How nurses can help in the fight against loneliness

Older people’s charity Independent Age is asking nurses to recommend its services to those who feel lonely

One in five older people in the UK is in contact with friends, families or neighbours less than once a week. One in ten is in contact less than once a month. Yet research shows older people often find it difficult to admit they are lonely, even to family and friends, because they fear being judged or blamed, or don’t want to be a burden.

At older people’s charity Independent Age, people tell us they had delayed getting in touch with our friendship services because they had thought they were not lonely enough or that someone else could have benefited from the service more. But if people are reluctant to ask for help to overcome loneliness, it can be difficult to identify those who need support.

Many older people don’t know where to go for help when they feel lonely and often turn to professionals, such as nurses, GPs or even emergency department staff. They may not realise how many people experience feelings of loneliness and that support for them is available.

As front-line health professionals, nurses are in a unique position to help identify older people who may be lonely and help them to access services that can help them.

We would like to encourage more nurses and other health professionals to help identify lonely older people and, with their consent, refer them to our friendship services.

Loneliness can be difficult to spot, but there are indicators to look out for. An older person may be more vulnerable to experiencing loneliness if they:

- Live alone.
- Have only small networks of support or little contact with family and friends.
- Have lost partners within the past two years.
- Live on a low income.
- Have poor mental or physical health.
- Are unpaid carers.

The advice of independent, trusted professionals can appear more objective than that of family members or friends, and so often has more effect. Older people are also more likely to seek support from services recommended to them by professionals.

Volunteers

Independent Age’s friendship services involve a regular, friendly, social chat over the phone in all areas of the UK, as well as face-to-face visits in some areas of England, Scotland and Wales. Services are delivered by trained volunteers.

We want to help as many older people as possible to get the support they need, so referrals from nurses, with the consent of the older people concerned, are invaluable.

Having a volunteer for a regular telephone call or to meet up for a cup of tea and a chat can provide vital companionship for older people who are lonely, enabling them to feel more connected to their local community. Our aim is to help make loneliness a thing of the past.

We also have a free advice guide, If You’re Feeling Lonely, which provides information for older people on topics such as how to recognise why they might feel lonely, how to help themselves and the opportunities to look out for. Other useful free guides, such as Dealing with Depression and Coping with Bereavement, are available through the website or helpline.

Nurses who would like to make a referral to Independent Age’s friendship services can call 0800 319 6789. If You’re Feeling Lonely can be downloaded or ordered by calling 0800 319 6789. Further information, including details on how to recognise whether someone would benefit from Independent Age’s services, is available at tinyurl.com/ycreh3lm