



Tackling loneliness and social isolation this Christmas

This time of year can see the problems loneliness and isolation at their worst for many people, the consequences of which are often seen in GP consultations. Zaidee O’Dell, Compassionate Neighbours London Project Manager, explains how their project is tackling social isolation in several London boroughs.

Compassionate Neighbours is an award-winning programme that started here at St Joseph’s hospice in East London and is being replicated in collaboration with St Christopher’s across six other hospices in London and the suburbs (Princess Alice, North London, Greenwich and Bexley, St Clare, Garden House and Isabel). It focuses on improving the experience of people in the last phase of their life, often a lonely and isolating time. It is underpinned by public health principles, which aim to promote and protect health and well-being through the organised efforts of society. The principles emphasise the collective responsibility of society and community.

We train and support compassionate neighbours to provide social and emotional support to people towards the end of life due to age or illness. We see it as a partnership between local people who want to make a difference, individuals seeking some support for themselves or others and the hospice. It is different from a traditional befriending programme in that we place few boundaries on the relationship between compassionate neighbours and the person they support. Instead, we encourage them to develop a meaningful relationship and engage with one another as much or as little as feels comfortable. We also encourage and support compassionate neighbours to share their knowledge and experiences of end of life, death, dying and loss within their community and provoke engagement with these issues. The programme has shown to have positive outcomes for all involved.

People who need support are referred to the project through a variety of sources such as GP surgeries, social subscribing, hospital discharge teams, local services and agencies as well as via the hospice. The hospice team then matches them to someone in their community to provide support. By the end of December 2018, we will have nearly 750 compassionate neighbours across all 8 sites and nearly 400 of them will be matched with someone in their community helping to combat loneliness and social isolation. Others may become ambassadors, coaches, peer evaluators and the movers and shakers of the Compassionate Neighbour movement.

Compassionate Neighbours can be contacted via CN@stjh.org.uk.

Tips for GPs

We also have some top tips from Amy Perrin, founder of the Marmalade Trust, on how GPs can raise and manage aspects of loneliness during consultations.

What advice do you have for GPs who think a patient may be lonely and want to raise the issue tactfully?

We would encourage you to have the conversation about loneliness with your patients. It is important to reduce the stigma and encourage people to recognise loneliness in themselves and others and by openly discussing loneliness more, you will help people to do this. Don't be afraid to ask the question, "are you feeling lonely?" If you feel this is too direct, discuss social support and contact, "do you have people you can talk to about this?" "where are you getting your support from?"

What advice do you have for GP practices on finding community groups to point patients to and/or supporting patients to share information on groups and activities?

Most GP practices should have access to social prescribing services, it is worth seeing if you can refer directly into one of those. If one does not exist, could you engage with a local organisation (ie Age UK, Marmalade Trust) to provide direct support, or build a community resource board in your practice.

What can people do in their community to ensure people aren't lonely at Christmas time?

Christmas can be more difficult if you are experiencing loneliness, there is perception that 'everyone' is busy with friends and family and it can highlight loneliness further. Be aware that this can be a more difficult time, encourage your patients to reach out to their friends, family or other networks for support. Community Christmas can also help anyone who is alone on Christmas Day.