

You can't always fix loneliness

Supporting the mental health of lonely older people



What we do

The Ageing Better Middlesbrough Outreach team offers one to one support to people who are feeling lonely and/or socially isolated.

The team is made up of outreach workers and psychological therapists. The outreach worker is the first point of contact, giving practical advice and helping individuals make positive changes to feel less lonely and isolated.

Therapy is offered to people struggling to manage their loneliness and whose mental health is affected. This is offered in addition to the support from our outreach worker.

Who we work with

We support some of the most lonely and isolated people in the country. People who have complex lives and are dealing with multiple issues.

The older people who need support from our psychological therapists have often been in plain sight for years, bounced around from service to service unable to find a way to move forwards.

The solutions for this group cannot be found through community development approaches, short term connector services or a package of care. It is about more than just hand holding people to their local community centre.

In the beginning

We thought loneliness would be the main presenting issue people came to see us with.

But people are not just lonely. Their loneliness is intertwined with other significant issues such as childhood trauma, long term physical health conditions, unemployment, caring responsibilities, substance misuse, domestic violence and poverty.

This is significant, because we now no longer talk about loneliness as if it is a stand alone issue. We know that loneliness is a piece of a much bigger picture.

**AGEING BETTER
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What we learned about supporting lonely older people

Therapy with outreach support wrapped around it is crucial

People need practical support at the same time as therapy to help them deal with the complex issues in their lives. Support such as managing debt, housing problems, help to fill out forms and make appointments and navigating the social care system.

It also means there is a smooth transition into therapy, with an outreach worker preparing individuals for therapy - building confidence, explaining what therapy is and how it can help. People feel like it is a continued experience of Ageing Better Middlesbrough rather than a separate intervention. This can reduce the stigma some older people have around being in therapy.

Support needs to be flexible, informal and long term

Our support is long term – some people see our therapists more than 30 times before they are ready to move on. This is because we work with individuals in between all that life throws their way – caring responsibilities, illness, bereavement etc.

We work with people until they are ready to stop seeing us, allowing breaks in support and flexibility with our appointments.

It also takes time to develop a therapeutic relationship – particularly for the older people we meet. Many have lost faith in services and need time to build trust with us.

It takes time to uncover complex and historical issues, such as childhood trauma. People may not open up about these things until they have been seeing the therapist for a while.

Meet people in a place that feels safe – this usually means their home

By the very nature of loneliness and social isolation, the people we work with often find it hard to attend therapy because they struggle to leave their own home. Let alone get past the difficulties of using public transport – getting to the bus stop, affording a ticket, working out the route and so on.

We break down that barrier by going to meet people in their home. We can then support individuals to take steps to get out and about when they are ready.

But we can't fix loneliness for everyone

Nearly everyone we worked with reported feeling less depressed and anxious and felt improvements in their wellbeing.

However, only two-thirds of people we worked with reported a reduction in feelings of loneliness. This means for one-third their levels of loneliness stayed the same.

For some people, the causes of loneliness are historical and deep-rooted. For others it is linked to parts of their lives that cannot change, like caring responsibilities, physical health, bereavement or mobility problems.

In these situations the therapy we provide is about building resilience to cope. It makes people feel better about the challenges they experience dealing with loneliness, but it does not get rid of the loneliness.



Get in touch

Call 01642 257034

Email info@ageingbettermiddlesbrough.org.uk

www.ageingbettermiddlesbrough.org.uk

f @abmiddlesbrough

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