

# The loneliness epidemic

As more people admit to feelings of isolation, Rick Lyons reports on the charities working to get people together in a Britain that's too busy to take time out

Charities are rallying volunteers to tackle a potentially deadly epidemic – not a disease that threatens to spiral out of control, but plain and simple loneliness. According to a survey by Age UK, the number of older people saying they are usually lonely has topped one million for the first time. Meanwhile – as we approach Older People's Day on 1 October – charity Contact the Elderly has declared a state of emergency with loneliness among Britain's old people reaching a 50-year high.

Earlier this year, Silver Line, the charity founded by Esther Rantzen (below) in 2013, revealed that more than half of the 100,000 calls it received in its first six months were from people who said they have nobody else they can talk to. The television presenter and campaigner turned her attention to the plight of Britain's older generation and set up a free 24-hour helpline, a 'ChildLine for the older generation'.

'The shocking fact is that Britain has become too busy to find time for our older people,' says Rantzen. 'Families are busy and may live many miles away. Carers have no time to stop and have a conversation. So many of our callers are completely alone, they have ceased to expect that they could ever enjoy life again, in fact they have almost forgotten what fun means. Modern Britain has no room for them.'

Indeed, modern Britain is a place where people are living for longer with a

transient population, which means close relatives may not live nearby. 'Loneliness isn't a new phenomenon per se, but because we've got more older people there's a bigger risk of it,' says Caroline Abrahams, charity director of Age UK. 'More people are living for longer which is a great thing from lots of points of view but one of the penalties of living a long time is that you tend to outlive your contemporaries.'

'Also, as people get older they're not working any more so social interaction that happens at the workplace is lost to

them too. At the same time it becomes a bit harder to sustain the social network you do have because getting out and about may be difficult.

'Add all those things up together and it's a recipe for being lonely in later life.'

It's no surprise that loneliness can cause unhappiness, but research shows it affects health too.

'It seems to enhance your chances of developing cognitive decline, Alzheimer's, dementia and it can be as bad for you, it's now thought, as being obese or smoking,' says Abrahams.

For these reasons the NHS needs to address the issue as a serious threat to public health, Abrahams believes. But there are also things we can do to help including engaging with elderly neighbours or becoming a volunteer.

Rantzen agrees. 'A little time taken out of our busy days is such a simple gift, but it could save a life,' she says.

**'The shocking fact is that Britain has become too busy to find time for our older people'**

ESTHER RANTZEN, THE SILVER LINE FOUNDER



YOU'LL NEVER WALK ALONE Loneliness is not a new phenomenon, but with more people living longer,

there's a bigger risk of feeling isolated

## Charities for the 'stiff-upper-lip generation'

### Intergen

'Older people have intimate knowledge that you won't find in the history books'

Intergen, founded by Norma Raynes, brings older people and schoolchildren in the community together for shared activities.

'I decided to bring generations together after researching older people and social exclusion,' says Raynes. 'I've seen the joy it's brought to a lot of older people. They not only have the opportunity to give something back, they're getting masses from the kids and learning new things.'

Under the scheme, schools are asked

how they would like older people to contribute to children's education. Among the volunteers is 100-year-old Gus Bialik (right with Raynes), who talks to sixth formers in Bethnal Green about the Second World War and the East End during the 1920s.

'My talks go down very well,' he says. 'Older people are the ones with intimate knowledge of what occurred personally. You won't find it in the history books.'

For more information on Intergen, phone 020 8 980 0693 or go to [intergen.org.uk](http://intergen.org.uk)



### The Silver Line

'There is a stigma associated with admitting to being lonely. A helpline is a way to get people to talk about it'

The Silver Line is a confidential, free helpline for older people across the UK, which is open every day and night of the year.

'There is a stigma associated with admitting to being lonely,' says Sarah Caplin, the charity's director of development and communications. 'There is a bit of a stiff-upper-lip generation who aren't used to expressing their feelings and have always been the care giver. Suddenly they need support and they're not very

good at asking for it. A helpline is a way to get people to talk about it.'

Specially trained, paid staff offer information, friendship and advice including putting callers in touch with local groups and services they may benefit from. Regular befriending calls can also be provided by Silver Line Friends, who are trained and vetted volunteers.

To contact The Silver Line phone 0800 470 8090 (24 hours) or visit [thesilverline.org.uk](http://thesilverline.org.uk)

### Contact the Elderly

'Our tea parties are a real lifeline of friendship for our older members'

Contact the Elderly provides regular social contact for older people by organising monthly Sunday afternoon tea parties.

'Our tea parties are a real lifeline of friendship for our older members who have little or no contact with any family or friends,' says CEO Mary Rance. 'They bring people of all ages together, develop fulfilling friendships

and support networks, and give everyone involved something to look forward to.'

Volunteer drivers collect attendees and drive them to a tea party, held by a volunteer host. Each month there is a different host but guests always have the same driver, meaning friendships can form. Volunteers can become drivers, hosts or group coordinators.



Go to [contact-the-elderly.org.uk](http://contact-the-elderly.org.uk) to find out more. Other charities working in this area include *The Campaign to End Loneliness*, which gets people feeling isolated to volunteer, and Age UK. Go to [campaigntoendloneliness.org](http://campaigntoendloneliness.org) and call Age UK on 0800 169 6565.

## Fi Glover

In my opinion



The BBC Radio 4 journalist airs her views

I know that you might feel you've had enough news from the polling booth recently – perhaps you are reading this whilst lying down in a darkened room with only a pair of hanging chads for company, but please can I tell you some exciting news from Sweden? For the first time a feminist party looked like it was going to get a place in government. The FI Party had hoped to achieve 4% of the vote in the country's general election this week, it managed just 3.1% – meaning no seat but a chance for the first time in history to qualify for state funding. Hopes are riding high for the next election already.

And yes, you did read that right – the FI Party. And no, I assure you, I am not writing this piece purely because my name is in there, although it does make for some great opportunities to cut out headlines from papers and stick them on my wall. At least I'm not our friend Mark whose surname is Frankel. Fine whilst Frankel was the greatest race horse of all time. Not so much now he has been put out to stud.

What drew me to the FI Party (Feminist Initiative) initially was a story about how the über-musician Pharrell Williams had invited FI's co-founder Gudrun Schyman up on stage at a gig in Sweden and asked the crowd to show its support and vote for her. Now if you aren't familiar with the back catalogue of Pharrell Williams then you won't know that the mega hit he

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co-penned last year, *Blurred Lines*, was a feminist's absolute nightmare. It sparked global outrage for its degrading lyrics and video content of girls parading around naked.

So for Williams to now be standing up for women's rights seems a volte-face of staggering proportions – but I salute him for changing his stance. As society's mores change so quickly, feminism frequently finds its way through the testing of the waters. Female equality is such an enormous issue that often you don't realise how you feel about it until you do something that undermines it, or provokes a reaction.

I congratulate Williams too, for giving support to a party that has, even in Sweden – land of the 'latte dad' and some of the firmest equality legislation in the world – faced the usual barrage of raised eyebrows and the boring expectation that a female voice will be shrill and demanding and ultimately about control freakery. That isn't what feminism is about. If you look at how millions of women are being treated on a daily basis it's heartbreaking that the female voice is so often one of pain, suffering, grief and disenfranchisement. At the heart of modern feminism should lie the desire to simply want the voice of normality to be heard. If it takes the pinpricks of our everyday actions to draw attention to the greater pain then that is a price worth paying. While we are talking about price – *Blurred Lines* was 2013's bestselling single. Stage befriending is fine, a royalty cut might be even better.

@ffiglover  
[bbc.co.uk/listeningproject](http://bbc.co.uk/listeningproject)