

Expert encourages people to 'be a little bold' to improve social experiences and wellbeing

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Singing in a choir can combat loneliness, according to the Centre for Loneliness Studies at the University of Sheffield.

Put to the test in a new BBC series called 'Meet the Street' (starting on Monday 16 December on BBC One at 9.15am), people from all walks of life will be brought together to see how the shared experience of singing can help them overcome the isolation of modern life.

The choir members talk about the impact social media has on their loneliness in the program, which will explore the science behind how we communicate. Dr. Chris Blackmore from the University of Sheffield will feature discussing the benefits, and potential pitfalls in using modern technology to help us connect to others.

"We know that singing in a choir is as good for us psychologically as playing in a team sport. We can benefit from [social interaction](#), [physical activity](#), pleasure, learning something new and the enhanced [social identity](#) that comes from being part of a team," said Dr. Blackmore.

But not everyone has the opportunity to join a choir or be present with others in such a way, and many people now rely on using social media to keep in touch with others, either near or far away.

"Some people find that the internet allows them to find and connect with particular interest groups, and this is particularly valuable for people who are geographically isolated, or who need support from a community of people with something in common, such as a medical condition or mental health problem," Dr. Blackmore added.

"Online interactions can help people to talk about difficult things, and this can be a real lifeline."

"However, thanks to [modern technology](#), we are increasingly able to live more physically isolated lives and for some there is the possibility that depending on social media for our social connections can increase our feelings of loneliness," he said.

Around 40 percent of the world's population use at least one social media platform¹. This popularity shows their value in helping us to engage with others, but there's a growing recognition that while digital connection is fine for "keeping in touch," it may not be the best way of developing deeper relationships.

It can also encourage negative behaviors like comparing ourselves to others, with research showing that too much of this "social comparison" is damaging and can lead to depression, or make existing problems worse.

Dr. Blackmore acknowledges that for some, making [social connections](#) can be difficult and daunting. "We can all be uncertain about what others think about us, and how we will be received, particularly when making new friends, or joining a new social club like a choir," he said.

"One of the most important things to remember is that this anxiety is normal—it's likely that everyone else who joined a group or social club probably felt the same, and some may still do. So being kind to yourself is really important—accepting that this is how you feel, but remembering that there are things you can do about it.

"Digital technologies have amazing potential to connect us to others, to be therapeutic and enhance our wellbeing, but for many people, online interactions are not an adequate replacement for spending face-to-face time with the people we know.

"So if you are finding yourself dissatisfied with all the online posting, you might want to take some time out and consider other ways of connecting with the people who matter to you this Christmas."

Making small changes to manage your social [media](#) usage can help you combat feelings of loneliness, and Dr. Blackmore shares some tips for the festive season:

- Take a risk, engage someone in conversation. Often when we feel lonely, we have a heightened expectation of rejection; in being a little bold and making the first move, you might be pleasantly surprised.
- If you realize you are avoiding human contact by using your phone, try putting it away and being open to interactions with others when in public. Small and seemingly innocuous interactions such as making eye contact, saying hello or "Merry Christmas" and being prepared to initiate or respond, such as chatting about the weather with a stranger, can all help us feel more connected.
- Think about how you feel after using [social media](#)—if you are concerned about its impact on your mental health, if it makes you feel hopeless or anxious, try limiting your usage to certain times or days. You can also block accounts or apps you know make you feel anxious, restless or angry. There are apps such as Space and OFFTIME that can help with this.
- If you are worried about not seeing people

in person, try arranging to see them face-to-face and see if this affects the relationship and helps your mood.

- If someone you know is feeling lonely, it's important not to just suggest they spend time with other people—people can still feel lonely in company or in a crowd, or it can make them feel worse if they feel unable to be with others. Why not ask what they might need, or suggest a shared experience that gives you a focus together, such as a visit to a Christmas market?

Provided by University of Sheffield

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