

Understanding Loneliness workshop: Is technology a bug or a fix?

About the workshop

On 22 July 2014, the Campaign to End Loneliness hosted a workshop that debated the role technology and telecare (also known as assistive technology) could play in keeping us connected, and preventing loneliness in older age.

Guided by recent research, and the experiences of organisations already supporting older people to access technology and overcome loneliness, we discussed:

- Whether it is fair to describe technology as either a 'cause' of, or a 'fix' for, loneliness
- How technology and telecare can be best utilised to tackle loneliness
- The challenges we need to address before technology will prevent or alleviate loneliness

This short report includes a written record of the group discussions on the day, as well as videos, audio recordings and case studies demonstrating how researchers and practitioners can use technology to tackle loneliness.

What does the research say?

[Previous research](#) has demonstrated that technology can both help to reduce loneliness and to contribute to it, depending on how it is used. A [2014 review](#) of loneliness interventions found that 3 out of the 4 most successful activities involved a new technology. However, small numbers of research participants meant they couldn't conclude if they'd be successful on a larger scale.

At this workshop, we heard from Professor Arlene Astell from Sheffield University who talked about their work to improve take-up of technology and assistive technology. A recording of her presentation can be found [here](#).

Professor Sue Yeandle, of the University of Leeds, also presented on her research and explained how telecare can be used to help older people live a full and independent life. Listen [here](#).

What did the workshop attendees think?

The workshop was attended by 11 charities, 6 social businesses/design agencies, 4 housing associations, 3 researchers, 1 local authority and 1 manager from the Department of Health.

**Click here to see what some of the attendees have to say
about how to use technology to combat loneliness**

Q1: What challenges can we face when using technology to overcome loneliness?

We asked attendees to discuss two questions; the first concerned challenges. These green boxes present a record of post-it notes written on the day, and highlight the barriers we may have to address when using technology to prevent or alleviate loneliness in older age.

Correctly identifying when people are experiencing loneliness & if they could benefit from a technology or group

Many new technologies require ongoing **face-to-face** support - but this is can be hard to offer

Older adults can **lack confidence** in using, or even **fear**, new technology

Ageism: older people can build barriers by assuming they won't be able to use a technology

Cost: kit is expensive & needs replacing often. Regular costs like broadband or increased electricity bills can also be off-putting

Lack of **motivation or interest** amongst some older people, to learn how to use a new technology

The **screen display** of many mainstream services, like Facebook, changes too frequently

Finding **dedicated, patient tuition** that can be tailored to individual needs and interests

Lack of accessibility for people with sight loss or early onset dementia

Commercial resistance in companies to developing products for a more mature market

Lack of consistent, high-quality training (for both older adults and volunteers)

There has to be **someone on the other end to reply:** a real challenge when someone lacks existing friendships/relationships

Offering training or technology can be perceived as **pushing change** onto people

Understanding the **limitations of a technology** (its not a magic bullet)

Negative reports in the media of **abuse over social media** and vulnerability of online shoppers

Q2: in your experience, how can we best use technology to tackle loneliness and bring older people together?

Our second discussion asked attendees to – based on their experience as service providers, researchers or designers – give advice to anyone seeking to use technology to connect people in later life. These red boxes capture more post-it notes, each with a different tip or suggestion.

Design technology training sessions so that they provide both **teaching** and **socialising**

Start by identifying **what** people want to do and **who** they want to communicate with

Make sure there is **someone at the 'other end'** of an email, tweet or blog post

Engage older people with the **creative** side of technology

Use a technology that can create a **sense of purpose**

Disguise new technology with old technology!

Offer **one-to-one** training and support that goes beyond an induction programme

Use technology to **enhance** the quality of existing conversations and interactions

Think about how technology and the internet can bring people together around **common interests**

Make sure that the older person is **in the driving seat**

Aim for technology that is as **intuitive** and **transparent** as possible e.g. touch screens

Don't forget the potential of well-established technologies like **telephones** or **TVs**

Don't neglect to **build confidence & self-esteem** whilst introducing new technologies

Talk about the benefits of a technology, and answer '**what's in it for me?**'

Treat technology as **just one tool** in a whole range of potential solutions for loneliness

Group Discussion 3: what haven't we discussed yet?

This session picked up all the questions attendees had thought of over the course of the event, but had not had the opportunity to talk about. Each answer below was given by the presenters or an audience member. If you have an answer to one of these questions, [let us know!](#)

How can we know what older people want, need and feel about technology?

- Our question should not be “What do you need?” but “How would you like to live?”
- We must remember that the needs and interests of older people are the same as younger and middle-aged adults. Let's not treat older people like an alien species!
- Because technology is changing so quickly, any consultation process should be done on the go. Get a product or project going (even if it is 1% of what you wanted to create) and then start a conversation about what is wanted and how it works
- People often don't know what they want. E.g. YouTube started as a dating website, but then a new interest in sharing home-made videos arose so the service had to adapt

How can we make technology work for people with cognitive decline?

- Most functionality we need is already in existence, e.g. touch screens work for people with early stage dementia because they're more intuitive than a keyboard and mouse
- Technology should be transparent: if you have to use an instruction manual to use something, the design has failed! We should aim for intuitive design all the time
- You could argue that we should not need specialist technology for people with cognitive impairment to use because all technology should be instinctive to the user
- Challenge the myth that the next generation of older people will somehow not be digitally excluded. Technology changes rapidly and we can get left behind at any age

How do we make technology more affordable for older users?

- Instead of asking how we can reduce the cost of technology, we should think “how can we increase the value of technology for the user?”
- For example, it may be difficult to deliver healthcare to someone who is housebound or isolated, but telehealth can both decrease health costs and improve quality of life
- Talk to housing associations: Viridian Housing make winter phone calls every year to their older residents. Could your local housing association do this as well?
- It's not just technology that needs to be more affordable in order to tackle loneliness, what about public transport? We need a more holistic approach to technology

- Regarding telecare, some existing applications are cheaper (and also more ‘normal’) e.g. do we need a GPS tracker, or would checking into FourSquare do the trick?

What more can we do to ensure technology and telecare become a ‘fix’ for loneliness?

- In Europe, telecare is more commonly referred to as “assisted living” or “assistive technologies”. This is a better way to talk about technology – as it is an enabler and brings the focus onto tools that will keep people active and enjoying life
- Provide a menu of options for an older person to say “this is what I want to do” and “this is what I’m excited by”
- Do your best to not put people in a position of weakness and make a technology or a new technology-based service as easy as possible to use
- The UK population is roughly 60 million. Only 1 million older adults say they are severely lonely. The numbers are in our favour! We only need 1 in 6 of us chose to do something about loneliness in our street or community and technology is a tool in this process
- We should treat technology as an oil that can make the wheels go round. It’s not the solution but it can definitely make and support meaningful relationships
- Improve recognition of people who are at risk of loneliness and isolation: the functionality and kit is out there already, we need to make sure people have access

5 ‘Take Home’ Messages

1. Technology is useful tool that should be used alongside a range of other things to combat loneliness: non-virtual relationships are still vital
2. What older people want from technology is what we all want: our interests and needs do not just change overnight when we turn 65
3. People aged over 65 are as just [thirsty for new technology](#) as you are
4. Focus on the benefits of a technology: don’t describe the service a new technology offers, describe the outcome that it will bring
5. We need more funding to make kit and training cheaper (and therefore less of a barrier) but can still do more right now to raise the value of technology

10 Ideas for Using Technology to Prevent or Overcome Loneliness

1. Get creative! Consider getting a group together to use computers and recording equipment to [start a podcast](#) or take inspiration from [Eric Whitacre's Virtual Choir](#)
2. Another imaginative way to get older people using computers or tablets is to stream music on an iPod or iPad through a gramophone or jukebox:

"We use a homemade jukebox using an iPad. Guests at our events touch the screen to choose a song. When we take it apart to show them they have been using an iPad it creates a very positive reaction that we can build on."

3. Identify technologies and apps that can help you improve the quality of conversations with old or new friends. For starters, check out [Mindings](#) and [Digital Shoebox](#)
4. Make the use of technology as purposeful as possible: take a look at [Granny Cloud](#)
5. Could you do with some free training? Barclay Bank's [Digital Eagles](#) or [Tea and Teach](#) might help or if you are a care home, [Go On Adopt](#) could find you student teachers
6. Where possible, use technology that is already in someone's home. For example [telephone befriending](#) or [video calling through the TV](#)
7. Think about how technology can start conversations around common interests:

"We use a table and a projector to screen black and white photos of our shared national history that can help provoke conversations at our events. It is particularly useful for new residents with no shared local knowledge"

8. To build interest, focus on the **benefit** of a particular technology; don't just describe what it does! This blog lists [40 reasons why an older relative might want to use the internet](#)
9. Websites like [Hoax-Slayer](#) can help overcome fear of scams or online abuse
10. A virtual community can boost face-to-face support. For example, [Rally Round](#) can help you coordinate support from family and friends for an older relative in need of a bit of support

For more information

Case Studies

During this workshop, we heard from two developers who are using technology and the internet to help older adults avoid loneliness and stay connected to family, friends and meet people with similar interests.

You can listen to Stu Arnott from **Mindings** and Calum Eadie from **SpeakSet** talk about their ideas and products, successes and challenges, [here](#).

Mindings, **SpeakSet** and another organisation represented on the day, **Viridian Housing**, have also shared recent evaluations of their pilots, which we have turned into short case studies. You can read about their experiences on our [Learning Network](#) website.

If you think your project or product would make a good case study of how technology can combat loneliness, please email [Anna](#).

Future Events

The Campaign to End Loneliness holds regular events and will continue to run our 'Understanding Loneliness' workshop series. For the latest information about Campaign events, please keep checking our [Learning Network page](#).

Further Reading

- **Advancing Knowledge of Telecare for Independence and Vitality in Later Life (AKTIVE)** website: <http://www.aktive.org.uk/index.html>
- **Challenging Obstacles and Barriers to Assistive Living Technologies (COBALT)** website: <http://cobaltproject.org/>
- *Older people, technology and community: the potential of technology to help older people renew or develop social contacts and to actively engage communities* (Independent Age and Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation report) <http://tinyurl.com/ldk2rnw>
- *Digital Inclusion Evidence Review* (Age UK report) <http://tinyurl.com/n2bhm4r>
- *Internet Use and Loneliness in Older Adults* (Sum, Matthews, Hughes and Campbell, 2008) <http://tinyurl.com/larbjvi>
- *Older People and Their Use of the Internet* (Nominet Trust report) <http://tinyurl.com/mq6hgzy>