How loneliness is impacting our capital's elderly

By Eve Hebron

BACKGROUND

According to a survey, London is one of the loneliest cities in the world. The elderly are rarely given a voice when the discussion of loneliness in the capital arises. We often talk about how difficult it is for young people to integrate 'in the big smoke' when moving here, but we seldom discuss how prominent of an issue loneliness amongst the individuals already living here is. Focusing on loneliness and how it can impact an individual, particularly the elderly, this article explores the ways in which we can all help to prevent it.

Eve Hebron is a London-based student, studying MA Arts and Lifestyle Journalism at London College of Communication, part of the University of the Arts London: https://medium.com/@evehebron

How loneliness is impacting our capital's elderly

Being British is often synonymous with being proud.

It is as though to be 'British' means being conditioned to develop and maintain a stiff upper lip from cradle to grave. However, is this keep calm and carry on approach stopping us from talking, sharing and discussing our feelings? According to The Loneliness Lab, a "project to accelerate action towards making London a less lonely city to live", the country's capital is ranked one of the loneliest cities in the world. Is this due to a want to remain proud? Are us Brits letting our guard down if we discuss such an issue?

We talk about how difficult it is for young people to integrate in 'the big smoke' and the loneliness that comes hand in hand with that. At twenty-five, I can admit I've felt like a prisoner to loneliness. Having lived in both Paris and London, I've done my time trying to pass it before now, re-reading the same sentence of a book or watching trashy Netflix shows whilst my minds wanders off to wonder what exactly was missing. The emptiness I had felt was particularly hollow, and I would often get an early night not because I wanted to, but because I felt it was the only way to pause the feeling. Such an omnipresent sensation can easily trick you into believing you are in a state of never-ending limbo, and it is often hard to have hope of seeing the light at the end of the tunnel.

Rarely however, do we discuss how prominent of an issue loneliness is amongst the elderly already living in the UK's capital. BBC news on January 31st, 2011, pronounced loneliness as a "hidden killer" of elderly people, which to me, is no surprise. This was a discovery that made the headlines, perhaps due to the fact that as a nation, we seem to subconsciously turn a blind eye to our seniors. But why is this?

In an essay for The New Yorker, writer Ceridwen Dovey states that "old age is perplexing to imagine because the definition of it is notoriously unstable". Old age does not discriminate. Factually, it is a chapter of life we will all encounter but, in the words of Simone de Beauvoir, "we have always regarded it as something alien, a foreign species". It is an area of life we dismiss because we can worry about it later, therefore we have a lack of understanding and interest in what it must be like.

In her book, *The Lonely City*, Olivia Laing writes about an encounter with an elderly stranger who "tried repeatedly to strike up conversation". The author did not want to talk but reluctantly did so, before the stranger got the hint and departed. Laing is left "ashamed

... his loneliness pressed up [against me]: an overwhelming, unmeetable need for attention and affection, to be heard and touched and seen". It appears there are many Londoners feeling similarly to the stranger Laing encountered. As stated previously, city life can be surprisingly cruel to humans longing for connection, and despite feeling it was hard enough for a young person like myself, evidence concludes that elderly individuals are one of the most affected in the capital.

According to a report published by King's College London, older Londoners, in particular those with cognitive impairments such as dementia, face issues that can impact their confidence and ability to access buildings and places, thus resulting in feelings of social isolation. Furthermore, elderly people within the city are likely to feel that they are more digitally illiterate when comparing themselves to others. Evidence within the Labour Force Surveys of 2011-2015 states that elderly people are actually digitally excluded, which includes having no access to the internet. In a report by the Greater London Authority (GLA), it was also discovered that high streets are valued by older Londoners as being spaces of leisure and culture that promote a sense of community. To them, this was and is the initial intention of the high street, as opposed to just shopping.

As a young person living in London, these statistics came as a surprise upon reading first time round.

I am a digitally literate individual in my twenties, who regularly wanders the local high street on the lookout for a cheap bargain or to meet friends for a coffee. And I have still experienced loneliness. For me, during lonely times, I have found some sense of comfort in seeing the flicker of the Netflix logo appear across my computer screen or having the ability to connect with others - from literally all over the planet - on an array of social media platforms. I have found a sense of comfort in knowing I can easily pop to a cafe or out for a drink (even if it is by myself), that I am fit and healthy enough to run for the bus if needs must, or even walk across London if wherever I have decided to go is the other side of the city. Furthermore, loneliness and its repercussions – such as anxiety and depression, are subjects of discussion that myself and my peers of the same age, are normalising. These comforts, however, are abilities myself and many other young people take for granted. To be striped of them would be so debilitating and depressing, that surely only gut-wrenching despair would develop.

The London Community Story, a grassroots Greater London Authority (GLA) project "with Londoners' lived experience at its heart", recently collaborated with the Conversation Booth in order to collect a diverse range of conversation from the city's people, on topics ranging from belonging to equality. Whilst being interviewed at Woolwich Library, when asked how to define what a community meant to him, one young man stated,

"For me personally, community is about having a space or people in an area or a locality, in which they are connected, aware of each other's needs ... increasingly, especially in this day and age, the idea of community is becoming less than significant."[1]

Discussions of empathy for one another, as well as happiness, were also hot topics. After listening to such in depth conversations, it was evident that many individuals feel London is in need of some warmth amongst communities. One woman declared,

"When you are happy, and when things work out for you, and when you have a lot of love and compassion and empathy in yourself to give to other people, I think the world is such a nicer place is so much better. You know, there's less violence is less anger, there's less loss of control, right?"[2]

Both have significant points; do we need this sense of community back in order to move forward? Thankfully, this is an issue we are beginning to discuss.

London Mayor, Sadiq Khan, has said he is committed to opening up the digital world to more Londoners. City Hall has signed the government's *Digital Inclusion Charter* which aims to get everyone who wants to be, online by 2020 - with a particular lean towards older people, delivering and sharing knowledge from the Mi WiFi pilot project. Furthermore, The Good Growth Fund, a £70 million regeneration programme supporting growth and community development in London, aims to enhance they city's public areas, community hubs, high streets and work premises by improving how buildings and spaces are designed and managed. The plan will take into consideration any impairments that likely impact the lives of elderly people within the capital, giving them easier access to communal spaces, thus significantly reducing the risk of social isolation. By placing the principles of inclusive design within the heart of the planning process, the Mayor will make sure the needs of all Londoners - particularly they city's older people - are met.

On some levels, it does seem the situation is improving, but there is still room for discussion. London Mayor, Sadiq Khan has previously stated that everyone should be able to benefit from the city's prosperity, "regardless of their age, disability, gender, gender identity, marital status, race, religion, sexual orientation, social class or whether they are pregnant or on maternity leave". Cities are a collection of these people coming together for the purpose of communicating – an antidote to being solitary. This is a shared issue, and thus we must leave our pride at the door, and all become part of the solution.

---

[1] London Community Story Research, Greater London Authority, 2019 (https://www.london.gov.uk/LDNcommunitystory).
[2] London Community Story Research, Greater London Authority, 2019 (https://www.london.gov.uk/LDNcommunitystory).

COPYRIGHT

Other formats and languages
For a large print, Braille, disc, sign language video or audio-tape version of this document, please contact us at the address below:

Greater London Authority
City Hall
The Queen's Walk
More London
London SE1 2AA

Telephone **020 7983 4000**
www.london.gov.uk

You will need to supply your name, your postal address and state the format and title of the publication you require.

If you would like a summary of this document in your language, please phone the number or contact us at the address above.