

## **How to make Christmas less lonely for a neighbour this year**

By Louise Forster, CEO

One in four Australians will be grappling with the spectre of loneliness this Christmas. Reminders of happier days can be particularly acute after the loss of a loved one or other changes, like divorce or a relationship split.

Many of us are feeling the added impact of prolonged COVID-19 restrictions limiting us from physically celebrating the season again with family and friends living interstate or overseas.

Over the past decade loneliness has been described as a growing epidemic, with researchers finding the negative health effects are as bad for your health as obesity and smoking 15 cigarettes a day. It's clinically established that people experiencing loneliness are more susceptible to premature death.

A recent report *Stronger Together: Loneliness and Social Connectedness in Australia* uncovered older people aged over 55, account for more than a third of the economic costs of loneliness through associated visits to GPs and hospitals as their physical inactivity took its toll.

The costs of loneliness are high, and researchers in Australia, the US and UK have been busy studying tried and tested methods, coming up with four main intervention strategies to stop loneliness. These include: improving social skills, enhancing social support, increasing opportunities for social contact, and addressing maladaptive social cognition – negative thoughts about self-worth and how others perceive you.

These are long-term strategies which will take time to implement, but what can we do now to make a difference to someone who's lonely this festive season?

First, we can look around our own neighbourhood. Research has found that one third of Australians have no neighbours they see or hear from monthly. Who are these people in your street? Do you have an older neighbour who has few visitors or who may have recently lost a partner? Why not drop a simple greeting card into the mailbox of a little-known neighbour who you may have shared a 'hello' or smile in the last year? Could you squeeze in an extra meal setting at Christmas lunch for a socially isolated neighbour?

Maybe a neighbourhood street party could help to bring you and your neighbours closer together. Many Perth councils will fund part of the cost of these get-togethers, which create a relaxed and festive atmosphere. It can be a less intimidating way to meet your neighbours and perhaps form some lasting connections, especially with those who are alone.

Consider Advocare's Community Visitor Scheme volunteering program that operates throughout the Perth metropolitan area. Volunteers are interviewed about their interests and skills and then matched up with an older person with similar interests who's asked for some company in their home or at the residential aged care facility where they live. The benefit of these types of schemes is shared between the volunteer and the recipients. Advocare's volunteers regularly report that socially connecting with someone who welcomes seeing them, and values their company, gives someone who had been suffering from loneliness such a lift.

Christmas is a busy time for everyone, but by contacting just one of your old friends or a distant family member during this time by email, phone or in person, you could make a huge impact on someone who may be feeling lonely or isolated at this time of the year.

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LOUISE FORSTER

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established that people experiencing loneliness are more susceptible to premature death.

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Louise Forster is the chief executive of Advocare