

Belonging and Loneliness in Older Age: documenting the lived experiences of people from the Campbelltown Council area

Action research project

Snapshot of findings

September 2019

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for Campbelltown Council



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1 Introduction

There has been much in the media recently on the issue of loneliness, highlighting experiences of loneliness across the lifespan. This increased media coverage, has fostered a growing recognition of the research that identifies loneliness as a serious problem, with far reaching implications, not just for individuals, but also for wider communities.

The Active Ageing Advisory Committee at the Campbelltown City Council has a focus on strategies to promote wellbeing for older people. The Committee were aware of the broader research in this area, but were keen to learn more about the lived experience for older people living in their Council area. A project was initiated in April 2019 to commence this task. The project aimed to explore and document opposite ends of the experience, the lived experience of loneliness and belonging.

This project, whilst small-scale, invited older residents from the Campbelltown Council area to share their experience of belonging and loneliness and to propose initiatives that could strengthen and support social connection and a sense of belonging for older people.

This report presents the findings from interviews held during April – June and a stakeholder workshop in August, 2019.

Project scope

The action research project was jointly managed by Cathie Graham, Campbelltown Council and Ann Sharley, an external consultant and a small group of volunteer co-researchers with interviewing skills were recruited and completed the project team.

A community development response was a key objective from the outset of the project. The concept was to involve participants, including those experiencing or at risk of loneliness, in devising initiatives to strengthen social connections and sense of belonging.

The project aims were to:

- Gain an understanding of the lived experiences of loneliness and social isolation in later life for people living in Campbelltown.
- Identify the factors that influence and strengthen a sense of belonging for older residents.
- Consider ways that knowledge and networks gained from the project can benefit the Campbelltown community.
- Through this qualitative research process to raise awareness of these issues and to encourage discussion.
- Establish a small volunteer working group to take the ideas and suggestions to a next stage

Process

Face to face semi-structured and audio recorded interviews were held during the months of April-July.

The data was analysed in July, when all the interview transcripts were available to track themes and trends.

A vox pop event was held at the Campbelltown Public Library on 2 August to elicit views from older people visiting the library.

A workshop was held on 8 August to present draft findings from the series of interviews and to gain endorsement from those present to the accuracy of the draft findings and to recruit a small working group who would lead the community development aspect of the project.

Concepts and definitions that informed the project

While a formal literature review was not part of the project brief, a scan of Australian and International literature was undertaken during the establishment phase of the project. The following concepts and definitions regarding Belonging and Loneliness helped to shape the interview framework:

- A sense of belonging is a human need, just like the need for food and shelter.
- Social isolation is an objective state that differs from loneliness. Social isolation is defined in terms of the quantity of social relationships and contact. Generally, social isolation is a state of complete or near complete lack of contact between a person and society.
- In contrast, loneliness is a subjective experience, often deeply personal, and reflects a temporary or involuntary lack of contact with other humans.

The interview framework also drew on three established categories of loneliness:

Social loneliness

Perceived lack of quality relationships with a broader network of friends and family – people whom we see regularly and who provide emotional and instrumental support, although perhaps not as much as a spouse or best friend. (Elmer, EM, 2018).

Emotional/intimate loneliness

Perceived lack of a satisfying, meaningful relationship with a significant other – a close reliable attachment figure like a spouse or best friend who not only provides emotional support but who also affirms one's value as a person. (Elmer, EM, 2018)

Existential loneliness

One's fundamental, inescapable sense of aloneness in the universe: The loneliness felt when realising that nobody else in the world truly understands one's feelings, needs, or desires. (Bolmsjo, I. et al, 2018)

Recruitment of participants

Promotional information on the project, and invites to participate, were sent to a range of older people listed on various mailing lists, i.e. Council Neighbourhood BBQ attendees, Active Ageing survey respondents, Council volunteers, Council's CHSP (Commonwealth Home Support Program) Social Program for older residents. Plus, details and invites were also sent to the Salvation Army Campbelltown, Regional Allied Health Service, local interest groups, individuals and the LOVE Campbelltown group.

Profile of participants

Total number interviewed (31) Females (20) Males (11)
Number who live alone Females (9) Males (4)
Number who live with partner/others Females (11) Males (7)
Ages of those interviewed Female (6) under 64yrs (10) over 65yrs (4) over 75yrs Male (1) under 64yrs (2) over 65yrs (8) over 75 yrs
Period of time/years in the area • 50 + years – (5) people • 40+ years – (5) “ • 30+ years – (5) “ • 20+ years – (2) • 10+ years – (4) “ Under 10 years – (10) people

2 Findings

The key themes captured in the qualitative research are outlined below. For a more complete picture of these findings from the participant interviews, please refer to Appendix 1.

Belonging

Views on belonging

When asked about their views on 'belonging', participants described a sense of connection to others and to their local community; the importance to be known and valued; and to experience a sense of acceptance from friends and family.

I think it just means you've got somewhere you call home. You belong into a certain community. (Male, 70yrs)

Belonging is being valued and recognised, being able to fit in, feeling safe, secure and being able to participate. (Female, 57yrs)

You feel known, you feel seen, you feel heard. All those things. (Female, 58 yrs)

To belong is to feel that you're in the place you'd like to be in, with the person you'd like to be with. (Female, 81 yrs)

People's experience of belonging

The experience of belonging was varied. Some participants most familiar with the experience and for others, this sense of belonging was an elusive one.

I experience this with my family, because I have a really good relationship with my children. (Female, 80yrs)

It's been a fleeting experience, I suppose. Belonging to a husband, belonging to children. (Female, 69yrs)

When I gave up my job that was when I gave up belonging anywhere. Because I did feel that I belonged there and I had something in common with most of the people I worked with. I have never felt that I've belonged anywhere since. (Male, 81yrs)

Other participants talked about this experience as being two ways and emphasized the need to take action.

You contribute as well as receive. I think you need to get involved with things to belong, to feel at home. It's not going to happen unless you make the effort yourself. (Female, 76 yrs)

What people said made a difference

Participants identified a number of experiences that enhanced their sense of belonging. These included:

Having common goals, interests and shared values

Belonging is when I have a close connection with a place or with people and there's something in common between us....common goals, maybe common values.

(Female, 70yrs)

Relationships that are reciprocal

You start to feel belonging if they contact you. It's not about you contacting them, it's about building those relationships and that belonging, but it's also reciprocated....it works both ways, and then you feel like you belong. (Female, 58yrs)

Quality and depth of relationships

Having someone, one or two friends you can go to and feel like, you can just call them anytime. That you can rely on and know that they'll sit and listen to you.....and they would come to you, if they needed a shoulder to cry on. (Female, 72yrs)

Connection to neighbours

One of the reasons I feel that I belong is because I have a very good relationship with my neighbours. We're all independent, but the common thing we have, is that there's that caring attitude toward each other, and the helpfulness. (Female, 63yrs)

Inclusion

After moving to Athelstone, I have had a greater sense of belonging. Right after we moved in the council invited us to the neighbour day event. The flyer for the event mentioned halal food....this is something really great, especially the fact that we felt immediately included. We felt our differences are acknowledged, but at the same time we are being accepted despite our differences. (Female, 57 yrs)

Acknowledged and remembered

Some participants mentioned the significance of 'small gestures' which can make a big difference in people's daily lives, and this is certainly echoed by the wider research.

When I go to Mercatos, for example, you're remembered, you're known. If I'm feeling like a coffee I can go anywhere and have a coffee, but I'll go there because there's this sense of belonging and someone will know my face. (Female, 57yrs)

Belonging spaces

I can have that sense of belonging and connection in a park, where there are beautiful gum trees. (Female, 70 yrs)

The library is always busy. If you're feeling lonely, it's a good place to go, because people are all around you. (Female, 70yrs)

Sense of connection

Connection is the experience of oneness. It's having shared experiences, related feelings, or similar ideas. (Female, 67yrs)

I would say it's an affiliation of your spirit. I believe we all have a spirit. (Female, 81yrs)

Loneliness

Views on loneliness

Participants were most expressive when describing loneliness, even if loneliness was something that they had not experienced personally. Others talked about the experience of being surrounded by others, yet still feeling lonely. Conversely, that you can be alone and not experience loneliness. These wide-ranging views on loneliness included:

Not having any friends. No outlook. Nobody comes to visit you. No-one rings you up. Can't go out because you can't go out. Relying on people all the time to do things for you. Feeling guilty when you ask someone to do something because you cannot do it yourself. (Male, 78yrs)

Lonely is when you've got nowhere to turn.....as though you don't belong anywhere in particular.nobody's interested.....When you feel like you could drop dead and nobody would know. Sometimes I think I could die and nobody would come to my funeral. (Female, 72yrs)

You can be dreadfully lonely with a house full of people, within a marriage. You can be alone, but you can be perfectly fulfilled and not one bit lonely. (Female, 57yrs)

.....I think lonely is something inside of you. Something that you need to work on really, because it can be quite debilitating and quite harmful. (Female, 80yrs)

Experiences of loneliness

A small number of participants identified their experience of a chronic loneliness in their life.

I would say at the present time, [loneliness is something that I experience] pretty constantly. (Female, 81yrs)

Days and days go by that I don't speak to anybody. Phone doesn't ring. And I guess that's a problem with my loneliness is that since my wife died, people no longer phone. (Male 80yrs)

I can't count on anybody else.....I learned to be comfortable with my own company and that's a bit of a handicapbecause I don't go out seeking the friendships like I used to do.(Female, 72yrs)

It was no good of me trying to have something to do with people just to help the loneliness because I can't be bothered. And I think fairly quickly people realise I can't be bothered and then they can't be bothered with me. (Male, 81yrs)

Whereas others talked about the experience of loneliness, not as a chronic experience, but more as 'a call to action' to look at the ways in which they can change their situation.

If I feel a bit down, then I ring somebody up or go for a walk. Makes me feel better. (

I've never really felt isolated or cut off.....because as soon as I begin to feel that way, it's a case of okay, what can I do to stop that? Even if at times, it's messaging a friend, I'm feeling a bit lonely today, can we chat? (Female, 70yrs)

I feel lonely many times. I just decided when I came back from this trip that I was just going to get out there. If someone rings me and says, do you want to do something? I'll say yes, I do. (Female, 70yrs)

I look for distractions now. I've learnt that basically that's what life seems to be about. The more distractions we can find, the happier we are. That doesn't sound very good, but it's about a network. (Female, 72yrs)

Living alone

The experience of living alone was raised by a number of participants as an aspect that deepened their sense of loneliness.

If you are on your own, sometimes on the weekends that's difficult, because your married friends they're away doing things with their family/partner. (Female, 61yrs)

I feel very safe here because I know my neighbours, and I know they're all caring. So even though I live alone, I feel that I'm looked after. (Female, 63yrs)

Life transitions

Many who experienced levels of loneliness felt they were unprepared for the major life transitions they encountered. For example, retirement, caring role, loss of partner, loss of driving licence. This change in circumstances exacerbated a sense of loneliness.

I never prepared myself for when I'm going to be on my own. And I think it's too late. (Male, 80yrs)

I think that's why they warn people about retirement. They say, don't wait for it to happen. Plan ahead otherwise you fall in a bit of a heap. (Female, 72yrs)

Less / loss of family connections

The significance of regular contact with children and grandchildren was raised as a factor that impacted on the lives of older people.

My children have got their own lives, which is as the circle of life goes. And they've got their lives and their children I really feel a bit lonely at times, and I wish I saw more of them. (Female, 80yrs)

What makes a difference

Quality and depth of social relationships

...because of lack of shared memories, the relationships are not deep enough so that makes me lonely. I can spend time with people, but I cannot sort of open up my heart and share things that I would like to share. (Female, 57yrs)

Expanding your network would be useful,...but I also know that it's not the number of people, but it's the quality of the relationship. Investing in the time and energy to build and sustain those kinds of relationships is crucial. (Female, 67yrs)

How to support a sense of belonging

Listed below are project suggestions compiled from the interview and workshop findings.

Socialisation opportunities (Group based and one on one)

- Regular neighbourhood BBQs (held regularly by Council)
- Program of social activity around Xmas time
- Movie club
- Book Club
- Regular coffee or brunch group
- Theatre group
- 'Let's get together Network' (coordinated social connections group - common interests ie dinner/brunch together, market, walking gallery visits etc)
- Monthly forums/discussion groups
- Join Council's CHSSP (Deb) social group, outings, speakers quiz

Information

- Welcome Pack to newcomers
- Sign-posting what already exists in the community (distribution of info booklets, weatherproof noticeboard)
- Put community info in local health and allied health clinics i.e. Drs tv

Learning

- Digital technology 'learn to' informal sessions (Mobile phone, Emails, Skype, Facebook, messaging etc.)
- Cooking classes for men
- Cooking classes for one
- Food shopping for one
- Interpersonal and group skills (mindfulness, self-care, grief and loss)
- How to manage finances for women

Other initiatives

- Volunteering
- Community mentors
- Foster pet program/own a pet (encourages walking, meet people and talking to others)

- Small and large dog park to facilitate social connections (promote for local area)
- Foster grandparent scheme
- Chat and friendship line
- Informal car pool arrangements (support people to get to events)
- Buddy System to welcome others
- Home visits to people in the network

3 Discussion

Belonging

The interview findings define belonging as when you feel a part of a community, where you are liked and appreciated. Loneliness is viewed as its opposite, where you feel unsupported and unknown. Interview participants were asked to define both concepts, and to reflect on their experiences of both.

Humans are a social species and a sense of belonging is considered a fundamental human need: just like the need for food and shelter. Feeling that you belong is most important in seeing value in life and a sense of well-being. This is acknowledged in Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, the most pressing needs and human motivations after Safety, are Love and Belonging.

How you feel and how you are made to feel in a particular place that probably gives you that sense of belonging. So it's not a physical place, but rather the people and the feelings you get. (Female, 57yrs)

Not surprisingly, this sense of belonging in some ways is a psychological lever: our interests, motivation, health and happiness are inextricably tied to the feeling that we belong to a greater community that may share common interests and aspirations.

Many of the study participants had experienced a sense of belonging, as a steady influence in their lives. Others described belonging as a fleeting experience. For a small number of participants this sense of belonging was something they were still seeking.

Loneliness

Even when interview participants had minimal direct experience of loneliness, they were readily able to define the concept. Participants described loneliness as feeling isolated, not having any friends, without purpose. Again, for a small number they report behaving differently; giving up on socialising with others, taking less care of their self. In more serious cases, loneliness triggered thoughts of giving up.

You can be alone and happy. So loneliness is associated with sadness, loneliness is associated with wanting to be with other people on a relaxed, friendly basis. (Male, 69yrs)

The emerging international research on loneliness highlights key distinctions between social isolation and loneliness: Isolation is having a small or non-existent social network, and loneliness – the painful, often stigmatized emotional response resulting from a mismatch between one's actual desired network of social relationships in terms of quantity and especially quality. (Perlman & Peplau cited in Duck & Gilmour, 1981)

Equally, loneliness is not synonymous with being alone, nor does being in the presence of others automatically protect individuals from experiencing feelings of loneliness.

Emphasized in the research is the difference between transient and chronic loneliness and this is important to note. We all experience loneliness from time to time, as a normal part of life, on a temporary basis, but this becomes problematic when loneliness becomes a chronic state.

Feeling lonely can pose a bigger risk for premature death than smoking or obesity, according to research by Holt-Lunstad. The idea that loneliness can be associated with poorer cardiovascular health and, in old age, a faster rate of cognitive decline and dementia is repositioning loneliness as a major public health issue. (Holt-Lunstad & Theodore, 2017)

The evidence is concerning, and shows it is a serious public health problem, for young people as much as the elderly.

Social connection

According to Esther Perel 2019, “it is the quality of our relationships that determines the quality of our lives” and this notion is woven throughout the interview findings.

The research confirms that social connections are fundamental to our daily experience and gives our life a sense of purpose, affinity and belonging. Conversely, lacking meaningful and satisfying social connections has powerful negative consequences across the mental and physical health spectrum. (Kantar Public, 2016) Participant interviews, together with this research, highlight the significance of strong social bonds to one’s sense of social connectedness. Moreover, the quality of connection and emotional closeness is more important than frequency of contact.

Connection is the experience of oneness. Its having shared experiences, related feelings or similar ideas. (Female, 67yrs)

These findings would suggest that a practical implication for any intervention is that attempts to reduce loneliness should not focus solely on the quantity of social support relationships, but instead aim to stimulate few close and emotionally supportive relationships. (Age UK, July 2015)

The connection with families was raised by a number of participants who indicated that they are not seeing their families as much as they would like. The nature of society today means that families can fragment as they follow careers and often paths, nationally or globally.

And now we are on the receiving end of it. Their lives are kind of at that really busy point, either careers or earning money or establishing relationships, or all of it. And so there’s not that much time for the parents. (Male, 69yrs)

My children have got their own lives, which is as the circle of life goes. And they’ve got their lives and their children. I really feel a bit lonely at times, and I wish I saw more of them. (Female, 80yrs)

The subgroups most commonly involved in providing informal support for older people are family, friends, neighbours and members of the community. Older people may also be in

receipt of informal support from the third sector or through membership of social support groups.

In instances where participants had close affiliations with family and/or friends, especially where there was a confidant who could empathise, there appeared to be reduced feelings of loneliness. This reinforces that emotional support seems to be the key. The Loneliness Evidence Review conducted by the peak agency Age UK (2015, p:167), confirms that poor quality social connections and fewer social activities increase the risk of cognitive decline in people aged 65+.

Causes of loneliness

What the research tells us is that loneliness does not have one simple cause. The causes of loneliness often results from a combination of complex and multi-layered factors. According to a report commissioned by the British Red Cross and Co-Op, loneliness is caused by a combination of personal, community and broader society issues as outlined below:

- An individual (eg health, income confidence, energy, emotions)
- Their connections (eg friends and family colleagues)
- Their community (eg social activities and services available, transport)
- Wider society (eg social and cultural norms, work/life balance).

(Kantar Public, 2016)

Life stresses such as physical isolation or mental health issues can create increased barriers for people who in turn become more at risk of transitioning to chronic loneliness. Age also is identified in the literature as a risk factor for loneliness.

Worthy of acknowledgement are the structural causes of this phenomenon of loneliness. These structural causes are connected to the wider social and economic contexts yet rarely get addressed in the research. Similarly, there are few policies and programs in place that specifically address its structural causes.

Life and role transitions

The literature reveals that major life events which change someone's sense of self and their ability to connect with other people should be viewed as moments of particular risk. Our interviews reinforced findings from the research; that major life events and transitions which change someone's sense of self and their ability to connect with other people are potential disrupters that can increase the risk of loneliness.

A key theme emerging from our interviews was the way in which loneliness was often felt at a time when participants were experiencing a transition in terms of their social connections and social identities – retirement, new arrival to area, mobility limitations, loss of driver's licence, caring role, bereavement, change in financial status. These transitions could either be sudden (eg the loss of a partner) or occur over time (eg the worsening of a health condition). When existing social connections are challenged or severed, this can negatively affect a person's social connections– their friendship, acquaintances, family and

colleagues. Plus, reduce opportunities for 'easy' connection and also threaten self-identity. (Kantar Public, 2016)

The significance of role and identity was a recurring theme across our research, the lack of identity or lack of clarity over assigned role in society, for example caused by a life transition, was a key trigger for loneliness. When a person's identity or role was disrupted by an expected or sudden life event, this could cause an old identity to fall away and a new one with added responsibilities and burden to appear.

All of a sudden you're on your own and you don't quite know how to fill in the day. I somehow or other do fill in the day, but it seems a bit meaningless, I think. (Male 80 yrs)

Experience and research tells us that not everyone that experiences a transitional life event comes chronically lonely and not everyone who experiences loneliness has undergone this kind of transition.

Fear of being alone and loneliness

We did not ask participants about how they felt about living alone in the future, but a number expressed concerns about their future and how they might cope.

I've gotten to the point now when I've got ample enough people in my life. But what struck me was, I was very afraid of being lonely. The reason why I'm here today is not so much the loneliness I have experienced, as the fear of what might happen if I got to that lonely stage. (Male, 69yrs)

I fear for the future when one day I might find myself alone. (Female, 57yrs)

Support approaches

A number of interview participants felt that many opportunities to increase social connection and minimise loneliness already exists in the Campbelltown Council area. Their comment was that these programs and activities could be better promoted to the community. However that view was not shared by the majority of participants.

The project was keen to learn from interview participants and research about the kind of support that might assist to strengthen belonging and to minimise loneliness.

A list of suggestions about initiatives was compiled from the interviews and the workshop (refer Findings section). These suggestions include interventions and support projects that encompass – group and one-to one support, social connections and learning opportunities.

What does appear important is to maintain and support existing relationships. In addition to enabling new connections, either group based or one-to-one support, as well as emotional support services. More intensive individual support will be needed to assist some people to connect. What is clear is that different people need different kinds of support and these needs can vary, depending on the level of their loneliness. Encouraging people to use existing community programmes, such as libraries, volunteering, and social groups is equally important as part of the array of support.

As discussed earlier, loneliness presents in different forms and has many different causes. The experience is different for each person, and thus a tailored approach is necessary. What is confirmed by the literature is that no one-size fits all approach to intervention is suitable for all people. Rather a combination of strategies and support types are needed.

The body of evidence shows that 'good practice' interventions seek to enable individuals to better maintain their existing social interactions. Secondly, interventions often try to facilitate the creation of new social connections. The final and newest approach is to use psychological therapies to help the individual reassess the way they think about their relationships. (Griffiths, 2017: 25)

Highlighted in a comprehensive report commissioned by the City of Vancouver on Social Isolation and Loneliness (2018), is the distinction between social loneliness and emotional loneliness. The report asserts the importance when designing programs to differentiate between emotional/intimate loneliness. It is argued that most interventions/programs appear to target social loneliness to the exclusion of emotional /intimate loneliness, even though both are important for health and well-being.

Furthermore, the best available evidence on interventions suggests that the most common strategy of providing social contact might help prevent transient loneliness from becoming chronic in certain at-risk groups. However, the authors caution that this strategy is less effective when loneliness has become entrenched. In these cases, cognitive distortions and self-defeating behaviours should be addressed P.8 There is strong evidence to support this proposition.

Common elements of successful intervention

UK research has identified eight principles of best practice for services that help people reconnect with their communities. These principles highlight the key 'building blocks' from which to construct successful future services and support. Services and support should:

- Support that gives a sense of purpose to the individual
 - Be peer-led and co-designed to include people in similar circumstances
 - Be local to individuals and easy to access
 - Be free or affordable
 - Instil a sense of identity for participants who are going through a period of transition
 - Provide sustained support, and clear goals and pathways out of support when appropriate
 - Benefit others and 'give back' to society, which can make individuals feel 'useful'
 - Be built around shared interests
- (Kantar Public, 2016)

The support approaches suggested by the research participants from the Campbelltown study, and listed in the Findings section, appear to align with the abovementioned eight principles of best practice.

4 Conclusion

The 31 people who participated in this small qualitative and action research project have helped to raise awareness and knowledge of the experiences of belonging and loneliness in later life. By sharing their insight and personal experiences, they have opened a community conversation which we hope will reduce the stigma around this topic. Plus, be a catalyst for change through a range of community driven initiatives in the Campbelltown local area. A working group has been established, and with the support of Council, will implement and guide the development of a number of priority projects as identified throughout the project.

The projects will build on existing community capacity and assets and strive to strengthen links to community and social connections. These actions will take place in the context of a wider strategy to promote and increase older people's wellbeing.

The UK in their extensive work in this area have identified that the addressing of loneliness is a shared responsibility amongst community and government.

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Appendix 1:

Summary of key findings presented to the workshop on 8 August, 2019

Belonging

Views on belonging

I think it just means you've got somewhere you call home. You belong into a certain community. (Male, 70 yrs)

To belong is to feel that you're in the place you'd like to be in, with the person you'd like to be with. With people that you get along with, not necessarily have the same ideas, but people that you socialise with, & you find pleasant company. (Female, 81 yrs)

There's different aspects of it. Belonging within the family unit. I think there's elements of belonging let's say if you've in work. I'm retired so I don't have that belongingness anymore. Other than I maintain contact with about three people I worked with, and we go for lunch every 6-8 weeks. So that's belonging. There's going to the gym. ... there's all these different groups,they're all ways of belonging. different, there's not one that just encompasses all of it. (Female, 58 yrs)

Belonging is being valued and recognised, being able to fit in, feeling safe, secure and being able to participate. (Female, 57 yrs)

Have people accept you and that you accept as well. It might be family, but it can just be acquaintances. (Female, 66yrs)

It's when you feel like people need you as much as you need other people. (Female, 72yrs)

It's when you feel you're part of the community. (Male, 70 yrs)

You feel known, you feel seen, you feel heard. All those things. (Female, 58 yrs)

Means that you're in a relationship with somebody, and you share and do things together. (Male, 80yrs)

People's experience of belonging

You contribute as well as receiving. I think you need to get involved with things to belong, to feel at home. It's not going to happen unless you make the effort yourself. (Female, 76 yrs)

When I retired I decided to join different groups. So I made it my mission to join things. And it's paid off very well, as I do feel like I belong here. (Female, 76yrs)

It's been a fleeting experience, I suppose. Belonging to a husband, belonging to children. (Female, 69 yrs)

I experience this with my family, because I have a really good relationship with my children. (Female, 80yrs)

When I gave up my job that was when I gave up belonging anywhere. Because I did feel that I belonged there and I had something in common with most of the people I worked with. I have never felt that I've belonged anywhere since. (Male, 81yrs)

I feel a sense of belonging when I am doing things with my wife. (Male, 81yrs)

In some streets, people lived there a long time and the whole street sort of changed. They struggle because all their friends have gone, and the new people that move in are young people, busy and out.....(Female, 63yrs)

I feel a sense of belonging, but I don't feel complete as I would like to when I'm part of a group..... when that walk is finished and we sit and have our coffee and have a chat – we all go back to our own lives. (Female, 72 yrs)

How you feel and how you are made to feel in a particular place that probably gives you that sense of belonging. So it's not a physical place, but rather the people and the feelings you get. (Female, 57yrs)

What makes a difference

Common goals, interests and values

Belonging is when I have a close connection with a place or with people and there's something in common between us....common goals, maybe common values. (Female, 70yrs)

If I haven't got something in common, I would rather not continue visiting friends. (Male, 81yrs)

Relationships that are reciprocal

You start to feel belonging if they contact you. It's not about you contacting them, it's about building those relationships and that belonging, but it's also reciprocated....it works both ways, and then you feel like you belong. (Female, 61yrs)

....its got to be mutual. I feel everything is one sided. Anybody can come to me...but I don't really have anybody to go to. (Female, 72yrs)

I gravitate towards like-minded people, people with similar interests to me. We support each when need be. (Male, 67ys)

Quality and depth of relationships

I feel really strongly that we're not allowing depth to relationships anymore because of the devices and the social media. What we call, "contact", is not the same. Like a quick two second, 25 words or less, chat on SMS or whatever is not the same as sitting down, having a coffee and allowing a conversation to develop, or to get to a depth where you can really reveal and open and share. (Female, 57yrs)

Someone to call, someone to be present, to listen

Having someone, one or two friends you can go to and feel like, you can just call them anytime. That you can rely on and know that they'll sit and listen to you.....and they would come to you, if they needed a shoulder to cry on. (Female, 72yrs)

Companionship.....It doesn't have to be on a daily basis. I'm quite happy to do things on my own, but every now and then it's nice to sit down and have a cuppa with someone.

Inclusion

After moving to Athelstone, I have had a greater sense of belonging. Right after we moved in the council invited us to the neighbour day event. The flyer for the event mentioned halal food....this is something really great. Especially the fact that we felt immediately included. We felt our differences are acknowledged, but at the same time we are being accepted despite our differences. (Female, 57yrs)

Sharing

One of the most powerful things that creates a sense of belonging and that sense of connection is sharing. That needs courage because you don't know how the other person is going to respond. (Female, 57yrs)

Connection to neighbours

One of the reasons I feel that I belong is because I have a very good relationship with my neighbours. We're all independent, but the common thing we have, is that there's that caring attitude toward each other, and the helpfulness. (Female, 63yrs)

Acknowledged and remembered

When I go to Mecartos for example, You're remembered, you're known. If I'm feeling like a coffee I can go anywhere and have a coffee, but I'll go there, because there's this sense of belonging and someone will know my face. (Female, 57yrs)

Being greeted by name is delightful. It means people remember me. (Female, 53yrs)

Belonging spaces

I can have that sense of belonging and connection in a park, where there are beautiful gum trees. (Female, 70yrs)

Gurner Reserve – off leash dog walking. Some people are on their own, but you feel really welcomed. (

Along the Fourth creek, and up towards Morialta. The natural habitat is just beautiful. (Female, 63yrs)

I walk most days with the dog in the glorious Linear Park, and I usually run into friendly people, some of whom I know. (Female, 76yrs)

Although I've got a comfortable home, I choose not to be there if there's no one in it. I like to get out and walk down the mall and look at the buskers or wander into the shops and go to the library. Libraries are some of my favourite places. (Male, 69yrs)

The library is always busy. If you're feeling lonely, it's a good place to go, because people are all around you. (Female, 70yrs)

Sense of connection – to self and to others

Connection is the experience of oneness. It's having shared experiences, related feelings, or similar ideas. (Female, 67yrs)

I would say it's an affiliation of your spirit. I believe we all have a spirit. (Female, 81yrs)

Views on loneliness

Not having any friends. No outlook. Nobody comes to visit you. No one rings you up. Can't go out because you can't go out. Relying on people all the time to do things for you. Feeling guilty when you ask someone to do something because you cannot do it yourself. (Male 78yrs)

The phone not ringing, being isolated from your extended family.

Lonely is when you've got nowhere to turn.as though you don't belong anywhere in particular. Just nowhere to go and no one to turn to, nobody's interested.when you feel like you could drop dead and nobody would know. Sometimes I think I could die and nobody would come to my funeral. (Female, 72yrs)

Loneliness is just feeling.....Nobody cares. (Female, 70yrs)

You can be dreadfully lonely within a house full of people, within a marriage. You can be alone, but you can be perfectly fulfilled and not one bit lonely. (Female, 57yrs)

Lonely means being by yourself, although you can be lonely in a room with a crowd of people. I think lonely is something inside of you. Something that you need to work on really, because it can be quite debilitating and quite harmful.

*Loneliness happens when you don't have enough sense of belonging or enough social connections. So if you haven't got that connectedness, then you get lonely. I think when people **retire** it's often a problem too because you've got all that time on your hands and knowing what to do with it.*

You can be alone and happy. Loneliness is associated with sadness, loneliness is associated with wanting to be with other people on a relaxed friendly basis. (Male, 68yrs)

Solitude is a choice, but loneliness is not. (Female, 72yrs)

Experiences of loneliness

I feel lonely many times. I just decided when I came back from this trip that I was just going to get out there. If someone rings me and says, do you want to do something? I'll say yes, I do. (Female, 70yrs)

I would say at the present time, [loneliness is something that I experience] pretty constantly. (Female, 81yrs)

Days and days go by that I don't speak to anybody. Phone doesn't ring. And I guess that's a problem with my loneliness is that since my wife died people no longer phone. (Male, 80yrs)

That feeling can come over you and you don't have to be at home. You can be out in a crowd and feel lonely.

Blimey no! Because I've always had friends and things to do. (Male, 78yrs)

If I feel a bit down, then I ring somebody up or go for a walk. Makes me feel better. (Female, 76yrs)

I can't count on anybody else.....I learned to be comfortable with my own company and that's a bit of a handicapbecause I don't go out seeking the friendships like I used to do. (Female, 72yrs)

It was no good of me trying to have something to do with people just to help the loneliness because I can't be bothered. And I think fairly quickly people realise I can't be bothered and then they can't be bothered with me. (Male, 81yrs)

I've never really felt isolated or cut off.....because as soon as I begin to feel that way, it's a case of ok, what can I do to stop that? Even if at times, it's messaging a friend, I'm feeling a bit lonely today, can we chat?

I've always been a fairly lonely person. I could be by myself without any problem and there were times when I preferred it to be alone, but there's a big difference between being a loner and being lonely. You can be a loner, but if you've got nobody else in your life, it's not a good thing. (Male, 75yrs)

Lonely – is somebody who can't bear being on their own. I can bear being on my own. I love being on my own. I think I'm very fortunate to be able to do that. I'm actually a glass full, not even half full, person. I don't want to retire though. I'll volunteer when I'm 80. (Female, 69yrs)

When I feel lonely at time, I sometimes feel that I'm the only person on the planet. The hardest thing for people to understand is about feelings. Nobody knows what's going on in your mind, even if you are sitting with a group of people. And they all think everything is fine and hunkey dorey and you put on a brave smile, but you are really feeling very lonely. (Female, 72)

Who do you turn to for help? Yes, if you have friends you share it with them, but unless they have experienced it themselves, they don't understand. (Female, 72yrs)

It's hard to make new friends as you get older. I don't know why that is.people have already created their circle. So they're not really interested in making new friends. (Female, 57yrs)

Living alone

If you are on your own, sometimes on the weekends that's difficult, because your married friends they're away doing things with their family/partner. (Female, 61yrs)

All of a sudden you're on your own and you don't quite know how to fill in the day. I somehow or other do fill in the day, but it seems a bit meaningless, I think. (Male 80yrs)

It's Groundhog Day. Get up in the morning same as yesterday, same as the day before, same as the day before that. What have I got to look forward to? I don't have a partner and what do I do? At the moment, I've got nobody, that's why I'm feeling lonely. (Male, 80yrs)

Affirmed/ acknowledged

When I have felt that I was seen, the feeling of loneliness has vanished. (Female, 67yrs)

Not prepared (retirement, being alone)

I never prepared myself for when I'm going to be on my own. And I think it's too late. (Male, 80yrs)

I think that's why they warn people about retirement. They say, don't wait for it to happen. Plan ahead otherwise you fall in a bit of a heap. (Female, 72yrs)

Family connections

My children have got their own lives, which is as the circle of life goes. And they've got their lives and their children. I really feel a bit lonely at times, and I wish I saw more of them. (Female, 80yrs)

And now we are on the receiving end of it. Their lives are kind of at that really busy point, either careers or earning money or establishing relationships, or all of it. And so there's not that much time for the parents. (Male, 69yrs)

Keeping busy

It's about....okay if you don't want this to be like that what do you have to do? (Female, 61yrs)

When I feel lonely, I've turned to my family. The number of people I can turn to is small. I'm very conscious that the best thing I can do is probably keep myself as busy as possible, but being productive. (Female, 57yrs)

Okay girl you've got to do it for yourself. Join a few things, or get involved, or put your hand up.

I've learnt that basically that's what life seems to be about. The more distractions we can find, the happier we are. That doesn't sound very good, but it's about a network. (Female, 72yrs)

Fear of loneliness and being alone

I started various interests and I've gotten to the point now when I've got ample enough people in my life. But what struck me was, I was very afraid of being lonely. The reason why I'm here today is not so much the loneliness I have experienced, as the fear of what might happen if I got to that lonely stage. (Male, 69yrs)

If I feel lonely to this extent what if I don't have them with me in the future? So I fear for the future when one day I might find myself alone. (

...I fear for the future, when one day I might find myself alone. (Female, aged 57yrs)

Neighbours

As you get older you seem to stay at home or in the house. .maybe because of health, maybe because of choice. All your neighbours are too darned busy, and

maybe you too busy. But I've always made it a point if I've moved somewhere, to wave to neighbours even if I don't know them.

I'm the oldest person in the street. People come and go. When I moved in there was an old chap next door and he was a lovely neighbour and we used to chat and he died. So now there is a young family moved in next door. So it's changed. (Female, 72yrs)

What made a difference for them

Quality/depth of relationships

...because of lack of shared memories, the relationships are not deep enough so that makes me lonely. I can spend time with people, but I cannot sort of open up my heart and share things that I would like to share. (Female, 62yrs)

Expanding your network would be useful,...but I also know that it's not the number of people, but it's the quality of the relationship. Investing in the time and energy to build and sustain those kinds of relationships is crucial. (

....It's not the number of people you know, but it's the quality of the relationship you share with them.Investing in the time and energy to build and sustain those kinds of relationships is crucial. (Female, aged 57yrs)

Socialising opportunities

Events like the Neighbour Day. The buddy system referred to in Council's brochure. This buddy system would really motivate me and give me that confidence to join a group where I don't know anyone. (Female, 57yrs)

Participating in 'Meet Ups' (a state wide socialising network organised around particular interests) (Female, 62yrs)

The responsibility lies with me. It's up to me to keep looking for inclusiveness.(

Solitude

When I go to a park. Even just to read, and just sit there and watch these people practicing their football and stuff in a distance. It just feels good. Gardening gives me great pleasure. Good classical music and good books. (Female, 81yrs)

I quite enjoy going and just sitting up at Thornden Park, have a bit of a chat to myself, sort out the world's problems. (Male, 75yrs)