A little imagination can help to combat loneliness

We may not be able to prevent the causes of loneliness, but nurses are well placed to help those in their care to access support

A minister for loneliness was appointed by the government in January to continue the work started by the late MP Jo Cox.

The Royal Hospital Chelsea’s social programme includes pottery classes, a choir and games such as draughts.

The Jo Cox Commission on Loneliness was set up by Ms Cox before her murder in June 2016 to raise awareness about the issue and find ways to overcome it. Now minister for loneliness Tracey Crouch will work with the commission, businesses and charities to develop a government strategy.

The facts about loneliness in the UK are stark:

» More than nine million adults are always or often lonely.
» Of people aged 65 and over, 3.6 million say that their main source of company is television.
» More than one third of people with dementia say that they lost friends after their diagnosis.
» Eight out of ten carers have felt lonely or isolated as a result of looking after loved ones.
» More than one in three people aged 75 or over say that feelings of loneliness are out of their control.

Nurses care for lonely older people every day: at home, in hospital wards, care homes and supported-living schemes. People are lonely for many reasons. They may lack the ability to advocate for themselves or ask others to do this for them, and so suffer in silence through pride or fear about admitting how they feel.

We may not be able to solve the reasons for every person’s loneliness, but nurses are well placed to advocate, direct and enable those in their care to access support to help combat the debilitating effects of social isolation.

The buoyant voluntary sector plays an important part in the reduction of loneliness, for example through befriending services offered by charities. Support groups for people with chronic diseases provide a sense of belonging, while cardiac rehabilitation programmes, dementia support groups and Lindsay Leg Clubs all help bring people together to share experiences over a cup of tea. Community services are well placed to assist in endeavours to address loneliness.

The Royal Hospital Chelsea has an outreach programme in which Chelsea Pensioners visit prisoners, support a homeless shelter and visit two veterans’ charities to help younger veterans.

Purpose and engagement

In the hospital, the social life includes pottery classes, a choir, walking group, a cinema club, evening entertainments and bingo. Classes such as calligraphy, conversational German and bridge are well attended. There are also many external trips and visits. An action-packed week provides purpose, engagement, the development of friendships, shared learning and enjoyment.

Despite the success of such activities, some people remain hidden away and we need to support them better to participate in community life. Even when activities are available we need to encourage and help people to join in; we cannot assume that everyone can do this for themselves.

Active ageing and imagination are vital to combat loneliness and create activities that mean people can come together for a common purpose. Care homes and supported-living schemes in the middle of our communities are well placed to assist with such activities.

Low-level interventions with low-level funding can have a positive health benefit. With a little imagination we could all do more to combat loneliness.

More information on the Jo Cox Commission on Loneliness is available at www.jocoxloneliness.org