

LESSONS FROM

The town that cured loneliness

When one Somerset town set out to bring the community together, hospital admissions miraculously dropped. Is this the proof we need that love and friendship are the best medicine?

When Dr Julian Abel heard that a Somerset town just a few miles from his house had set out to 'cure loneliness' among its residents, he knew he had to learn more.

Many years as an NHS consultant in palliative care had brought home to him the importance of connection. There's a mass of evidence to show that social relationships are the key to a longer, healthier life. 'They are more powerful than nearly all the medications we take, and more effective than giving up smoking and drinking or taking up diet and exercise,' he says. 'Friendship and community, people you know and love in the places you know and love, are the most powerful therapeutics we have.'

He was astonished to discover that a unique ten-year experiment in Frome – a historic market town that is home to a thriving independent arts and food scene – seemed to be proving this many times over. Since the launch of the project in 2013, which set out to transform healthcare through community support and connection, hospital admissions had dropped by 14% over four years, despite rising by 29% across Somerset. Even through Covid, hospital admissions in Frome remained lower than the rest of the country.

Dr Abel is now helping other towns and cities learn the lessons from Frome and start their own projects to combat loneliness. There's nothing particularly special about Frome, he stresses: 'It could be any town; it could be your town. This is something you can do anywhere in the world.' He has been approached by communities as far afield as Colombia, the USA and Sweden.

Yet it's no easy task, given that we live in a society that seems structured to keep people apart: we move from one side of the country to another; we shop and socialise online; many now work from home; and for large chunks

by
ANNA
MOORE

**Friendly
Frome**
Dr Helen
Kingston
(below) and
her team
turned Frome
(right) into
a social hub



of 2020 and 2021, we were legally required to isolate. A report by the Campaign to End Loneliness found that the number of people in the UK feeling chronically lonely increased by almost a million during the pandemic. Older people are especially vulnerable. More than half of those aged over 85, and over a third of those aged between 75 and 85, live alone and many find Christmas the most challenging time of all. Half a million older people regularly go at least five or six days without speaking to anyone at all.

This was something that Frome GP Dr Helen Kingston was determined to change. In 2013, she received funding to launch a radical project called 'Compassionate Frome'. One of the first steps was to build a website listing all the community resources in the region. There were hundreds of social groups and support groups, as there are everywhere, but many people didn't know about them. The directory has more than 50 categories, such as 'nature', 'exercise', 'pets', and 'older people' so users can find their area of interest.

Dr Kingston's team launched 'talking cafes' – weekly drop-ins at a local cafe where you can meet new people – as well as a 'talking bench'. There is farm volunteering, gardening groups, 'knit and knatter', plus 'men's sheds' where men gather in a barn to make and mend.

Next, they recruited and trained 700 local volunteers, including hairdressers, taxi drivers and waitresses, to act as 'community connectors'. Their role was to tell customers and neighbours what was available and what might be relevant to them. If each community connector had 20 such conversations a year, it led to a total of 14,000 – enough to make an impact in a town of just under 27,000 people. On top of this came a team of professional 'health communicators' who helped people manage both multiple and complex health conditions. The aim was that patients would no longer be treated in isolation, as a cluster of symptoms, but as a whole person.

'It's not just about connecting the lonely and isolated, it's about helping everyone develop positive relationships,' says Dr Abel, who was so impressed by what he saw in Frome, he co-wrote a book on it, *The* ➔

In harmony
A ladies' choir singing in Frome



Community matters
Dr Julian Abel is rolling out the Frome model across Somerset and into Wales

☛ *Compassion Project.* 'It's about knowing what people are interested in, what they can do and what they would like to do.' The results have been transformative.

With so many ways to connect, Frome is a thriving social hub all through the year. There are Sunday tea parties, summer parties, street parties and Christmas dinners. The health benefits over the first four years were overwhelming, and are continuing.

Precisely why loneliness is so toxic to our health isn't yet clear, but numerous studies have proved it. One famous review involving 300,000 people found that those with strong social relationships had a 50% lower chance of dying prematurely. Older people with one or two chronic diseases but high levels of social support do not have higher death rates than those who are 'disease-free'. Women who suffer heart attacks are three times more likely to die if they are lonely. What we do know is that loneliness can trigger inflammation, whereas oxytocin, the chemical released when we socialise, boosts the immune system and reduces blood pressure.

Dr Abel has been involved in rolling out the Frome model to other parts of Somerset, and into Wales. He's been working with Cardiff GP Dr Karen Pardy to set up a version in the south west of the city, an area with high deprivation and significant numbers of older people.

'A key part has been employing "wellbeing

connectors" who work with people, have a good conversation, ask "what matters to you?" and link them into the community,' says Dr Pardy. 'We have fantastic befriending services which changed to phone calls during the pandemic. There's a fantastic Grow project with a community garden, and at Christmas, everyone can gather to eat the produce.'

'At the surgery, we have developed multi-disciplinary teams that can get together for complex cases. It might include the GP, the community resource teams, wellbeing connectors and independent living services all working to figure out the best way to help someone.'

As in Frome, it's about looking after the whole person. 'As a GP, it used to be so frustrating to treat someone's symptoms in isolation,' adds Dr Pardy. 'People aren't just one medical problem. You need to look at their whole lives, the way they are feeling and how they are living. Now we have a room full of people to do that. One patient told me that we'd restored their faith in the NHS!' And just like Frome, Cardiff South West has seen a drop in hospital admissions. 'During the first year of the project there was a 4% fall in emergency hospital admissions compared to a 5-20% increase in other areas of the health board,' she says. 'In the over-75 age group, hospital admissions saw a 16% reduction.'

For Dr Abel, the message is clear: 'We're talking about love, laughter and friendship,' he says. 'We're talking about meaning and value in people's lives. The central issue is that kindness, compassion and connection is completely transformative. If it came in tablet form, it would be hailed as a wonder of modern medicine. By contrast, it's entirely free but offers heartening evidence that when human beings choose to make time for each other, the beneficial effects go far beyond the reach of naive optimism. People really should know about it.' ☛

HOW TO CONNECT WITH YOUR NEIGHBOURHOOD



1 Acts of compassion. 'The basis for good relationships is compassion,' says Dr Julian Abel. 'When we make a cup of tea or hold the door open for someone, we benefit more from the generosity of the giving than the recipient does, but they'll appreciate it as well.'

2 Think about small steps you can take to be more compassionate. Talk to neighbours. Ask how someone is and really mean it, really listen. If there is someone vulnerable and alone on your street, drop a note through their door, gently introducing yourself and asking if they'd like help. Do something to improve the environment in which you live, such as picking up litter or donating to a local food bank. If there's a street WhatsApp group, be part of it. If there isn't, start one.

3 Simply 'being with people' won't cure loneliness. You need positive connection and a sense of belonging, so find groups that follow your interests. Scour your local paper, community websites such as Nextdoor, and library or supermarket noticeboards.