Volunteers from Contact the Elderly run monthly tea parties to tackle social isolation among elderly people

**Tea parties combat loneliness in old age**

In this article...
- The prevalence of social isolation among older people
- Information about Contact the Elderly
- What makes people feel less lonely

Older people are particularly vulnerable to social isolation and loneliness caused by the death of a partner, loss of friends, family dispersal and reduced mobility. The Mental Health Foundation (2010) states that "major transitions, such as bereavement, test our resilience to loneliness and old age [and] also put us at a heightened risk of feeling lonely".

According to the Office for National Statistics (2013), nearly half (49%) of all people aged 75 and over in the UK live alone, and the number of people aged over 80 years is projected to reach eight million by 2050 (Cracknell, 2010). Since the likelihood of living alone increases with age, as does the incidence of mobility problems and loss of independence, the number of people experiencing social isolation will increase.

National charity Contact the Elderly is combating this issue by bringing small groups of older people together for monthly tea parties across England, Scotland and Wales. There are currently over 500 groups supporting over 4,200 older people. The service is for people who are aged 75 and above, who live alone and have limited support from family, friends and statutory services. The tea parties are held on Sundays; this tends to be when most other local services for older people are not operating and the older people who attend the tea parties have said Sunday is the loneliest day of the week.

Each older guest is collected from their home by a volunteer driver and taken to a volunteer host’s home for the afternoon. The group visits a different host each month, but the drivers remain the same. This ensures that, over the months and years, acquaintances turn into friends and loneliness is replaced by companionship.

Volunteer drivers, who are checked by the Disclosure and Barring Service, are asked to commit to around three hours one Sunday a month. Hosts hold tea parties, which last for a couple of hours, in their own homes once or twice a year. Drivers accompany the older guests to the tea parties and drop them home safely afterwards.

A survey by Contact the Elderly in 2012 revealed that 80% of older people who attended the tea parties felt less lonely, 63% felt more confident, 38% considered their general health to have improved and 26% saw their doctor less. The positive effects of the tea parties are illustrated by the case study in Box 1 and by this comment made by one older person using the service:

“I’m so glad I got in touch with Contact the Elderly. The social contact the tea parties bring has made a big difference to my life. Being around people again has made me feel like my old self.”

The people using the charity’s service fall into the category of the “oldest old”; over half of those who attend the tea parties are in their 80s, while 23% are in their 90s and 1% are aged over 100 years. Many have social care needs, due to mobility issues and hearing and visual impairments, and are unable to leave their homes without assistance.

**Kellie Smith** is communications manager at Contact the Elderly

**References**

Contact the Elderly works with health professionals, including practice nurses, GPs, community matrons, occupational therapists and falls-prevention teams in England, Scotland and Wales. For more information, visit contact-the-elderly.org.uk or call freephone 0800 716543.

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**BOX 1. CASE STUDY**

I referred Brian Green, aged 89, to Contact the Elderly in 2012. His wife had recently died and he told me he was feeling lonely and depressed. When someone is left on their own and their family is busy with their own lives, there is a huge impact on the person left behind. Mr Green was cut off in the area in which he lived so the tea parties were a great chance for him to get out.

The local staff member at Contact the Elderly in Mr Green’s area had space in one of the groups and was able to place him quickly. One Sunday a month, Mr Green was collected from his home by a volunteer driver and taken to a volunteer host’s home, where he joined a small group for tea, chat and companionship. The hosts provided refreshments and made sure Mr Green was made welcome and enjoyed himself; his driver dropped him home afterwards.

Mr Green went to the tea parties for a year until he died in early 2013. He loved this and they made a huge difference to him in the last year of his life.

The guest’s name has been changed.

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