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greener journeys

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Last week was Loneliness Awareness Week. What did we learn from it?

That loneliness is now endemic and action needs to come not just from the individual but also, most importantly, from the community they live in. That we may have thought loneliness was a problem for the elderly, but in fact young people are particularly hard hit. That public transport has a potentially vital role to play in tackling this corrosive social epidemic – a role which is currently massively underexploited.

That the UK is suffering from a loneliness epidemic is beyond doubt. Two thirds of us admit to at least sometimes feeling lonely[i], and more than nine million adults in the UK are always or often lonely[ii]. 13% of people in the UK feel lonely every day[iii].

The health risks are well documented. Loneliness is as bad for your health as smoking fifteen cigarettes a day, carries greater health risks than obesity,[iv] and increases risk of mortality by 29%[v]. Lonely people are more likely to suffer from depression, dementia, diabetes, heart conditions and strokes[vi].

A report for the British Red Cross and Co-op, *Trapped in a Bubble*, revealed that the causes of loneliness are often complex, multi-layered and mutually reinforcing: a combination of personal, community and UK-wide factors. On a personal level, the importance of having a role and identity is a recurring theme; aspects of one's community such as inadequate transport infrastructure can contribute to feelings of disconnection; as can social norms such as the perceived inappropriateness of talking with strangers[vii].

Reduced opportunities for face to face contact with others are a major part of the problem.

Of those who feel lonely, almost a third (30%) say this is because they have no one to talk to at home[viii]. Millions are experiencing isolation as changes to lifestyles and working patterns, and the growing use of technology, erode the opportunities for human contact. People are finding that a network of digital connections are no replacement for real human interaction. At the same time, they may be losing the skills or opportunity to forge those interactions.

It follows that a central part of the solution to loneliness must include increasing opportunities for face to face contact. Sometimes it is the smallest gestures that can make the most difference. A study by Gillian Sandstrom and Elizabeth Dunn has shown the surprising power of "weak tie" connections[ix]. They demonstrate that even social interactions with the more peripheral members of our social networks can contribute to our well-being. The Campaign to End Loneliness vividly demonstrates the importance of small gestures, how social interactions in everyday life can make a big difference to ourselves and others.

No age group is immune from experiencing loneliness.

The fact that loneliness affects older people is widely recognised. Half a million older people in the UK go at least five or six days a week without speaking to anyone at all[x]. There has been less recognition, however, of how acute the problem is amongst young people. The Marmalade Trust, a UK based charity which began [Loneliness Awareness Week](#), highlight this as a common misperception. Research for Greener Journeys has revealed that 75% of young people admit to being affected by loneliness, compared to 45% of those aged over 55[xi].

That loneliness is particularly acute among younger people may be partly the result of increased time spent online. A survey of San Francisco State students by E Peper and R Harvey demonstrated that students who used their smartphones the most reported higher levels of feeling isolated, lonely, depressed and anxious. The researchers concluded that loneliness is partly a consequence of replacing face-to-face interaction with a form of communication where body language and other signals cannot be interpreted[xii].

Author Jean M Twenge asks whether smartphones have destroyed a generation. He contends that post-Millennials are more comfortable online than out partying, and are safer, physically, than adolescents have ever been – "but they're on the brink of a mental-health crisis".[xiii]

The experience of using public transport provides many opportunities for social interactions.

Research for Greener Journeys has revealed that the bus can be a powerful tool for tackling loneliness. Three in 10 people in the UK go at least one day a week without speaking to anyone close to them. A third of people in the UK have deliberately taken the bus to have some human contact[xiv]. For some people the bus driver might be the only person they speak to on a day when they don't speak to anyone close to them.

Instinctively, people may be drawn to public transport, and buses in particular, to have some human contact. Over one in 10 (12%) admit to having spoken to a stranger in the past month because they've had no one to speak to, and a fifth of these (19%) have spoken to a stranger on a bus in the past month[xv]. Bus travel can help people to be more sociable, with nearly two fifths (37%) of regular bus users saying that while travelling by bus they have spoken to someone they've just met[xvi].

Not only does bus travel help combat loneliness, it also strengthens the fabric of our society. Two thirds of bus users say that bus creates strong community ties, and 8 out of 10 know someone who completely depends on the bus[xvii]. Buses provide access to social activities and essential services, support employment, education and training and improve the general health and well-being of individuals. A 10% improvement in bus service connectivity leads to a 3.6% reduction in social deprivation[xviii].

However, despite the proven social benefits, connecting with strangers on public transport is still the exception not the norm.

A study in 1978 by Milgram and Sabini concluded that the requirements of appropriate social behaviour on the subway are, on the face of it, simple - the 'implicit rule' is that passengers are discouraged from talking to each other[xix]. More recently a similar study from Esther Kim at Yale University concluded that greatest unspoken rule of bus travel is that if other seats are available you shouldn't sit next to someone else. As the passengers repeatedly told her, "It makes you look weird."[xx]

Kim describes how people will go to extraordinary lengths to avoid each other on public transport. When all the rows are filled, and more passengers are getting aboard the seated passengers initiate a performance to strategically avoid anyone sitting next to them. These strategies include: avoiding eye contact with other people; placing a large bag on the empty seat; sitting on the aisle seat and turn on your headphones so you can pretend you can't hear people asking for the window seat; pretending to be asleep; putting your coat on the seat to make it appear already taken; lying that the seat has been taken by someone else etc.[xxi]

So, what is going wrong? We have ample evidence of the proven benefits of connecting with others on public transport. Why aren't we connecting more?

In a fascinating study, *Mistakenly Seeking Solitude*, Nicholas Epley and Juliana Schroeder observe that although connecting with others increases happiness, strangers in close proximity routinely ignore each other[xxii].

Epley and Schroeder considered two possible explanations: either solitude is a more positive experience than interacting with strangers; or people misunderstand the consequences of distant social connections. To investigate they carried out a study of commuters on trains and buses which concluded that people tend to "mistakenly seek solitude". Participants reported a more positive (and no less productive) experience when they connected with strangers than when they did not - even though they had expected precisely the opposite.

In the second part of their study Epley and Schroeder explored why it was that people don't engage more. If connecting is more pleasurable than not, why don't people learn from their experiences and connect more? They considered two possible explanations: either they believe other people are not interested and that by not interacting they are being polite they; or, they have had previous negative experiences of connecting with strangers (negative experiences tend to be more memorable than positive experiences).

The study demonstrated that the former explanation is overwhelmingly more likely. People misread others' silence as disinterest and therefore do not engage in the very conversations that would correct their expectation. Epley and Schroeder observe that those who misunderstand the consequences of social interactions may not, at least in some contexts, be social enough for their own well-being. They conclude that on an increasingly crowded planet, misunderstanding the benefits of social engagement could become increasingly problematic.

It seems the biggest culprit is social norm. The problem was poignantly summed up by Kali, a third-year student from Nottingham, who told The Marmalade Trust: "I find it quite ironic that most of us go through loneliness but decide not to confide in each other. It's more than a feeling but a strange unhealthy habit to be broken."

What's the solution?

Travel is the single most important activity that brings total strangers into close contact with each other. Public transport has a vital role to play in breaking down unhealthy social norms and providing opportunities for us to connect with each other. We need to get the bus and talk more.

[i] ComRes Survey for Greener Journeys October 2018

[ii] Trapped in a Bubble: An investigation into triggers for loneliness in the UK, Kantar Public December 2016, report commissioned by British Red Cross and Co-op

[iii] ComRes Survey for Greener Journeys June 2019

[iv] Social Relationships and Mortality Risk: A Meta-analytic Review, Julianne Holt-Lunstad, 2010

[v] Loneliness and Social Isolation as Risk Factors for Mortality: A Meta-Analytic Review, Julianne Holt-Lunstad 2015

[vi] Age UK Evidence Review on Loneliness Age-UK June 2015

[vii] Trapped in a Bubble: An investigation into triggers for loneliness in the UK, Kantar Public December 2016, report commissioned by British Red Cross and Co-op

[viii] ComRes Survey for Greener Journeys June 2019

[ix] Social Interactions and Well-Being: The Surprising Power of Weak Ties, Gillian M Sandstrom and Elizabeth W. Dunn, April 2014

[x] No-one should have no-one, Age-UK 2016

[xi] ComRes Survey for Greener Journeys June 2019

[xii] Digital addiction: Increased loneliness, anxiety, and depression. NeuroRegulation, 5(1), 3. Peper, E., & Harvey, R. (2018)

[xiii] iGen: Why Today's Super-Connected Kids Are Growing Up Less Rebellious, More Tolerant, Less Happy--and Completely Unprepared for Adulthood--and What That Means for the Rest of Us, Jean M Twenge, 2017

[xiv] ComRes Survey for Greener Journeys October 2018

[xv] ComRes Survey for Greener Journeys June 2019

[xvi] Research by MindLab at the University of Sussex for Greener Journeys 2015

[xvii] Research by MindLab at the University of Sussex for Greener Journeys 2015

[xviii] A Study of the value of local bus services to society, University of Leeds ITS, 2016

[xix] On Maintaining social norms: A field experiment in the subway, S. Milgram and J. Sabini, 1978

[xx] Nonsocial Transient Behavior: Social Disengagement on the Greyhound Bus, Esther C. Kim. 2012

[xxi] Nonsocial Transient Behavior: Social Disengagement on the Greyhound Bus, Esther C. Kim. 2012

[xxii] Mistakenly Seeking Solitude, Nicholas Epley University of Chicago and Juliana Schroeder University of California, Berkeley, 2014