



## Reducing isolation

### Loneliness causes an increase in blood levels of stress hormones

- meaning it can actually make you ill, and worsen problems such as depression and anxiety.

Feelings of isolation impact all of us at different times in our lives. Even when we have friends, family and a close church community to help us through, we can still experience loneliness and uncertainty, particularly during times of transition. For people living with a long-term mental health issue, a sense of isolation can be ongoing, and finding ways of regularly connecting with others can be problematic. How can we in the church provide effective support?

### Where to start?

Church can provide many opportunities to reduce experiences of isolation, with regular activities offering opportunities to connect. But it's not enough to have a thriving church life. Sometimes, watching others who appear to be very socially engaged can further our feelings of isolation; we can feel even more lonely. If your church does have lots of activities on offer, don't just put them on a notice sheet – some people may need clear, personal invitations. We are all individuals with different desires, skills and experiences: the best kind of support tries to honour this and recognises our God-given individuality.

Equally, be aware that there may be particular considerations for people living with mental health issues as they contemplate how they might increase their social connections or get involved in new activities. The impact of their health could mean a reduction in energy, or there may be side-effects of medication, making it difficult to be regularly involved in activities. Some conditions lead to continual negative thoughts and low self-esteem, resulting in a lack of desire to initiate socially.

It's important to start where the person is and make sure we go in the direction they want to. If we're approaching somebody after noticing they may be isolated, we must do this with sensitivity. Similarly, if somebody discloses that they are struggling with problems of isolation, a good start is to listen carefully first, rather than jump to making suggestions. Your idea of connection may look very different from theirs.

Having established that they would like to discuss the topic, a good starting point could be to explore the issue using some clarifying questions:

- Are there places, people or activities that help you feel more connected? What do these look like?
- Is there an enjoyable activity you've stopped doing that you'd like to pick up again?



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- What feels possible in terms of making a change? Do you need any support to make this happen?
- What kind of support, both informal and formal, can you draw on to help you?
- What might be your first step in exploring this further? This could involve research, talking to a friend already doing something similar, maybe allowing yourself to try something just once?

### Supporting change takes time

Making changes can be hard, particularly if people are experiencing extreme isolation. Consider what this might mean in terms of the support you can realistically provide, remembering that others may be able to give help too. Also remember that the person you are supporting should always be driving their own decisions and the actions that follow. Whilst all of us benefit from regular encouragement, ensure that it is always their agenda, not yours!

Loss of motivation can occur if somebody hits an obstacle. How do you encourage someone who has lost motivation? As a supporter, it may be hard to understand why they have hit a barrier, and we may become discouraged. One approach is to ask them to consider the pros and cons of change. You might ask: 'What do you stand to gain by doing this? What do you stand to gain by leaving things as they are?' Don't forget, there may be benefits to not changing! This question can help someone understand their motivation and take an appropriate course of action, ensuring that as a supporter you are not driving the agenda.

### Your church's role

We all have gifts to share and when we can exercise them, it can help us feel more connected; our experience of church is enriched when we have a chance to share them. Is your church set up to equip a member of your congregation to share their gift? Is there anything in the way you run your activities that might make it difficult for somebody to participate? Sometimes small changes can make a big difference. For example, if weekly commitments aren't possible for somebody leading a group, could this commitment be shared with another? The benefit to encouraging participation may be huge as you work towards building a truly inclusive church and ensure the voice of everybody is involved. If you are in leadership, are you actively seeking ways to encourage people to identify and share their gifts?



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## Some practical suggestions

Finally, some ideas to explore:

- **Online forums can often help reduce isolation.** Chat rooms, social media and bulletin boards can be great ways to connect when energy is low.
- **Feeling physically well can have an enormous impact on mood.** Some GP surgeries have even prescribed gym passes to their patients.
- **Volunteering roles.** Many charities are able to provide flexibility and local volunteer centres can help you explore options. Helping others has proven benefits in helping us connect.
- **Explore life-giving lone activities.** If someone doesn't have the confidence or energy to spend time with others, why not encourage them to explore life-giving solo activities? Learning a new recipe, reading a book, getting some exercise or practising an art or craft can all help develop confidence.
- **Mixing communities.** The support offered between different people can be of great value and help meet mutual needs. Can your church help initiate links between people who would not otherwise meet, such as different age groups, different communities or ethnic groups?
- **Advocacy.** Many people living with mental health needs benefit from advocates, who can help them have a voice in often complex processes influencing local provision, policy and running of services. Could this be a first step in helping someone you are supporting to break out of their isolation?

### ➔ Helpful links:

Supporting people and reducing isolation is complex. Find out more about why Sunday morning is not enough

➔ <https://tinyurl.com/sunday-mornings-article>

Recovery, and the change of thinking patterns and emotions that are often involved, takes time. Here's more about recovery, using a rather unusual model: Strictly Come Dancing!

➔ <https://tinyurl.com/strictly-come-recovery-article>