Meeting the Jones'

Can grassroots initiatives ease loneliness and fix our disconnected neighbourhoods? Reenat Sinay finds out

After a series of break-ins and burglaries on her estate in east London, Lyn Juniper-Solley decided it was time to set up a neighbourhood watch and do something about it. The only problem was, none of the neighbours knew each other – a phenomenon all too common today.

In wondering how to coax all these strangers into working together, Juniper-Solley happened to hear a radio advert for the first ever Big Lunch and thought it was a "fantastic excuse" for all her neighbours to finally meet.

That was back in 2009. The atmosphere on her estate has "changed massively" since then: residents have formed lasting relationships and the burglaries have all but stopped.

"We've definitely seen a reduction in the crime rate because people know that the residents know each other and talk to each other. It's a really desirable place to live now, and in east London that's something I'd like to shout about because that's just not the norm," says Juniper-Solley.

Their Big Lunches have become the social event of the year, drawing over 100 people annually for a day of barbeque, dodgeball games and cake competitions.
The Big Lunch, an initiative created by the Eden Project, is in its seventh year and going strong. Last year nearly 5 million Britons took part nationwide, and even more are expected to at this year's event on Sunday, 7 June.

The idea is simple: people strengthen their communities by getting to know their neighbours over the most British of traditions – the Sunday lunch. Anyone can organise their own event, but they all take place on the first Sunday of June.

Smit, executive vice chairman and co-founder of the Eden Project, says that while the concept is straightforward, the results can be eye opening.

“In places where there’s no social cohesion, Big Lunches often unleash a flood of warmth in people who’ve actually wanted to get to know their neighbours for years and years. They’ve wanted to be in a place where you recognise people, but never had the courage because they’re too shy to knock on people’s doors and say hello,” he says.

Rebuilding communities via the stomach is more than just a light-hearted way to make new friends or reduce crime. One of the main aims of the project is to tackle rampant loneliness created and perpetuated by a lack of social connection.

Loneliness is on the rise in Britain. Last year, we earned the less-than-flattering title of ‘loneliness capital of Europe’ following a survey conducted by the Office of National Statistics (ONS) – a distinction the secretary of state for health, Jeremy Hunt, called our “national shame”.

While it’s simply part of the human condition to feel lonely from time to time, the number of people whose loneliness just won’t go away is on the rise. According to the ONS, one in seven Brits (15 per cent) reported feeling very lonely in their daily lives.

Chronic loneliness – often defined as having less than three strong personal relationships – has recently been proven to have a more negative impact on our health than either obesity or smoking cigarettes. It can lead to cardiac arrest and premature death, in addition to being associated with a wide array of mental health issues.

Dr Rebecca Harris, an expert on loneliness and psychology professor at the University of Bolton, believes targeted government spending and a change in the ethos of our insular lifestyles are needed to tackle the mounting problem. And it’s not just a physical one.

Although there have been no official calculations or estimates, Dr Harris says the financial price of chronic loneliness and treating its related physical effects are “costing the nation a lot of money”.

Yet for such a widespread, potentially dangerous and expensive situation, government policy is inexplicably lacking.

“Obesity and smoking are given more government funding for public health campaigns,” says Dr Harris.

Rohini Simboyal, spokesperson for the Campaign to End Loneliness, says that although the Care Act – which has provisions for chronically lonely and isolated older people – was enacted last year, “only 51 per cent of local councils have put strategies in place to carry out that policy”.

There are currently no government policies that deal with loneliness in younger people.

Young people aged 18 to 34 were recently found to be the loneliest age group in Britain, with 83 per cent describing themselves as lonely in an Opinium survey.

Combine a young generation of lonely souls with disintegrating community spirit, and the future looks pretty bleak.

The most recent ONS Wellbeing survey found that less that half of people under 44 in the UK value friendships and associations in their local neighbourhoods.

“We’re becoming a society that’s forgetting about community spirit and supporting people that live near us,” says Dr Harris.

Nowhere is this more severely felt than in big cities where we’re surrounded by strangers. Particularly in places like London, we just want to escape from the chaos outside and shut

ourselves in with wine and Netflix at the end of a long and crowded commute. People seem content to go about their daily lives sometimes never meeting those who live next door.

In Lucy Williams' neighbourhood in Archway, north London, some of the residents lived near each other for decades without ever having had a conversation. As a freelance photographer, she felt isolated working from home but not knowing anyone around her.

"I wasn't sadly lonely, but as a freelancer I sometimes wouldn't have seen someone to speak to for a couple of days," she says.

Williams credits the Big Lunch with finally bringing the neighbourhood together.

"I really missed having people I could pop in and have a cup of tea with, or people I just said hi to, and now I've got that," she says. "We do things like go to the pub quiz, go for drinks; we sometimes have a Christmas drinks as well."
Lyn Juniper-Solley has found community gatherings such as these to be an effective way to get the 18-34 age group involved.

"Over the last seven years of doing the Big Lunch, I've really seen more and more single mums joining in, or immigrants who feel very isolated to either their own homes or to people who speak their languages. They're coming out now and mixing with other people and feeling more comfortable," she says. "It's multi-purpose."

Dr Harris, who works with the Big Lunch, says the project proves that simply reaching out to other people can make for a happier society.

"Instead of talking about loneliness and how we need to reduce it, they were just encouraging people to make friends with their neighbours, eat with people. We focus so much on the problem rather than thinking, 'actually the solution is to just get out there and start interacting with other people,'" she says.

The nationwide impact of the Big Lunch is proof that grassroots community efforts can lead to real change on a local level, but its just one of several movements to enhance social cohesion.

Alex Nunn, a spokesperson for Action for Happiness, says that these types of grassroots initiatives to improve personal relationships in a community are part of a wider localisation trend – something he calls "recommunitising".

Examples can be found everywhere from the launch of the Brixton Pound (B£) to support local Brixton businesses to housing campaigns like Focus E15.

Action for Happiness encourages its members to take positive individual action, the most visible product of which is the sprouting up of "happy cafes" around the country.

London's first happy café, started by members of Action for Happiness, is another example of an attempt to bring the local community together.

Canvas in Shoreditch encourages its patrons to doodle, leave messages for each other, or answer prompts written on its white walls. It also hosts laughing workshops, film nights, and discussions on happiness and wellbeing.

"When you've got those people together and you give them a space in which they can express themselves, it actually changes the overall energy within the place and makes it a much more conducive environment for people to strike up conversations and make new connections," says Nunn of Canvas.

"Recommunitising local areas is not the immediate effect of them, but it's an end goal. Just by virtue of that you've got all sorts of conversations going on that you wouldn't normally overhear in a coffee shop in east London," he adds.

Big Lunch organiser Lucy Williams hasn't missed a beat. She uses her photography skills to run an initiative called NOW Portrait, in which she encourages others to photograph – and speak to – strangers. Similar to the popular photo blog Humans of New York, the collection of pictures create a tapestry of the local community. But more importantly, Williams says, the project encourages people to overcome their awkwardness and make conversation with new people.

"What I found is that people do want to talk once you say hi to them. People always stop for five minutes at least for a little chat. And people are so interesting, they've got all these stories, have all different backgrounds and beliefs and sexual orientations and everyone comes together. We're all just the same really.

Williams set up NOWPortrait in March 2014. So far it has attracted over 70 participants who have chatted with and photographed over 250 strangers.

"People have amazing breakthroughs in doing it. People have emailed me like 'Oh my god I can't believe it! I was so scared and then I talked to a stranger and they were so lovely and I found out that they live just down the road and now I've got a new friend'," she says.
Not everyone is convinced by these optimistic schemes, however.

Like many young people who move to London from a small town in search of work and adventure, Lauren Smith, 25, had a euphoric first few weeks in town. Then she began to find herself in a work-sleep-work routine with no locally based close friends to ease her transition to London.

Smith recently moved into an ex-council flat in northeast London where she gets along with her three flatmates, but doesn't know anyone else in the building. When asked if she would attend something like the Big Lunch, she cringes and says, "Definitely not. I wouldn't be caught dead at something like that."

But organisers like Williams aren't fooled by this attitude. She insists that even though many people don't respond to invitations, they end up stopping by when they see everyone together.

"The starting off is difficult when you have this idea in your head about community things like, 'Oh it's going to be one of *those* kind of events'. But then you come along and you realise that everyone's normal, everyone's having some wine to drink, everyone's having a laugh," she says.

It is this type of connection that Sir Tim Smit intended the Big Lunch to inspire all along – giving strangers an excuse to talk to each other in what could otherwise be a very awkward situation.

"We wanted it to feel as if it was something people had been doing all their lives," he says.

And so it should be. After all, as Dr Harris says, "People are like essential vitamins for us. People make us well."

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