

Louise Forster: Give the gift of your company this Christmas

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Many Australians experience loneliness at Christmas time. Credit: Don Lindsay/The West Australian

It's no secret that loneliness is on the rise in our modern world.

Once upon a time older people were thought to be the most likely age group to experience loneliness, but research from 2023 shows younger and middle-aged people can feel alone too.

With Christmas right around the corner, how can we help Australians experiencing social isolation? According to the State of the Nation Report: Social Connection in Australia 2023, nearly one in three Australians feel lonely. While 69 per cent of Australians agree loneliness is a serious issue, only three in 10 say they know how to help other people who are feeling lonely.

That's a huge gap, and one that has serious repercussions for the health and wellbeing of Australians of all ages.

A recent Bankwest Curtin Economics Centre study also attributes social connection as a major influence on loneliness, and concludes that one of the reasons younger people struggle is due to inexperience.

Making major life transitions in your teens and twenties can be difficult and unsettling. Young people don't have experience weathering life's storms, but older people, by contrast, know what to expect from retirement and in their later years. They've developed coping skills

and have survived a lifetime of ups and downs. While losing friends and relationships from illness and death is heartbreaking, it's also an expected part of life as we age.

In 2021, the Australian Red Cross also revealed women and younger people are more likely to experience feelings of loneliness during the festive season.

If young people are feeling lonely, and older people are better equipped to manage their loneliness despite social isolation, then to my mind bringing different generations together to support each other during the festive season makes a lot of sense.

So how you can help someone feeling lonely this Christmas?

Annual festive celebrations are a perfect time to begin making new community connections between people of all ages. Most traditions have a social element and are a good icebreaker for extending invitations or making suggestions about joint activities.

1. Share a cuppa. You've no doubt heard the saying, "the biggest gift you can give someone is your time" and it's true. Making time to sit down, have a cup of tea and talk to someone about how they're feeling in the lead up to Christmas Day is one of the simplest ways to help them feel connected. Just listening to the person, hearing their concerns and sharing memories of days gone by can also make them feel seen.

2. Share a recipe. All over the world, nothing brings families and friends together like food. And with so much cooking experience under their belt, older people often have a wealth of recipes to share with younger generations. Asking them to show you their special Christmas recipes in the kitchen doesn't just encourage activity and movement, it also gives them purpose and creates a beautiful Christmas memory that is cross-generational.

3. Singing carols and playing instruments. Whether it's Silent Night or Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer, everyone can chime in with a well-loved carol to create a feeling of togetherness.



KATE PHILLIPS Gen X and Gen Z unite! It's time to end

4. Watching seasonal movies. Alternate the old school classics such as *It's a Wonderful Life* and *National Lampoon's Vacation* with modern favourites like *Elf* or *The Grinch*.

5. Crafting. String popcorn, make paper chains for the Christmas tree, or print wrapping paper with ink and stamps. If you're a master crocheter or knitter your skills could provide a lifetime of enjoyment to someone who would like to learn them.

6. Attend religious services. Older people often miss out on religious services because of mobility or transportation needs. The holidays are a great time to help someone connect with their spiritual side by taking them to a service.

7. Making, writing, and sending Christmas cards. You can buy a box of charity cards or make your own cards together. Arthritis can make writing difficult, so offering to address cards can be a thoughtful gesture.

8. Visiting community markets and seasonal events. Shop for gifts together, listen to community or school choirs or take in an outdoor movie.



At Christmas Giving the gift of belonging is so important

9. Attend neighbourhood gatherings. Offer to escort a neighbour with limited mobility to the neighbourhood party or local school concert. Assist them getting up and down steps — a nemesis of many older people.

10. Wrapping gifts. Make an event out of gift wrapping, with festive music, Christmas cake and carols. It's an activity to keep your hands busy while reminiscing and telling stories about Christmas past.

Intergenerational activities can be done on a small scale. So if you want to get to know your neighbours, often all it takes is extending an invitation. Ask them about their hobbies, share skills or if you're feeling ambitious, organise an intergenerational street party.

We don't need research to tell us that building relationships and developing friendships of all ages is valuable for our quality of life and mental health.

The best gift you can offer anyone is your time and attention and chances are, you're going to enjoy giving that gift as much as the person does receiving it.

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