of the house and having a walk, sitting in your garden or in a local park and even doing some gentle stretches are good for your mental wellbeing.

Local Sources of support:

- www.timetoshineleeds.org – a website run by the Leeds Older Peoples Forum that runs projects and awareness about isolation and loneliness across Leeds. Go onto their website to find out about what’s happening across Leeds and how you can get involved with: volunteering, training or awareness programs. Contact Hanna@opforum.org.uk for more information.
- Neighbourhood Networks: Search on the Leeds City council website or on www.opforum.org.uk or the Leeds Directory to find your local organization.
- Age UK Leeds: www.Ageuk.org.uk/Leeds
- One You Leeds – the local healthy living portal offering a range of tools to help people assess their general health and also provides contacts for local services.

National Sources:

- Campaign to end Loneliness: This is a nationally run program looking to end loneliness. Find out more on their website www.campaigntoendloneliness.org
- No one should have no one: http://www.ageuk.org.uk/no-one/
- Social Isolation Literature Review: https://www.gmcvo.org.uk/system/files/micra_-_a5_brochure_-_social_isolation_0.pdf
Public Health Resource Centre
The Public Health Resource Centre (PHRC) is a specialist knowledge and resource hub, offering support to anyone in Leeds with a responsibility or professional interest in public health or promoting health and wellbeing. The PHRC holds a large selection of books, DVDs, report, games, teaching packs, interactive

and visual models on a wide variety of public health topics, all of which are available to loan free-of-charge. In addition, we have a variety of leaflets and posters which you can order free-of-charge.

To register with the PHRC, or for more information, please visit www.leeds.gov.uk/phrc or visit the PHRC anytime during opening hours. You can also follow the PHRC on Twitter and Facebook.

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