

OVER HALF OF GRANSNET USERS WHO ARE LONELY HAVE NEVER TALKED ABOUT IT

New survey reveals worrying findings as charities shine spotlight on older generation

Over half (56%) of Gransnet users who describe themselves as lonely have never talked about their loneliness to anyone, with the vast majority of that numberⁱ saying their close friends and family would be quite surprised or even astonished to hear they feel lonely, according to a new surveyⁱⁱ carried out by the over-50s social networking site.ⁱⁱⁱ

Published today to mark the launch of the Jo Cox Commission on Loneliness spotlight on older people, the survey also reveals that 93% of Gransnet users admit it's possible to feel lonely even when you have a partner or family, with 82% agreeing that talking about feelings of loneliness is much easier when they are online and anonymous.^{iv}

As part of the Commission's spotlight on older people, nine organisations – Age UK, Alzheimer's Society, British Red Cross, Campaign to End Loneliness, Eden Project Communities, Gransnet, Independent Age, Royal Voluntary Service and The Silver Line – are working collaboratively to raise public awareness of loneliness and encourage everyone to act to tackle it. With Age UK research showing that 1.2 million older people are chronically lonely^v, and half a million people over 60 usually spend every day alone^{vi}, there is clearly an urgent need for action.

According to the British Red Cross, a worrying 45% of people aged 65 and over wouldn't know where to turn if they're experiencing loneliness.

While loneliness can strike at any age, older people are at higher risk of being lonely as they are more likely to experience deteriorating health and the death of a loved one. Disability, poor health, poverty and limited access to transport all contribute to older people feeling cut off from their family, friends and local communities, meaning many older people have little or no social interaction. The closures of bank branches, post offices, small shops and libraries, particularly in rural areas, can be devastating for many older people who rely on them for social contact, exacerbating their feelings of being forgotten and lonely.

The cross-party Jo Cox Commission on Loneliness, launched earlier this year in Parliament, is supported by thirteen organisations^{vii} and aims to not just raise awareness of the problem but to act as a 'call to action'. Under the slogan 'Start a Conversation', the Commission wants to mobilise the public to help themselves and others around them – educating people on how they can become part of the solution – whether through talking to a neighbour, visiting an old friend, or just making time for people they meet.

Passionate about tackling loneliness, Jo Cox set up the Commission before her murder in June 2016. In her memory the avowedly cross-party Commission is being taken forward by MPs Rachel Reeves (Labour) and Seema Kennedy (Conservative), supported by Jo's family.

Co-chairs of the Commission, Rachel Reeves and Seema Kennedy, said: "Loneliness is a silent epidemic across the UK. We all need to act and encourage older people to freely talk about their loneliness.

“Everyone can play a part to ending loneliness among older people in their communities by simply starting a conversation with those around you. Building awareness of loneliness by being the ‘eyes on the ground’ to spot it amongst older customers, patients, friends, relatives and neighbours, and refer onto people who can help are all interventions that could make a real impact to a lonely older person’s life. How we care and act for those around us could mean the difference between an older person just coping, to them loving and enjoying later life.”

People can help by making time for older relatives and checking in on older friends and neighbours who they know. In addition, the organisations are asking their supporters and followers to post #happytochat on their Twitter and Facebook status to create online chatter around loneliness and encourage people across all generations to be aware of the loneliness that can often be found – but only behind closed doors.

Anyone who wants to find out more about the Commission or how they can get involved in tackling loneliness in their community can visit www.jocoxloneliness.org for further information.

QUOTES FROM PARTNER ORGANISATIONS

Campaign to End Loneliness

Laura Alcock-Ferguson, Executive Director at Campaign to End Loneliness, said: “In times of austerity, it’s easy to think that tackling loneliness is a luxury. The reality is more stark. Loneliness is a serious public health issue, and dealing with it will take the strain off the NHS and social care services.”

Age UK

Caroline Abrahams, Charity Director at Age UK, said: “The impact of loneliness can be devastating and while there is no quick fix, there are reasons to believe that we can all do something to change things for the better: a simple thing like saying hello and having a chat can brighten up an older person’s day and do more good than most of us would ever guess.”

Alzheimer’s Society

Jeremy Hughes, Chief Executive at Alzheimer’s Society, said: “Dementia puts people at higher risk of loneliness than the general population, and, sadly, a third report having lost friends since their diagnosis. We’re proud to be part of an initiative tackling such a big issue for people with dementia, and raising public awareness of a topic too often brushed under the carpet.”

British Red Cross

Mike Adamson, Chief Executive of British Red Cross UK said: “Every day British Red Cross staff and volunteers see first-hand the damaging effects loneliness and social isolation have on older people, many of whom are already in crisis. Our research shows that life transitions are key triggers for loneliness. We need to focus on these moments and work together to prevent loneliness from taking hold in the first place, by responding quickly and helping people to recover once they’ve hit crisis point.”

Eden Project Communities

Tracey Robbins, UK Delivery Manager said: "Loneliness is complicated, but there are surprisingly simple ways to support older people. Connection within communities is such a vital part of building and maintaining the trust, co-operation and relationships between people. Every generation is at risk of loneliness, but by being better connected to each other, we all benefit and become healthier, happier and more resilient. The decline in social contact could be contributing to the rise of loneliness in the UK and affects us all; that's why informal and inclusive neighbourhood gatherings like The Big Lunch are crucial, helping to unlock local connections and giving people, no matter what their age, a way out of feelings of loneliness without needing formal interventions."

Gransnet

Lara Crisp, Editor of Gransnet, said: "We know from our forums what an enormous difference it makes for people to know that there is always someone out there they can turn to, whether it's for support, advice or just a chat about nothing in particular. We are delighted to partner with the Jo Cox Loneliness Commission to help ensure that everybody who wants or needs it has someone they can talk to online at any hour of the day or night."

Independent Age

Janet Morrison, Chief Executive of Independent Age, says, "It's heart-breaking that so many Gransnet users are suffering in silence. Hopefully these results will help people realise that they're not alone. It's so important to talk to others about how you feel and by taking small steps and changing one thing at a time, it's possible to reduce your feelings of loneliness. Independent Age has a unique guide which is designed to help people recognise why they might feel lonely and offers tips for simple steps they can take to reduce loneliness, showing them that feelings of loneliness need not be out of their control and need not last indefinitely."

Royal Voluntary Service

David McCullough, chief executive of Royal Voluntary Service said: "Real relationships and human contact is what's needed to make older people feel less lonely. If we each take a small step to help an older person alone – a visit to a friend or relative for a quick cup of tea – we can make a huge difference to the lives of older people in our communities. Through the work of the Commission, we want to inspire the public to start a conversation and help put an end to this growing epidemic."

The Silver Line

Sophie Andrews, Chief Executive of The Silver Line said: "The findings of the Gransnet survey, sadly, are all too familiar to us. We often hear, from the over 10,000 callers to our 24/7 helpline every week, that the proud 'stiff upper lip' generation find it hard to admit their feelings to friends and family. This is why The Silver Line – the only free, national helpline which older people can call anonymously and in confidence 365 days a year - was set up.

"In just over three years we've taken over 1.3m calls – which of itself underlines the need for urgent collective action to tackle it across our society."

ADDITIONAL QUOTES

Fiona Phillips, ambassador for Alzheimer's Society, said: "I'm really proud that organisations have come together to highlight and tackle the issue of loneliness in our society. Sadly, I know from

personal experience just how tough feelings of loneliness can be for older people, particularly those living with health conditions such as dementia. For the person living with the condition, struggling to take part in activities they once enjoyed and kept them active in their community can be very isolating. For the people around them, watching someone you love lose a sense of who they are is devastating. It's like bereaving for someone who is still alive."

-Ends-

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Notes to editors:

Nine national organisations support The Jo Cox Commission on Loneliness spotlight on older people (20th March-23rd April). Media contact details are as follows:

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Website: www.jocoxloneliness.org - hub for all the information on the Jo Cox Commission on Loneliness and how people take part.

Twitter: @JoCoxLoneliness – lead social media channel that will raise awareness, educate and drive conversations across all generations.

#HappyToChat – campaign extension and social media call to action for 'Start a Conversation' on Twitter.

Both Rachel Reeves MP and Seema Kennedy MP (co-chairs) are available for interview. For more information, please contact Ruth Price by phone 07896 309648 or email ruth.price@parliament.uk.

The Jo Cox Commission on Loneliness is working with the following partners – Action for Children, Age UK, Alzheimer’s Society, The British Red Cross, Campaign to End Loneliness, Carers UK, The Co-op, Eden Project Communities, Independent Age, Refugee Action, Royal Voluntary Service, Sense and The Silver Line.

Throughout 2017 the Commission will focus on loneliness as it affects different members of society including older people, men, people with disabilities, carers, refugees, children and parents. The spotlight on older people will be from Monday 20th March – 23rd April 2017.

ⁱ Of the 73% (741 people) of those who would describe themselves as lonely – 54% said friends and family would be ‘quite surprised’ and 17% said they would be ‘astonished’. Gransnet Loneliness survey, 31 Jan - 11 Feb 2017.

ⁱⁱ The survey ran on the Gransnet website between 31 Jan and 11 Feb 2017. 1,014 people took part.

ⁱⁱⁱ Gransnet.com is a social networking site for the over 50s and a recognised champion for digital inclusion.

^{iv} Gransnet Loneliness survey, 31 Jan - 11 Feb 2017.

^v Marmot, M., Oldfield, Z., Clemens, S., Blake, M., Phelps, A., Nazroo, J., Steptoe, A., Rogers, N., Banks, J., Oskala, A. (2016). *English Longitudinal Study of Ageing: Waves 0-7, 1998-2015*. <http://dx.doi.org/10.5255/UKDA-SN-5050-12>.

Figures extrapolated by Age UK to national population using latest ONS Population Estimates.

^{vi} Approx. 498,000 people aged 60+. TNS polling for Age UK, Nov 2016 – sample of 2,241 people aged 60+ in the UK.

^{vii} Age UK, Alzheimer’s Society, British Red Cross, Campaign to End Loneliness, Eden Project, Gransnet, Independent Age, The Silver Line and The Royal Voluntary Service.