How older people can use the internet to avoid loneliness

November 3 2015, by Dhruv Sharma

Credit: AI-generated image (disclaimer)

Placing someone in solitary confinement is usually seen as our most extreme forms of legally sanctioned punishment. And with good reason. Research suggests that loneliness can be as bad for your health as smoking [15 cigarettes a day](), because strong relationships reduce stress and encourage us to take better care of ourselves. As primate expert

Frans de Waal [put it](#): "Our bodies and minds are not designed for lonely lives. We become hopelessly depressed in the absence of human company and our health deteriorates."

Isn't it sad, then, that we often [come across statistics](#) suggesting that a million [older people](#) in the UK have not spoken to anyone for a month? And that [two fifths](#) of all older people (about 3m) say television is their main source of company?

Loneliness among the elderly is a growing problem and combating it is now a [local government priority](#) in the UK. As the [baby boomer generation](#) reaches retirement, we're facing a global "[silver tsunami](#)". This imminent surge in the older population is likely to increase the number of [lonely people](#), especially as baby boomers are more likely [to be divorced](#) than previous generations. We need better ways of understanding and dealing with this situation, in order to plan for the future.

Today we use a range of measures to try to prevent or alleviate age-related loneliness. Many of these are services such as weekly social groups, activity sessions, befriending services and home visits. By studying these services, my colleagues and I found that they predominantly follow a "business as usual" attitude when it comes to the growth of loneliness. [We found](#) that 77% of interventions appeared to be incremental, meaning that they were attempting to make improvements to existing services rather than introduce any radical new ideas.

It's time we started experimenting a bit more with new ways of addressing loneliness so we can understand their possible strengths and, more importantly, their limitations. In particular, the social networking aspect of the internet, which is more often accused of displacing traditional social interaction and isolating people, is creating ways of tackling loneliness by bringing together people whose paths would

otherwise never cross.

Running coaches

One such idea [is GoodGym](link). The principle is fairly simple: get fit by doing good. GoodGym connects keen runners or people who want to get fit, with things that need to be done in the community such as cleaning the community park or helping out a vulnerable person.

As with many fitness programmes, participants can connect with a "coach" who motivates the runner to commit to at least one weekly run. But the coaches aren't who you might expect: instead of buff personal trainers they are older people who are socially isolated. The volunteers run to an elderly person's home and then spend time keeping them company. They can also help their coaches out with day-to-day chores such as picking up a newspaper or groceries. This is a novel way of combating loneliness and social isolation among the elderly while encouraging fitness, a win-win situation.

If you [look closely](link), GoodGym is not directly aimed at reducing age-related loneliness. It is a way of keeping fit that happens to address the issue of loneliness and social isolation, as one of several ways of "doing good". But it does bring the two issues together so that they address each other's needs.

Friends who talk

Another idea that similarly matches lonely older people with others looking to improve themselves is the [CNA speaking exchange](link). The project was launched by an English language school and marketing agency and involves young students in Brazil speaking with the residents of a care home in America using video-calling software. The speaking

exchange gives the Brazilian students a chance to practice talking in English with native speakers of the language. Similarly the older people in the care home get to spend time talking to someone. To help the students improve, the video conversations are recorded, allowing teachers to review them.

Through this mutually beneficial dialogue, both parties learn about each other's cultures and address each other's needs of companionship. It is a novel way of delivering the known benefits of a befriending service that doesn't rely entirely on volunteers. And according to the charity AgeUK: "Befriending schemes have proved one of the more effective services for combating both isolation and loneliness, but they are best used in conjunction with other services."

Just like GoodGym, the exchange combines two problems to act as solutions to each other. This idea of "creative recombination" of existing products, services, places, knowledge and skills can lend a fresh perspective to a sector more used to incremental improvements.

This doesn't mean existing service providers like local authorities and charities always have to come up with fresh, radical measures. They can research and work with other innovators and entrepreneurs who might have a better grip on the potential of new technologies. And they can look out for interesting local initiatives such as the ones discussed that could be replicated or repurposed to meet the changing needs of the growing elderly population in different settings.

This story is published courtesy of The Conversation *(under Creative Commons-Attribution/No derivatives).*

Source: The Conversation