PLUS is a mental health charity and social movement covering Perth and Kinross. We are known for our local work related to recovery from mental distress and our local contributions to the national see me campaign to eradicate stigma in mental health. Promoting recovery, working to prevent suicide and challenging stigma are the main areas of our work. We are also significantly involved in influencing policy and planning in areas of mental health and social justice. For more about our work visit www.plusperth.co.uk

When I heard about the enquiry I circulated an email to our members to ask if they would be willing to provide their thoughts on loneliness. Bearing in mind the last minute request, I got a good response from people. One of the things I heard from people several times was why does the enquiry only look at loneliness in older people - you will see references to that in the personal perspectives. People also said to me that loneliness in people with a mental health condition was common as many found it hard to make and sustain friendships, often due to the effects of heavy medication which made people drowsy and unmotivated. I gather there has been a large response to this enquiry from other mental health organisations which perhaps backs up the point of loneliness being a massive issue for people with mental health issues. Interestingly the people who put pen to paper in where all people with mental health issues between the ages of 50 and 72.

PLUS had a discussion on the term loneliness and how younger people might perceive it to be something different from older people. Perhaps loneliness is an older fashioned word and young people describe the feelings associated with it as something different so don’t recognise themselves as lonely. Also it could be quite stigmatising or embarrassing for a young person to admit to being lonely whereas more acceptable in older people.

The personal perspectives further on in the submission highlight the importance of detecting feelings of isolation and ‘feeling left out’ ie loneliness in young people when it is happening to prevent mental health issues later in life, so hopefully the enquiry will consider this.

If we had more of time we could have pulled together many more views and thoughts on this such is the strength of feeling so please get in touch if you feel the enquiry warrants a focus group as we would very likely oblige.

I read recently that UK was the ‘Loneliness Capital of Europe’ and would like to say how pleased we are that the Scottish Parliament are taking the growing issue of isolation and loneliness seriously.

May we please be kept informed about this matter and contacted on any forthcoming parliamentary debate which we would like to attend.

Susan Scott
Manager
PLUS Perth & Kinross
21 March 2015
PERSONAL PERSPECTIVES ON LONELINESS

“At one time people used to whisper the word ‘cancer’ but today the taboo word is ‘lonely’. It is sometimes very difficult to admit that you feel lonely because of what others might think. You might be thought of as being a loner or maybe a little weird. As with most things in life, until you have experienced something it is difficult to understand. It is no different with loneliness and isolation.

I am now in my late sixties but even in early childhood and teenage years I felt very lonely. When I was nine years old my father died and my mother had to go out to work to support my brothers and myself as there were no benefits in these days. She took up nursing and worked different shifts and most of the time we had to come home from school to a cold empty house. Having to light the fire and cook for ourselves. It was a miserable existence and I felt extremely lonely as there was no affection shown to us after my father’s death and we had more or less to fend for ourselves. I was an only girl, one of my brothers being five years older and the other five years younger. When I was ten I was very highly strung and looking back I believe I had a nervous breakdown. I was probably grieving for my father but these things weren’t spoken about then. In the end we all left home in our teens. My brothers moved to England and I got married at 17. When I look back I often think that the lack of affection and the loneliness I felt in my childhood led to a lifetime of depression and anxiety.

I have now been on my own for 22 years and at times I have found it difficult to cope with the loneliness and isolation. When I was first on my own I had a complete breakdown. My whole body, both physically and mentally, shut down and I put on 6 stones in weight practically overnight. I was diagnosed with ME, which left me totally debilitated. Other medical conditions such as depression, diabetes, bowel and digestive problems, asthma, B12 deficiency and a few other conditions added to the list as well. I have tried so hard to lose weight over the years without any success and I have become so disheartened as my efforts have all been in vain. I have read recently that high levels of cortisol in the body due to stress can lead to weight gain and also difficulty in losing weight. As I always feel stressed because of my situation this may be the reason for my lack of success in trying to lose weight.

There are many reasons why people feel so alone, especially in this day and age with the divorce rate being so high. It affects the couples who divorce, the children and in a lot of cases the grandparents as well. The whole dynamics of the family change and the aftermath can sometimes be devastating. When children feel unloved and unwanted, this is when loneliness can set in. Having experienced the lack of affection in my own life I know how important it is to feel loved. It is in childhood that self-esteem is built and to feel unwanted or unloved often leads to many emotional problems in the future”.

PERSONAL PERSPECTIVES ON LONELINESS

“I think it is so important to feel a sense of belonging and having a good network of friends and relations around you. I don’t think some families realise the importance of keeping in touch with their elderly parents or other relatives on a regular basis. I am not thinking so much about myself here, but I know people who are elderly and infirm who seldom see their families.

The effects of loneliness are devastating on both mental and physical health. It is said that laughter is the best medicine. It is easy to laugh when you are interacting with someone else but it is not an easy thing to do when you are on your own. I know some
people don’t need others in their lives but most of us have a longing to be with other people.

I am pleased the Scottish Parliament are looking into the subject but to be truthful with you they can only do so much. It is the lack of intimate relations that is the biggest problem. I do not mean this in a sexual way but having the feeling of closeness to others. It is good being able to socialise and meet other people and lots of people have made true friends in this way. In my case I have joined various things and have met many acquaintances along the way. But acquaintances and friends are two different things and maybe I should have given more of myself but the lack of self-esteem and confidence held me back from doing so and at times I think that I am partially to blame for the loneliness and isolation I feel now.

One thing I would like to bring to the Scottish Parliament’s attention is with regard to people living in sheltered housing. Councils/Housing Associations are cutting back on Scheme Manager (Wardens). Either cutting hours, doing away with Scheme Managers and introducing visiting wardens who would only be in a complex for a few hours per week. A lot of elderly people depend on these managers as they may be the only person they come into contact with and to do away with this service would be criminal. When will decision makers wake up and instead of making drastic cuts to save money remember that there is no substitute for human contact. The cost of a part time warden’s wage is not a lot of money in the big scheme of things and it should be remembered that they play such a vital role in looking after the welfare and wellbeing of tenants. I remember a saying that society is judged by the way it looks after its elderly. The Scottish Government should take note”.

PERSONAL PERSPECTIVES ON LONELINESS

“I have said it before and I will say it again Loneliness is a deadly disease. It is insidious to all stages and ages of life.

I get so fed up when government’s and local authorities assume it is just an age related disease. It is not! It can and does start in childhood.

I call it a disease because it can develop complications; Depression, suicidal ideation, attempted suicide and Suicide. I know this through personnel experience. It started in my childhood.

I also call it a disease as it is hard to catch and for some people incurable.

A small part of my history.

In 1969 my mom a Scot returned to Scotland after the death of my father and a few months previously the death of my baby sister. She returned here to be with her family, I doubt it was very successful but I don’t know. She was a widow bringing up 6 children by herself and being bullied by our neighbours who had of course not known my dad.

Anyway I started primary school. I was different from the other kids because I couldn’t remember the words to the games we use to play so was not allowed to play with the others. I did not learn how to make friends and I remember wishing that a new neighbour would move into my close so I could have a friend.

By the time I got to the secondary school my deafness was discovered but I did not receive any help although I did get dumped into remedial classes, which I hated and was so stigmatising for a young girl. My dyslexia wasn’t recognised until I was in 30’s and was once again trying education”.
“I have been totally isolated in the past which was not good for my mental health.

Main alternative to being isolated is mixing only with other people who also have mental health problems – not healthy or conducive to recovery for me. May help others.

When I was told I had to attend Murray House psychiatric Day Centre (Many years ago) I remember telling my mother “How is mixing with other mentally ill going to help me to get better”. I still hold basically the same view”.

PERSONAL PERSPECTIVES ON LONELINESS

“First of all I am finding it difficult to write about social Isolation sitting here alone in my flat. Basically living in social isolation caused a deterioration in my mental health. It started whilst living alone in the village of Bankfoot where I lived for nearly five years. To be accepted as part of the village community one had to have been born there. Or there might of been acceptance if I had, children. There was a school about 3 mins walk away. Once I got into my house over 90% of the time I saw nobody. After having lived up north in Morayshire where I made a lot of friends this was an unwelcome change. But for a while I accepted it. I did try to join organizations’ at the local church. It would take me too long to write down instances. where I felt I was deliberately shunted because I happened to be a middle aged women living on my own. The only living beings’ I can say I made trusting friendships’ with are the two cats who for a while lived next door. I have a cat for and for one winter it worked to say to myself in my house I have a friend in my black cat called Star which enables me not to think about the unfriendly village community. Come the next winter this was not enough. We all need people that we can open up to. Then of course there is the spring, summer and autumn where I had to go and be seen in the garden by people who did little more than say hello.

When Finally I decided to leave Bankfoot I was experiencing awful pangs of lonely isolation. Every time I’d come back to Bankfoot on the bus I’d have these feelings welling up inside my stomach, I ‘d see people sitting in their houses laughing at me and disturbed images on the road.

I had joined social organizations’ in Perth but when I came back to Bankfoot there was nothing. Sometimes I felt I was banging my head up against a brick wall trying to make people understand this.

I am now staying in a sheltered housing flat for the over sixties in Perth There is activities on in the communal lounge such as Bingo, coffee mornings, Carpet Curling, Darts, Dominoes etc. I can meet with other tenants in the Communal Lounge. However, they don’t seem to go into other peoples flats. I consider I have solved part of the problem of lonely isolation.

Social mobility in my family has caused isolation. Around here the only family member is my 90 year old mother. I have a cousin in Canada and a cousin in Cornwall whom I email. I have a brother in Australia whom I occasionally speak to on the phone.