

Loneliness, Depression and Anxiety: exploring the connection to mental health through *Testing Promising Approaches to Reducing Loneliness in South Lakeland*

Introduction

Research shows that loneliness is associated with poorer physical and mental health and lower well-being amongst older people. In particular, loneliness amongst older people is associated with experiencing depression, and older people with a high degree of loneliness are twice as likely to develop Alzheimer's disease as those with a low degree of loneliness. An ongoing service delivered in South Cumbria, advanced through Age UK's *testing promising approaches to reducing loneliness programme*, provides learning on how to support lonely older people who may also be experiencing mental health issues.

What is *Testing Promising Approaches to Reducing Loneliness*?

The [*testing promising approaches to reducing loneliness*](#) programme ran between April 2015 and October 2016, with eight local Age UK partners testing different approaches to reaching older people who are lonely, understanding their situation and providing and/or arranging for appropriate support.

Age UK South Lakeland, one of the local Age UK partners, continued the approach beyond the end of the programme. Data captured on almost 2,850 older people, over three years from the start of the programme, showed that loneliness scores were highly associated with depression symptoms and anxiety¹.

In other words, among the older people supported by Age UK South Lakeland, many of those who were lonely also experienced feelings of depression and/or anxiety.

¹ The correlation between loneliness and depressive symptoms (as measured by the PHQ-9 questionnaire) was 0.992. The correlation between loneliness and anxiety (as measured by the GAD-7 questionnaire) was 0.977.

What have we learned from Age UK South Lakeland's support of lonely older people who also experienced mental health issues?

Both listening to, and exploring, issues that older people are experiencing is crucial to being able to support those experiencing both loneliness and mental health issues such as depression and anxiety. To explore such issues, **collecting data on older people's lived experience** can be invaluable. Age UK South Lakeland's [Compass Tool](#) collects a wealth of information across the five domains of health, living conditions, social life, money and locality. This statistical information provides valuable insight into linkages between different aspects of older people's lives, enabling **identification of issues that are the main causes of negative feelings**. Staff are trained to ask the questions in an appropriate and sensitive manner. The support provided is tailored to the needs and wants of individual older people, and, for those with multiple issues, the focus is to prioritise and resolve most urgent things first.



“Reducing loneliness is not always about encouraging more social engagement. Rather other issues...may be the key to reducing loneliness”

Summary – 3 ways to support older people experiencing loneliness, depression and anxiety

Some ways to support older people experiencing loneliness and mental health issues:

- listen to and explore issues being experienced by older people
- collect and use relevant statistical data to identify issues and relationships between issues
- recognise that resolving other issues may be the driver to reducing experiences of loneliness

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