

WHEN ^{THEY}
GET OLDER
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Helping your parents to overcome loneliness.

NO. 1 IN A SERIES OF
GUIDES FROM
WHEN THEY GET OLDER



Helping your parents to overcome loneliness.

Right now it's almost cool to be lonely. Drop loneliness into a search engine and you'll come up with all sorts of celebrities claiming that fame, riches and constantly being in the public eye have left them feeling lonely.

Beneath the chatter though, there's a real problem right through society. Conferences, research, initiatives and campaigns all actively seeking to reduce loneliness and the toll it takes on people's lives.

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WE ONLY NOTICE HOW
MUCH OUR PARENTS ARE
DRINKING, EATING OR
EXERCISING WHEN WE'RE
ACTUALLY PRESENT.

Why is loneliness an issue for our parents - and therefore for us?

Loneliness is not just about spending more time alone than is comfortable. It's about all the knock-on effects too. Loneliness can lead to depression, and with that comes ill health. That's the view of Professor Ian Philp, an advisor to the World Health Organisation and an expert on healthy ageing and the care of older people, speaking on the ITV programme [The World Tonight](#) recently. It's a concern that's echoed by other experts.

For older people, depression brought on by loneliness can lead to a worrying lack of interest in looking after themselves. Loss of appetite means little effort is made to prepare meals. Not eating can eventually lead to malnutrition, even in people who have the wherewithal to eat well. Once an older person becomes weaker through poor diet, they are much more vulnerable to all manner of ills.

In other cases, people may battle loneliness through an extra dram of whisky a night, or a couple of glasses of wine. We've already seen [reports](#) that say the middle classes are drinking more while their lives are full and busy. Imagine the temptation once you're alone and needing to fill the void.

We only notice how much our parents are drinking, eating or exercising when we're actually present, so we don't necessarily know how much loneliness is affecting them.

Telling our parents that they need to eat more, drink less or cheer up is challenging the symptoms rather than the causes. If we want to help our parents stay reasonably fit and contented, we need to address the issue of loneliness, and preferably before it becomes a real problem.

While we're about it, we need to think about ourselves too. Being a long-term support for elderly and ailing parents can be quite a lonely role, especially if it means regular solo dashes back home or to hospitals and care facilities.



A DIFFICULT MILESTONE
FOR ANY PARENT IS
HAVING TO GIVE UP
PERSONAL TRANSPORT.

How does loneliness happen?

These are a few of the ways that loneliness can creep up on an ageing parent. They make a gloomy read when taken altogether, but they won't all happen to everyone.

We're talking about issues that arise over many years. The challenges of a 65-year-old won't be the same as the worries of an 80-year-old. The idea with highlighting the possibilities is to mitigate their effects by talking and planning in advance, or at least being aware of what might be going on later in life. Sometimes your parents aren't lonely and never will be – but the older they get the more they may watch what's happening to friends and neighbours and worry about it for themselves.

So let's start at the beginning. Loneliness can set in on retirement. If your parent has been immersed in their business to the exclusion of outside interests, they are going to find retirement a serious jolt. The routine's gone, the buzz has gone, and now they have to make an effort to find and spend time with people with whom they share some common interests. Think long-term maternity leave without a baby to keep you busy and no possibility of return to "normal" life.

Many people dream of moving away on retirement – off to the coast, back to their roots, or even abroad to the sun. It might mean a wonderful location, but uprooting from everything and everyone that's familiar to a new place and new people can be tougher than expected. If your parents decide to go for that cottage in the country with the roses round the door, they may find themselves increasingly isolated as they get older, receiving fewer visitors and inevitably having to give up the car. Public transport? Probably not.

Wherever they are, a key difficult milestone for any parent is having to give up personal transport. There comes a time for most people when they decide to give up driving – and some are forced to do so, some by failing eyesight or a failed re-test. Once that happens, they're reliant on their own legs or lifts from other people. Neither of those is ideal, and having to arrange transport certainly takes the spontaneity out of going out. If they can't make it further than the end of the road on their own, that's a whole life that disappears. No more popping to the shops or the garden centre, no more clubs, swimming or watching the local rugby. Giving up outside activities for one reason or another can also mean less time with other people.

The obvious cause of loneliness is suddenly finding yourself on your own. Losing a partner could happen at any time. Apart from the grief, that's a whole lifetime of daily routines that disappear. Women appear to cope better with widowhood than men. Many men of our parents' generation have to face daily chores for themselves for the

first time – learning to cook, keeping the house reasonably clean, doing the shopping. Men are also less likely to tell anyone that they're lonely – it's the stiff upper lip approach. Research carried out by the [WRVS](#) shows that 190,000 British men suffer from a lack of social contact, and more than a third spend over 12 hours alone every, single day.

A partner can be lost in other ways than through death. There's the emotional loneliness of living with a partner who can no longer give back. If one parent is caring for a partner, they may seem to have day-to-day company, but it's not going to give them everything they need – stimulating conversation, laughter, shared activities. It can be far lonelier living with someone who can't get about or even communicate than living on your own.

At the same time, the people who parents would swap visits with are disappearing. The whole generation is having to face being trapped in the house, moving into care homes, or passing on.



OUR TOP TIP IS PICK UP
THE PHONE AND CALL FOR
5 - 10 MINUTES A DAY.

What can you do about your parents' loneliness?

The good news is that 89% of those who said in the WRVS survey that they felt lonely also reported that they feel better after seeing family and friends.

Your parents are lucky. They have you. However infrequently you can visit, at least you can keep in touch and just make conversation. But what else can you do?

Move in together – or at least closer

For some parents the ideal answer is to move in with their offspring, or vice versa. We have to be practical, and that is not going to work in many cases. We may not have the space. We may not have the time to care for someone who's in growing need of support. If we're really honest, we may not have the desire. Even if we've always got on well from a distance, proximity and age can make a relationship very difficult. Just because blood ties might make us more tolerant to differences in opinions and lifestyles, it would be unreasonable to expect everyone in the family unit to happily accept the situation.

That said, we do read very positive stories of three generations living under one roof. Look closer though, and the chances are the older generation are still fit and active, and the motivation is pure economics.

Alternatively, we could look at moving our parents to be closer at

hand. Moving would be a good opportunity to downsize, have a more manageable home – possibly in a new community building - and release some capital. The upside for everyone is proximity. The downside is that our parents would leave behind a great deal, especially if they've been in the same house for some time, and would be possibly become much more dependent on us for company.

Set a contact routine

If we talk to our parents and all agree to leave them where they know, then there are still many actions we can take to relieve the loneliness.

Visit or call - it's all human contact. We may not be able to visit very often, but when we do, why not make the most of it? If we've got a whole day or more, then giving the house a clean while we're there is fine. But if we've only got a couple of hours, we could find someone else to do housework, and then we can give our parent the same quality time we're encouraged to give children.

We can go out somewhere together, and find the space to chat. We can hit the shops if that's what's needed, but it doesn't have to be just about food shopping. How about a visit to M&S to stock up on shirts and jumpers? Or if we know what our parent likes, we can even order the food or clothes online and find something more exciting to do in person. Join the [National Trust](#), the [RHS](#), or one of the regional heritage organisations and take a stroll followed by an almost certainly good bowl of soup. Garden centre restaurants are a favourite venue and often offer discounts for seniors as well as seasonal shop browsing.

Tip. As soon as you know for sure you'll be visiting, put the date in your parent's diary. It's something they can look forward to during the boring days in the run up to your visit. Make sure it's a date you can keep though – cancelling at the last minute is not a good plan.

Make that call – our favourite tip

If we can't get there very often, why not make a five or ten-minute call every day? Calling regularly will mean shorter conversations, but it's just about making the contact, and having our parent know that at a set point in the day they are going to talk to someone.

Tip. Don't call during Countdown. There'll be other markers in the day too that your parents are likely to want to adhere to as they get older. And they'll probably be pleased if you call at a regular time too, so it's something they can look forward to in the routine of the day.

Getting online is a really good idea for parents. Even if they're not wildly Internet savvy, could they learn the basics? [Skype](#) is a fantastic way to create a link across distances, and it's stable enough these days to enjoy a decent videoconference. Messaging and email lets us use odd moments at home or work to check in with our parents. A [recent report from Age UK](#) found that over a quarter of people aged 65+ who admitted to feeling lonely said that keeping in contact with family and friends via the web helped relieve feelings of isolation.

Alternatively, how about some online gaming with parents? Something like Scrabble or Chess rather than "shoot 'em up" games perhaps.



WE CAN INVESTIGATE
CREATING A SOCIAL
LIFE FOR YOUR PARENT
OUTSIDE THE HOME.

What can you do that's not all about you?

Brothers and sisters, sons and daughters

Our siblings can theoretically get involved too. There is even [software available](#) to help plan your support activities.

Tip. Want to fall out with family? One of the fastest ways is to try telling siblings what they should be doing, or becoming resentful because they haven't thought of it themselves. A good plan is to just decide what you can do and leave others to make up their own minds.

There's the possibility of suggesting that children of driving age visit their grandparents on the odd occasion. Some will happily. Others will be appalled at the idea. Much depends on how great a relationship they have built with their grandparents and whether they have been involved in their lives up to this point.

If nothing else, our siblings or children could take on some visiting and making that call for a week or two while we take a holiday. They can be an emergency contact in that time too, which will help your parent to feel more secure. If we have no immediate family that can help, then we have to look further afield for holiday support – our parents' friends and neighbours perhaps.

Getting out to meet people

We can investigate creating a social life for your parent outside the home. The success of this approach very much depends on our parent's personality and their willingness to try something new. If they've not been a mixer so far in their lives, going out to lunches and joining clubs may not do it for them.

Tip. Don't expect to come up with a good idea and have your parent just fall in with it. They have known better than you from the moment you were born and are unlikely to accept easily anything that smacks of you telling them what to do.

If our parents are fit and active, there are groups such as the [Rotary Club](#) and other voluntary organisations who would welcome their presence. They could volunteer to help at local schools - [Age UK](#) has plenty of information about joining local groups. There's also the University of the Third Age ([UA3](#)) for cerebral activities.

There are plenty of opportunities in many areas to join others in keeping active. The local leisure centre may have bowls groups, for example, and more gentle exercise classes. Older people may be eligible for low-cost membership – check with their doctor's surgery.

Some councils run walking programmes in the local beauty spots that aren't too arduous. They should be on the appropriate web site.

Local libraries continue to be a source of knowledge about local activities – check their noticeboards when you're next in the vicinity. Local papers up and down the country are also a rich source of information about local charities and befriending groups.

Can social workers and doctors help? [Esther Rantzen](#) has recently been on the campaign trail asking GPs to support her charity to reduce loneliness for older people. Social care workers might also provide pointers to local groups.

There are plenty of day centres available where older people can get a good lunch and some company. Be prepared for resistance to this idea. Even though many cater for people aged 50 upwards, there's the feeling that this is for oldies – and none of us want to feel like we've been categorised that way.

The [WRVS](#) and other organisations run social clubs, community centres, lunch clubs, community transport and befriending. [The National Association of Care Catering](#) is involved in setting up Luncheon Clubs and community meals services. There are a host of other groups, many local, such as [Contact the Elderly](#) organising get-togethers, tea parties and much more.

Travelling safely

Getting to these events or anywhere, in fact, can become an issue when the car's no longer available. While travel services are under pressure, it's still possible to find free bus passes for senior citizens and lower cost rail travel. Contact your local authority to find out about the transport options in your area.

Sometimes, though, going out on public transport seems daunting. There's getting to and from the station or the bus stop, in all sorts of weather, and hurdles like steps to negotiate. Despite rules and regulations, there's the fear that transport staff won't make allowances for the slow, infirm, or hard of hearing or sight. Older people can also have a fear of being jostled or even mugged. A [recent report](#) found that elderly people were afraid of falling when they went out. They're not necessarily silly fears, so it's good to be understanding about them.

If a parent is worried about public transport, an option might be to set up an account with a local, reliable taxi firm. They could be called upon to get a parent to local groups as well as the doctor, dentist, chiropodist, hairdresser – wherever they want to go.

Alternatively there are local groups providing low cost transport for older people. This might be a minibus service or even a one-to-one lift service provided by volunteers. It might be possible to overcome the "I'm not a charity case" reaction by suggesting that parents pay for the petrol, even if not asked to do so. Try searching for Dial a Ride, community transport or volunteer car drivers. [The Red Cross](#) offers a service provided by volunteers around the country.

[The Elderly Accommodation Counsel](#) has a directory that might be a useful starting point for investigating other local services.

Staying in and meeting people

Arranging regular visitors could help. A carefully chosen gardener or cleaner, for example, provides some structure for the week without it appearing to be an act of charity. The obstacles are that our parent might not want to accept practical help, and if they do they might not be able to afford it themselves. It's also really important to ensure that the people hired are trustworthy, so personal recommendations from friends and local charities are strongly recommended.

Tip. Don't assume that people who have come to do a job, from cleaning to changing dressings or delivering a meal, will stay for any longer than it takes to get the job done. Real communication has to come from elsewhere.

For times when we and our family really can't visit, it might be worth looking at the national and local befriending schemes that are springing up as part of the drive to reduce loneliness. These organisations might be able to provide a visitor in person, or even a phone call service. It's also worth checking what national and local campaigns are doing to help end loneliness, such as the [Campaign to End Loneliness](#).

Staying in and keeping a pet

If your parent enjoys the company of animals, then keeping a pet has been shown to have all sort of mental, emotional and physical health benefits. They're a source of interest, you can talk to them without ever getting into an argument, and they offer unconditional love. Fitter and recuperating parents will benefit from exercising a dog, say, while [research](#) has found that the fragile elderly can need less homecare if they have a pet for company.

On the other hand, pets can be expensive. It's not just food, but also the cost of pet health insurance which will grow year after year. What about kennel or house sitter expenses, for example, or the cost of a dog walker if your parent can't always do it themselves? Will you be covering the cost of the pet, or will it be eating into their pension?

Your parent may also have a nagging worry about what will happen to their pet if they can no longer look after them. Will family or friends be able to take them on? If your parent is heading for a nursing home, it's possible that they can take their pet with them, as long as it's reasonably small and continent. Sheltered housing might be more of a problem – some are still overburdened by the anxieties of health and safety issues. If all else fails there are organisations like the [Cinammon Trust](#) which will ensure that the pet continues to be cared for.

The number one question has to be – would you parent enjoy a pet? And number two - who would cover the cost?



MEDITATION CAN HELP
TO COMBAT LONELINESS.

Helping our parents to help themselves

There's a school of thought that says meditation can help to combat loneliness. A [study](#) published in the journal Brain, Behavior and Immunity suggested that eight weeks of training in mindfulness can help to decrease loneliness.

There was a flurry of correspondence in [a national paper](#) recently from mostly older men who recommended finding a new partner as the answer to loneliness. Potentially tongue-in-cheek in many cases, the letters do point to the possibility that a widowed parent doesn't have to resign themselves to being alone forever. Knowing that you wouldn't disapprove if they formed another relationship might help them should the possibility arise.

Meanwhile, back on the Internet, there are groups such as the [Drop By](#) forum, specifically focused on the senior age group that are there simply to provide a forum for chat about anything.



LONELY PEOPLE CAN
BECOME DEPRESSED
AND LOSE INTEREST IN
COOKING AND EATING.

Avoiding malnutrition

As we said at the beginning of this guide, lonely people can become depressed and lose interest in cooking and eating. This might be especially true of those for whom preparing food has not been a life-long habit. Without eating nutritious food regularly, everyone is more likely to suffer ill health, and older people are potentially more susceptible.

If all the socialising choices don't appeal, then at the minimum it's good to make sure our parent is eating well. It's treating the symptom rather than the cause in some ways, but eating well is important for a reasonable lifestyle and an increasingly fragile body.

If a parent doesn't want to or can't go out to eat socially, then stocking up the fridge and the freezer is the next alternative. A good-sized freezer can hold at least a couple of week's worth of ready meals together with frozen vegetables. And any home-cooked food may be greatly appreciated. It's a good idea to make sure the cooking instructions are very simple and in large, clear writing. If ready-made meals carry very small type, it could be worth rewriting the key instructions on a large sticker on the front.

Including treats like cakes or tarts in the freezer may encourage a parent to invite friends in for tea as they will have something worthwhile to offer.

Tip. Many of our parents come from an era when it was outrageous to waste food. To ensure they don't keep food beyond a healthy date, use the same stock rotation that food stores do. Bring the oldest food to the front, so it gets used first. And encourage your parents, if they're doing the shopping, to pick out the food at the back of the shelf, that's likely to have a longer use-by date.

Shopping deliveries from supermarkets are an option, but they all have delivery charges, and one person living alone doesn't need that much shopping.

If your parent really doesn't want to cook, then meal deliveries can provide nutritious food and a brief social encounter. [The local council and voluntary groups](#) provide some services, and there are plenty of private providers ready to deliver. [The National Association of Care Caterers](#) has been making a noise with its No One Should Go Hungry campaign to ensure that nutritious meals are easily delivered to the housebound.



MAKE TIME FOR YOUR
OWN NEEDS TOO. EAT
PROPERLY, TAKE EXERCISE,
SEE FRIENDS.

Dealing with our own loneliness

If we're honest, visiting our parents to help them out can be a bit boring. And sometimes, as they become frailer and maybe start to suffer from major difficulties, it can be frightening too.

It's hard to enjoy a solo trip to a nursing home, for example, to watch our parent shrinking away in an armchair.

And yet we often choose not to share the anxiety with our families and friends, because we don't want to upset them, or even bore them with the same old, same old, week after week.

That leaves us feeling lonely too. What's to be done about it?

There are forums that we can join to discuss practical and emotional matters, such as the [Alzheimer's Society Talking Point](#) and [The Stroke Association](#). [Patient.co.uk](#) publishes a list of support groups, some of which may be helpful.

Tip. Be aware that sometimes these forums can seem full of people who are better and nobler than you. That's probably because you're tired and feeling bad about not doing enough. Try it to see how you feel – you'll almost certainly find support.

Make time for your own needs too. Eat properly, take exercise, see friends. Help your family to understand why they might not be getting the attention they have come to expect.

We can quietly put our family and friends on a rota, so we get to talk about what's getting us down, but not to any one person for too long. We can share the pain with friends in similar situations and all feel better for it. There is an opportunity here for our partners and adult children to support us while we support our parents. A bar of chocolate, a bottle of wine and a listening ear for half an hour makes a huge amount of difference.

OUR TOP TIPS FOR OVERCOMING LONELINESS

- » **Say when you're going to call or visit, and then keep to it**
- » **Research options for getting out of the house and make suggestions**
- » **Avoid pointless nagging to eat more, drink less and generally cheer up**
- » **Keep family in touch with what's happening, so they can volunteer to help**
- » **Tread a fine line between organising and being plain bossy**
- » **Look after yourself too**

Did you find the information in this guide helpful? Perhaps you've got some great tips for helping parents cope with loneliness that we haven't included. Have your say and discover more helpful advice at [WhenWeGetOlder.org](https://www.whentheygetolder.org) or follow us on [Twitter](#) and [Facebook](#) by searching WhenTheyGetOlder.