

# Beating the Lows

in Later Life

## Overcoming Loneliness

A Self Help Guide



## CONTENTS

How to use this guide	3
What is Loneliness?	3
What can help me feel less lonely?	6
Barriers to Overcoming Loneliness	15
What next? How to put this advice into practice.	26



## HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

This is a brief self-help booklet aimed at helping you to identify and overcome issues with loneliness and social isolation. The guide is broken down into different parts to allow you to access the information you feel is most relevant to you. You may find that all of this guide is helpful for you, or you may find that only certain parts apply to you – just use the sections which you find helpful.

**Please note if you are struggling with your mood and well being and feeling that life may not be worth living please contact your GP as soon as possible to discuss accessing support services locally.**

## WHAT IS LONELINESS?

Loneliness is a negative feeling we can experience when we do not have the quality and quantity of the close relationships and social connections we would like to have.

Loneliness is often linked to being socially isolated. However not everyone who lives alone or is isolated feels lonely, and likewise, not everyone who is lonely is socially isolated.

Anyone, of any age can be lonely, but issues such as retirement, changes in physical health and changes in social circumstances can mean that people in later life may be more vulnerable to experiencing loneliness.

### The impact of loneliness

Being lonely can be a very difficult emotional experience, but it can also have a large impact on our physical and mental health. People who are lonely are more likely to visit their GP, have more physical health problems, such as high blood pressure and are at greater risk of anxiety and depression.

## How common is loneliness?

Up to **16%** of people over the age of **65** in the UK are thought to experience loneliness.

Almost a **fifth** of those over the age of **55** only have contact with another person 3 or 4 days of the week.

A **fifth** of people over the age of **75** living alone will rarely see or speak to someone every day.

Source: [www.campaigntoendloneliness.org](http://www.campaigntoendloneliness.org)

## What increases the risk of feeling lonely?

Some life events or situations are known to increase the risk of a person feeling lonely. These include:

- Bereavement
- Living alone
- Retirement
- Recent move to a new area
- Lack of family/friends close by
- Poor health

## Am I lonely?

Answering the following questions can help to understand if you may be experiencing loneliness

### 1. How often do you feel that you lack companionship?

Hardly Ever	1
Some of the Time	2
Often	3

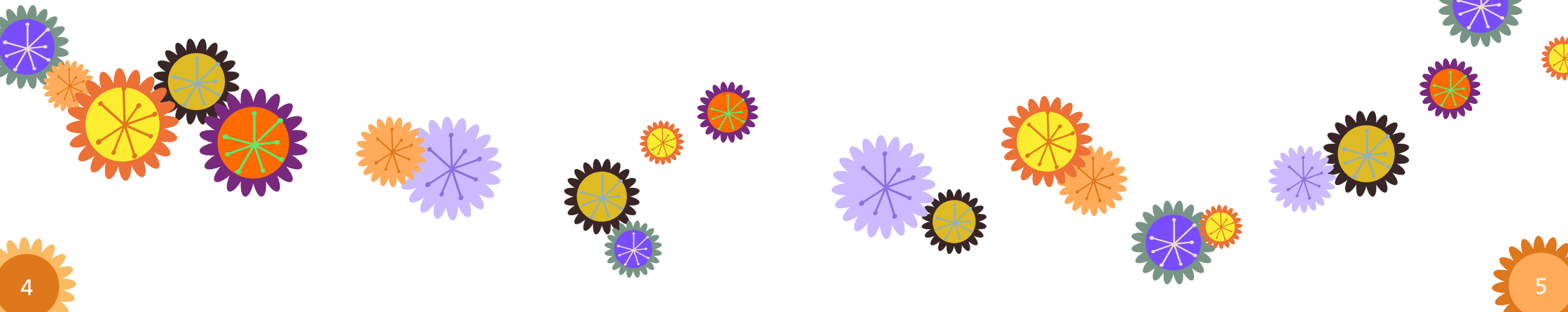
### 2. How often do you feel left out?

Hardly Ever	1
Some of the Time	2
Often	3

### 3. How often do you feel isolated from others?

Hardly Ever	1
Some of the Time	2
Often	3

If you answered 'some of the time' or 'often' to all or most of the above questions, it is likely that you are experiencing loneliness.



## WHAT CAN HELP ME FEEL LESS LONELY?

There are several ways to help reduce loneliness. These include:

- Becoming more socially active/active in the local community
- Volunteering
- Befriending
- Telephone support
- Social media

### Becoming more socially active

Taking part in activities in your local community can increase your contact with other people, increase the chances of developing new friendships and provide the opportunity to spend time taking part in activities you enjoy. All of these things can reduce the experience of loneliness and social isolation.

It is also important to consider what skills, knowledge and experience you have that you may be able to share with others.

### Finding out about what is on in the local community

Local newspapers, community centre and supermarket notice boards and your local library are a good place to start looking for what may be on offer in your area. There are many groups, clubs and activities around the region that may be of interest to you including arts and crafts, fishing, music, sewing, photography, gardening and many more.

Alternatively, if you have access to the internet, using an online search engine (such as Google) can provide information on what is on locally.



**Please note further information on using the internet is available on page 9 of this guide**

Useful websites locally include:

**The Living Well** - a locally run website that offers up to date information on community groups and organisations in Dumfries and Galloway - [www.thelivingwell.org.uk](http://www.thelivingwell.org.uk)

**Dumfries and Galloway what's going on** – a website dedicated to events and activities happening in the region <https://www.dgwggo.com>

Many local areas also run their own community websites with lots of information about local activities.



### National Organisations

There are several national organisations that support older people engaging in activities and interests that they enjoy. These include the University of the Third Age (U3A) and Men's Sheds. Other well-established organisations active in the local community include:

**The Scottish Women's Institute:** [www.swi.org.uk](http://www.swi.org.uk)

**Rotary International:** [www.rotary-ri.org](http://www.rotary-ri.org)

**Probus:** [www.probusonline.org](http://www.probusonline.org)

**Meetup:** [www.meetup.com](http://www.meetup.com)



## The University of the Third Age

The University of the Third Age (U3A) is an organisation run by and started for people who are retired. The U3A brings people together with common interests to form groups from book groups to bird watching. If you have a specific skill or interest that may not be on offer, the U3A encourages members to start new interest groups as there may be other people with similar interests to you.

The U3A run monthly meetings and organise group meetings for a wide range of different hobbies and interests. There are currently four U3A branches active in Dumfries and Galloway: Dumfries, Stewartry, Wigtownshire and Stranraer. Up to date telephone numbers will also be listed on the websites below.

Dumfries: [www.u3adumfries.org.uk](http://www.u3adumfries.org.uk)

Stewartry: [www.u3astewartry.org.uk](http://www.u3astewartry.org.uk)

Wigtownshire: [www.wigtownshireu3a.org.uk](http://www.wigtownshireu3a.org.uk)

Stranraer & West Galloway:  
[www.westgallowayu3a.magix.net.website](http://www.westgallowayu3a.magix.net.website)

There is also a 'virtual' U3A for those who may not be able to attend groups or meetings locally or where there are no local branches. The virtual group is run entirely online and is worldwide. For further information go to [www.vu3a.org/index.php](http://www.vu3a.org/index.php)



## Men's Shed

Men's Sheds were set up to resemble a man's garden shed but in a community setting. This allows men to come together to work on projects or to share knowledge and skills with each other.

There are several Men's Sheds in Dumfries and Galloway including, Lockerbie, Thornhill, Dumfries, Stoneykirk Stranraer, Balmaclellan and Dalbeattie.

For an up to date list of currently open Men's Sheds and further information go to [www.menssheds.org.uk](http://www.menssheds.org.uk)

'A Men's Shed is a larger version of the typical man's shed in the garden – a place where he feels at home and pursues practical interests with a high degree of autonomy. A Men's Shed offers this to a group of such men where members share the tools and resources they need to work on projects of their own choosing at their own pace and in a safe, friendly and inclusive venue. They are places of skill-sharing and informal learning, of individual pursuits and community projects, of purpose, achievement and social interaction. A place of leisure where men come together to work'

(Information taken from [www.menssheds.org.uk](http://www.menssheds.org.uk))





## Volunteering

Occasionally some people have difficulty finding a purpose and value as they move from working life into retirement. This can increase a person's sense of loneliness and isolation. Volunteering can provide an increased sense of purpose and value, provide structure to one's day and also increase social contact.

There are several ways to begin volunteering, ranging from becoming a volunteer for local or national organisations to offering your time to local schools or hospitals. Supporting a neighbour or sharing your time with someone who needs help in an informal way can also be considered volunteering.

**Third Sector Dumfries** is an organisation which brings together information on voluntary and charitable organisations locally and can also provide up to date information on what volunteer opportunities may be available.

Third Sector Dumfries can be contacted:

By telephone: **0300 303 8558**

By email: **info@thirdsectordumgal.org.uk**

Via website: **www.thirdsectordumgal.org.uk**

In writing or in person:

- Third Sector, Dumfries and Galloway, 16 Queensberry Street, Dumfries, DG1 1EX
- Burns House, Harbour Street, Stranraer, DG9 7RD

**Volunteer Scotland** provides a database of existing opportunities for volunteering across Scotland, with an easy to navigate search facility to enable you to look for opportunities in your local area.

Volunteer Scotland can be contacted:

By telephone: **01786 479 593**

By email: **hello@volunteerscotland.org.uk**

Via Website: **www.volunteerscotland.net**

## Healthy Connections/Community Link Worker

If you are having difficulty accessing local groups or finding out what may be happening locally, Healthy Connections can help. Through the support of a designated Link Worker, they will work with you to identify what matters to you and assist you in accessing local groups, support agencies and allow you time to focus on your current situation and make plans for your future.

Healthy Connections can be contacted on the following telephone numbers:

Nithsdale **01387 244410**

Annandale **01461 204741**

Stewartry **01556 505724**

Wigtownshire **01671 404267**

## Befriending

Feelings of loneliness and isolation are often associated with a lack of social contact. For someone who may be unable to leave the house or who struggles to travel, having a befriender can be very beneficial. There are several organisations that provide a befriending service in this area.

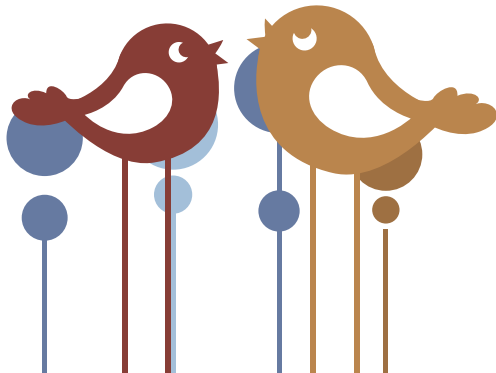


**Food Train Friends** is a befriending service providing trips out, home visits and telephone calls, bringing some fun, laughter, friendship and social contact to older people in need who live in Dumfries & Galloway.

(Information taken from the website:  
[www.thefoodtrain.co.uk/our-services/food-train-friends](http://www.thefoodtrain.co.uk/our-services/food-train-friends))

Food Train Friends can also be contacted by telephone:  
**(01387) 279111**

There are also opportunities to volunteer for the Food Train Friends and become a befriender yourself.



**The Silver Line** is the only confidential, free helpline for older people across the UK, open every day and night of the year. The specially trained helpline staff:

- Offer information, friendship and advice
- Link callers to local groups and services
- Protect and support those who are suffering abuse and neglect

If callers would like to be put in touch with Silver Line Friends, they can receive a weekly friendship call or a regular friendship letter. Silver Line Friends are volunteers who have contacted The Silver Line because they enjoy talking to older people. (Information from the Silver Line website)

You can contact Silverline on: **0800 4 50 60 70**

More information is available on the website:  
[www.thesilverline.org.uk](http://www.thesilverline.org.uk)





## Social Media

Social media includes services such as Facebook where you can create an online 'profile' from which you can exchange messages, photographs and videos to and from friends and family.

Research has shown that older people who regularly use social media to stay in touch with friends and family who live far away are less likely to report feeling lonely than those who do not use social media.

## Learning how to use the Internet

Many older people are very active online and enjoy the benefits of social media, for example. Some older people, however, find it difficult to 'get online' and can feel overwhelmed when trying to navigate the internet.



Your local library can provide classes and tuition on how to use the internet and have courses specifically designed for learning to use 'Tablet' computers such as iPads, Kindles, etc.

You can find out about current computer classes by either:

- Popping into your local library
- Telephoning your local library via the main council switchboard: **030 33 33 3000**

Asking a friend or family member to check online at [www.dumgal.gov.uk/lia](http://www.dumgal.gov.uk/lia)

## Barriers to Overcoming Loneliness

Some people can find it very difficult to take steps to address loneliness and often there are issues that can prevent them from changing their situation. Some of these issues might include:

- Transport
- Worries about physical health
- Difficulties with anxiety or depression

## Transport

Living in a rural community if you don't drive, or are no longer able to, can increase a person's sense of loneliness and isolation. There are several services in the Dumfries and Galloway area that are specifically designed to support those people who struggle with transport.

- 1. The Rural Voluntary Service** – Members of the RVS will support older people with transport through volunteers using their own cars. This can be to attend appointments or even to go for trips out. This service is available throughout Dumfries and Galloway, for a small fee to cover petrol costs. To enquire as to what is available in your area contact **01683 221 477**
- 2. Taxi-card** – People over the age of 60 who have restrictions with mobility may be entitled to a taxi card to subsidise the use of taxi transport up to the value of £100/year. To check if you may be eligible for this contact the main council switchboard on **0300 33 33 3000**
- 3. Bus Travel** - Everyone over the age of 60 is entitled to free bus travel around Scotland. Those living in Dumfries and Galloway are also able to travel to Carlisle free of charge. You can apply for a bus pass at any council customer service centre. For further information, contact the council switchboard on **030 33 33 3000**





## Physical Health Worries

If you are having difficulty with a physical health condition that makes it difficult for you to leave the house or to attend activities in your local area, this can increase loneliness and isolation.

Often people in this situation can experience thoughts of, 'I can't do that' and dismiss any activities that they think may be too difficult for them. What can be helpful is to consider what you **CAN** do rather than focusing on what you can't do. Also, consider how activities can be adapted to ensure you still feel you can do some of the things you used to enjoy.

### Let's consider an example:

Bob has always been a keen gardener. He always had a large garden with a vegetable patch to grow fruit and veg. In the last three years, Bob's wife passed away, and he had a stroke which has left him in a wheelchair. He has been struggling to go out and has been feeling more and more lonely over recent times.

#### Thoughts

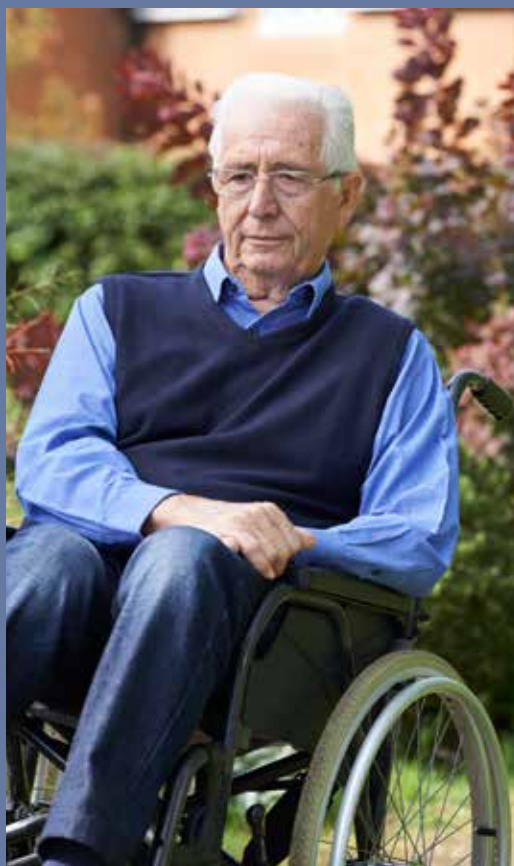
I can't go out in my garden

#### Feelings

Sad, lonely, depressed

#### Behaviour

Does less and less



## How to address this:

**1. Individually** – Focusing on what he can do rather than what he can't do e.g. Gardening activities that can be done from a seated position:

- Planting window boxes/propagator
- Planting tubs
- Operating a small greenhouse with a smaller array of vegetables/fruit

**2. Additional support coming to the house:**

- Employing someone to tend the garden and support Bob with tasks he can continue to enjoy thus also increasing social contact
- Consider whether Bob can offer others some of his knowledge and experience in return for support with his garden.

**3. Engaging in interest groups locally**

- Joining a gardening group via the U3A/visiting local gardens/garden centres
- Getting involved with Men's Sheds
- Attending day centre and providing input into day centre garden

**4. Volunteering**

- Becoming involved in local gardening projects where Bob can share his knowledge of gardening methods with others.



Take some time to consider some activities that used to interest you and write them down here:

### Activities that I am interested in

Now consider what you are still able to do with regard to that activity or who you may be able to ask for support:

### What am I still able to do/who can help

**Remember:** Throughout life, we have to adapt and change in response to new circumstances. Just because we are unable to do things exactly as we used to doesn't mean we can't still get enjoyment from similar or adapted activities.

## Anxiety

Feeling anxious about going somewhere new or meeting new people is very common. Occasionally, however, this anxiety will prevent us from making positive changes in our lives.

Symptoms of anxiety may include:

- Heart beating faster
- Sweating not due to heat
- Lightheaded or dizziness
- Fear of the worst happening
- Shaking
- Stomach pains
- Chest tightening
- Avoiding doing things

*"I am feeling lonely but the thought of going somewhere new or joining a group makes me feel really nervous and worried. I feel safer in my own home but I know this isn't helping my loneliness."*

## Managing symptoms of anxiety

There are several ways to manage these symptoms. These include:

**Breathing exercises:** when we feel anxious, our breathing quickens which increases the amount of oxygen going to our brain which in turn can make us feel dizzy or faint. Slowing down and controlling our breathing can help us feel calmer or more in control.

## Controlled breathing exercise

Work out a stable breathing rhythm. Perhaps try to breathe in for three seconds, hold this breathe for two seconds, and then breathe out for three seconds. It can be helpful to count as you do this e.g.

**IN 1 - 2 - 3    HOLD 1 - 2    OUT 1 - 2 - 3**

## Relaxation

It is important to make time to relax and do activities that are enjoyable. This can help to reduce your anxiety levels by calming the body and mind. It can also help you to sleep better.

Relaxation can involve doing something that you enjoy. Good examples might be reading a book or having a bath. Exercise is also particularly effective at helping us to relax. What you do does not really matter. Try to choose something that you will look forward to and that gives you a break. Taking part in an activity that you enjoy will also give you less time to spend worrying. Here is a list of activities that might help you to relax.

Suggestions:

- Do some exercise (e.g. swim, walk)
- Read a book
- Watch your favourite TV show
- Do something creative (e.g. draw, paint)
- Have a bath



Try to add some of your own ideas into the box below. You will know what works best for you.

### My relaxation ideas



## Overcoming avoidance

If we avoid the situation that brings on symptoms of anxiety, we may feel an initial sense of relief. However, this relief will only be in the short term. Avoiding the situation means we never get the opportunity to learn that it is OK or is even enjoyable. We may miss out on really positive experiences because of this avoidance in the face of anxiety.

**Remember** it is natural to be nervous and anxious about trying something new. The important thing is to remind yourself is that if you don't try it, you will never know if it was something that could have made a positive difference in your life. The more we do something, the easier it usually gets.

For more information on managing anxiety, please go to [www.moodjuice.scot.nhs.uk](http://www.moodjuice.scot.nhs.uk)

### Do you remember.....the first day of a new job?

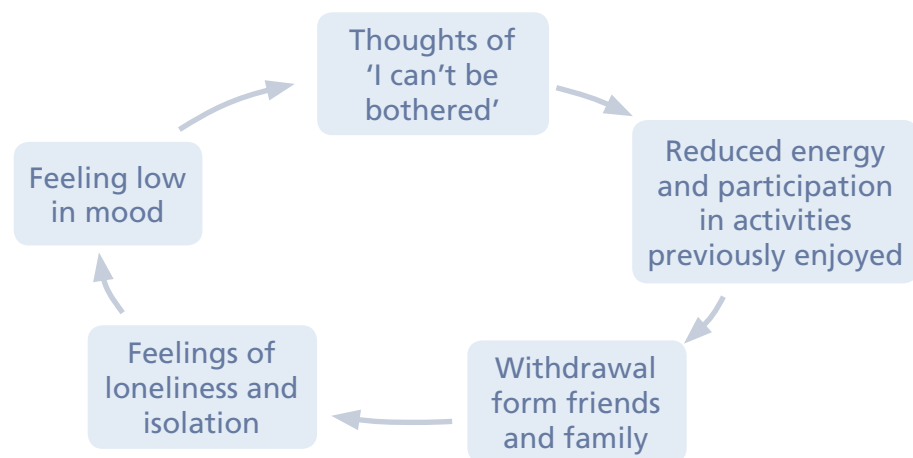
1. How did you feel?
2. What were you thinking?
3. What did you do?
4. Did going to the new job get easier or harder as the days passed?

**Now think...if you had avoided going to the new job what would have happened?**



## Low mood/depression

When we feel low in mood or depressed our motivation to do things can be affected. This can lead to us withdrawing from activities we used to enjoy, and we can begin to avoid friends and family. This can then lead to increased feelings of loneliness and isolation, and we can end up in a vicious cycle of low mood and loneliness:



Often when feeling depressed, a common thought is, 'I will do more when I feel better'. This can run the risk of things never changing as we may never feel really up to doing something, particularly when we are depressed.

Depression can result in us reducing the time we spend in activities that are meaningful and fulfilling to us. These activities will be different for all of us, so it is important to consider which activities are important to you and give you a sense of value, focus and enjoyment.

**Consider some of the activities you enjoy or may have enjoyed in the past or new activities which you might like to try.**

## Activities of interest that I enjoy or that I might enjoy

A large empty rectangular box intended for the user to list activities of interest that they enjoy or might enjoy.

Breaking activities down into manageable steps can be a helpful starting point as sometimes the thought of going back to doing something you haven't done for a long time might feel overwhelming.

An example of this might be knitting which is currently very popular amongst people of all ages:



**Step 1: Find knitting needles** – locate old ones/borrow some/ buy new ones (tip – charity shops often have a range of knitting needles available for sale)

**Step 2: Decide on a pattern** – or even knit a square; the Red Cross regularly look for donations of knitted squares to make blankets for people in need.

**Step 3: Pick wool** – from existing supplies/again wool is available to buy in many charity shops

**Step 4: Plan when to start knitting** and remember to start small e.g. I will knit for ten minutes on Tuesday morning

**Step 5: Join a local knitting group** - there are a number of knitting groups in Dumfries and Galloway who are always looking for new members

## Have a go at breaking down one of your own examples from the box above:

Making a plan for activities to do across the week can also be helpful. Consider activities that are going to address some of your feelings of loneliness.

**Remember** to break things down into small steps. If it feels too overwhelming to plan the whole week at once, try planning just one or two days at a time.

### My weekly planner

	Morning	Afternoon	Evening
Monday			
Tuesday			
Wednesday			
Thursday			
Friday			
Saturday			
Sunday			

**Remember** when we are feeling down or depressed we start to withdraw from the activities and people that are likely to help our mood improve. Doing something rather than nothing is likely to have a positive effect on our mood and pave the way to helping us re-engage in the local community which will reduce our feelings of loneliness and social isolation.

For further information on how to overcome depression and low mood go online to: [www.moodjuice.scot.nhs.uk](http://www.moodjuice.scot.nhs.uk)

## WHAT NEXT? HOW TO PUT THIS ADVICE INTO PRACTICE.

If you have read this guide and recognised that some or all of it might be helpful to you, it's now important to think about how you could put some of these ideas into practice.

### Planning

Planning can be a very important tool in helping us to organise and motivate ourselves, particularly when we are making changes in our life. Writing things down as part of this planning not only helps us stay organised, it also helps remind us of the commitment we have made to our self to carry out that activity.

Use the space below to plan out what you would like to do and how you will do it.

Goal	What action do I need to take?	When will I do it?
e.g. Find out about what is on in my community	Make a trip to local library; ask staff there to assist with finding information on the internet; make a note of relevant information	Tuesday afternoon

Goal	What action do I need to take?	When will I do it?

You might also find it helpful to use a diary or a planner (like the one below) to help you keep track of the things you plan to do. This not only helps you remember the activities you would like to do, but it also helps you spot any unhelpful patterns in your week, so you can find solutions to these e.g.

*"Thursday and Friday are always quieter days when there isn't so much happening, and there is no one to speak to. I could look for a group that I would be interested in that happens on a Thursday or Friday."*



	Morning	Afternoon	Evening
Monday			
Tuesday			
Wednesday			
Thursday			
Friday			
Saturday			
Sunday			

## MOTIVATION

### Write it down

Write down what you plan to do (why not use the planner above) and keep it somewhere you will see it. Try sticking it on the fridge or keeping it on the coffee table so you can remind yourself about what you plan to do and why you are doing it.

### Make a commitment

Make a commitment to yourself to carry out your activity at the time you said you would. If you had agreed to meet someone else at a particular time and place, you would make sure you were there. Treat a commitment to yourself in just the same way and prioritise your plans.

### Recognise the impact

Keeping a record of what you do and how it makes you feel can help you understand which activities give you the most benefit. Try rating how you are feeling out of 10 before and after each activity and notice if there is a change. When you can see that an activity makes you feel better, this can help encourage you to do more of it.

### Reward yourself

Recognise that making changes like these takes effort and reward yourself for making that effort. For example, you might decide that if you go to the library to find out about local opportunities, you'll do something you enjoy, such as having a browse in the shops, on the way home. Or perhaps you could plan that if you go along to a few meetings of a group you are interested in, then you will treat yourself to a coffee and a slice of cake with some of the other members after the meeting.

## EVALUATION

We hope you have found this self-help guide useful. We would really appreciate your feedback on it. This will help us to improve it for use by others in the future. We also hope to examine how effective this guide is at helping people to reduce their feelings of loneliness.

If you are willing to help us in this evaluation, please complete the form below and return it to your GP surgery or to Dr Fionnuala Edgar, Clinical Psychologist, Department of Psychology, Cree West, Crichton Hall, Dumfries, DG1 4TG.

Please tick the answers which apply to you

### How did you access this guide?

From my GP

From a practice or district nurse

From a Healthy Connections worker

Other (please specify)

### What was your score on the 'Am I lonely?' questionnaire (page 3) before you began using this workbook?

Score

### How much of the information in this guide was helpful to you?

All / most of it was useful

Quite a lot of it was useful

Some of it was useful

Not very much of it was useful

None of it was useful

Do you have any suggestions as to how this guide could be improved or any other comments you would like to make about it?

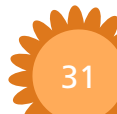
We would like to contact you at the end of this project to ask you a few questions about how useful you found this guide. If you would be happy for us to contact you by telephone please tick the box below and provide us with your contact details.

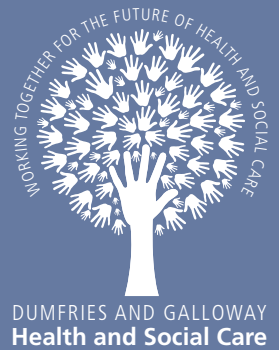
I consent to be contacted for a brief telephone follow up as part of the Loneliness project

Name

Telephone

Signed





This guide was produced by the Older Adult Service, Department of Psychology, NHS Dumfries and Galloway.

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