

Loneliness is not an affliction, but a lack of community power



A new demographic has formed in the Netherlands over the past couple of years; that of lonely people. It almost seems as though loneliness is a type of affliction, a disease you contract or a condition you suffer from. Once you have been labelled a lonely person, you are no longer the person you have been all your life up until then – someone with good and bad traits, preferences and talents, favourite pastimes and a will of your own. Someone living on this or that street, with neighbours; someone who goes to school, has co-workers, enjoys soap series, gets annoyed by footballs ending up in their backyard, and is cheered by the cashier at the Coop saying ‘good morning’. No, once you’ve been assigned this label, you are lonely first and foremost – and therefore pitiful.

On the other hand, there’s the ‘not-lonely people’. This includes the people who try to help you to no longer be lonely – with the best of intentions, to be sure! A veritable army of professionals and civil servants, ranging from municipal initiatives to welfare organisations, from the GGZ mental health association to your local library, and from the provincial-level government to knowledge centres and research institutions. Everyone goes all out to fight the advance of loneliness, make it a municipal priority and earn it a spot on the political agenda. There’re anti-loneliness programmes, a Loneliness Information Centre, aid for local initiatives to tackle loneliness including a step-by-step plan, and a checklist for such initiatives. There’re local task forces, loneliness meetings, social-cognitive training interventions, loneliness weeks and coalitions

*“We’re Sergeant Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band
We hope you have enjoyed the show
Sergeant Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band
We’re sorry but it’s time to go.” The Beatles*

against loneliness. Preferably ‘integrated’ ones, meaning that professionals from various organisations enter the fray together.

The fact that so many people in our modern western society feel lonely is obviously a real problem. However, I think most of the current anti-loneliness efforts and propaganda are not doing much to change the situation. I am referring to those efforts based on a pitiful framework, geared towards spotting lonely people and having non-lonely people help them.

What I think could make a difference, however, are those initiatives and practices that do not revolve around loneliness as a problem or around the demographic of ‘lonely ones’, but are instead geared towards creating meaningful relationships within communities and dissembling the alleged antithesis between lonely/non-lonely and vulnerable/invulnerable.

Initiatives that are geared towards sustainable relationships within neighbourhoods, creating communities that make *everyone* feel welcome, no matter how eccentric, no matter how little social interaction you are capable of engaging in. And initiatives that are geared towards what *everyone* has to offer, based on the notion that ‘there are no have nots’ (as Jim Diers, social work professor in Seattle and international community builder, put it). I refer to these types of initiatives as the ones based on a community framework.

Approach based on a pitiful framework	Approach based on a community framework
Objective: fewer lonely people	Objective: communities in which people care for one another and in which everyone is seen as part of the community
Aimed at decreasing loneliness	Aimed at increasing happiness, a sense of community, and resilient, strong, open local communities
Focus on the problem: Minister of Loneliness (GB)	Focus on perspective: Alderman of Happiness (Schagen municipality)
Lonely people as the target audience	Local residents as the target audience
Lonely people need to be helped – The non-lonely people help the lonely ones	Everyone in a community has something unique to offer to that community. People’s own lives and community life as a whole are enriched when different types of people are able to play their part, switching between roles and between being the helper and the person being helped.
Efforts revolve around the main objective: loneliness is seen as a problem and attempts are made to track down the Lonely Ones	Meandering, looking for and effecting a sense of community within neighbourhoods, finding people who serve as connectors and people who have things in common with one another
Temporary: interventions, consisting of projects, programmes, campaigns, calls to action	Permanent. Contributions are geared towards people’s daily lives and life within the community and are fine-tuned accordingly.
Loneliness is seen as a personal problem of individual people, that can be solved by deploying the right expertise	Loneliness is seen as a collective problem to be handled by local residents, without the involvement of professionals
Actors: professionals/counsellors, municipalities and social organisations are the most important players in the field	Actors: neighbours, friends, including people who feel lonely, and local entrepreneurs are the most important players in the field. Local professionals and people from outsider the neighbourhood form a second line of defence.
For these kinds of approaches, the target audience usually does not play an active role in the project, but serves only as the object being acted upon	Everyone is an actor within this approach, including the people who feel lonely

‘If loneliness is the problem, community is the answer’ **Cormac Russel – referencing Margaret Wheatley**

Allow me to explain what I mean when I talk about approaches based on a community framework, and why I feel those types of initiatives are more effective than interventions based on a pitiful framework. A community-based approach required you to view people, neighbourhoods, and the power of communities in a different light. When you try to define what it is that makes people happy, the same principles prevail across the globe.

Everyone has a need for social contact and for doing things together

Everyone wants to be seen and heard, to feel acknowledged

Everyone wants to achieve their full potential

Everyone wants to be meaningful to others

Everyone wants to be a part of something

Take yourself, for instance. When you feel lonely, sad, or worthless, you are comforted, experience a sense of alleviation, are cheered and lifted from your bad mood when one of these principles makes itself known. To put these principles into practice, you need neither programmes nor professionals. We all love stories and movies in which these five principles are the connecting factor – in which people meet one another, build something together, mean something to others, engage in personal relationships and are a part of something bigger. This enables them to lead fuller, richer lives and, consequently, feel less lonely. Look at video’s as: ‘As it was in heaven’, ‘Young at heart’. ‘A simple life’. These are all stories about the power of community, about living small, small actions, events, and chance encounters that change people’s lives for the better – simply because they feel at home somewhere, feel a part of something, meet one another, make a difference in someone else’s life, help empower other people and thus enrich their own lives in the process.

Cormac Russell is Managing Director of Nurture Development and a faculty member of the Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) Institute at Northwestern University, Chicago, and an international ABCD trainer. He says the following about loneliness: *‘Can you think of anything more lonely-making than being a client of a bespoke service to de-programme your loneliness? Reduction of loneliness is an ambition that creates the illusion of hitting the target, but in the end inevitably misses the point. Loneliness is not the absence of programmes, but of a sense of belonging and having valued roles in community (non-professionalised) life and life in general (citizenship), the solution therefore is found in community building at neighbourhood level, not in loneliness surveys.’* [Go here to read Russell’s entire blog post.](#)

LOKAAL-O, the place to find community creators in Baarn/The Netherlands

In my neighbourhood, we – as neighbours - founded in 2015 a temporary community centre in an former school building, called LOKAAL-O www.lokaal-o.nl

As local residents we have started all sorts of initiatives there, based on what we are interested in and what makes us happy. For example, we have founded the Happy Kids/Happy People club, where children and adults come together to do arts and crafts together. Each week, the ‘beautiful meetings’ group meets, to chat and just get to know one another better. On Wednesdays and Saturdays, the Give-Away Shop convenes; loads of people meet up for coffee and chat about their week. And on Wednesdays, the neighbourhood library is open for business.

All of these are initiatives that are easy to join and open to everyone, in which you serve not just as a volunteer, but as a happiness creator and community creator as well. Lots of the people who show up would fall neatly into one of the target demographics of a welfare organisation; poor families, lonely senior citizens, children with impairments, people with debt, people who are chronically ill, people living in a shelter... But at LOKAAL-O, they are not a demographic; they are simply themselves. They have fun with one another and get to



know their neighbours better through a range of activities. And if you were to ask them whether their contributions and contacts with others make them feel happier, whether it has given their life more meaning, those people who felt lonely before affirm that they feel less lonely now.

A welfare organisation recently attempted to start a regular coffee meetup at LOKAAL-O for ‘people who sometimes feel lonely or would just like a listening ear from time to time’. No one showed up.

What could you do differently?

What could you as a community worker and community creator do differently if you want to exchange your old, loneliness approach for working on creating local communities? To inspire you, I am listing a number of building blocks below, based on the ACBD (Asset-Based Community Development) view on community building.

There are loads of initiatives – including amongst anti-loneliness programmes – that are based on the starting principle of connecting people and creating more relationships and social cohesion. You as a policymaker, social initiator, director, or social worker can choose to base your plans and actions on these principles and exchange your loneliness approach for community-building. Instead, work on creating a sense of community, on establishing more sociable, equal contacts between the people

*“Oh, I get by with a little help from my friends.
Hmm, going to try with a little help from my friends.”
The Beatles*

within a neighbourhood, on fostering local communities, on developing the innate talents of people and neighbourhoods, regardless of whether they feel lonely or not.

Working on a context that invites interaction

To stop the advance of loneliness, the best approach is to abandon the usual host of programmes and projects and instead become a part of the day-to-day micro communities in neighbourhoods and towns. Have your intent in all that you do be to create a context that invites interaction (that is the mission of architect [Stephanie Akkaoui Hughes](#)). Regardless of whether you are involved in neighbourhood projects and/or activities, resolving conflicts, building new homes, developing public space... Focus all of your efforts on helping people meet one another, engage in conversation with one another, and get to know one another better, in line with the motto of famous community builder Jim Diers: *'The best value of a project is not the project, but bringing people together.'*

Working on meaningful relationships within neighbourhoods

Whether you are at work in a neighbourhood as part of a social organisation, as a social worker, as a GGZ employee, or as part of a social neighbourhood team, stop creating substantive performance agreements and objectives! Have your only objective be to stimulate the creation of more meetings, meaningful relationships and friendships in the neighbourhood. As youth worker Mike from Heemstede mentioned in a recent meeting: 'All of my work really revolves around trying to get more people to say 'hello' to one another.' This is the most important tool for preventing people from becoming lonely: an environment that invites people to establish meaningful relationships and friendships in their neighbourhood. Research by professor Anja Machielse who teaches on the subject of vulnerable senior citizens, shows that meaningful relationships are what is lacking most from the lives of socially isolated people. According to Machielse, meaningful relationships contribute to increased self-confidence and personal autonomy. She lists the following characteristics of meaningful relationships: familiarity, mutual support, and being able to display vulnerability.



A touching confirmation of the difference that meaningful and equal relationships can make in people's lives is this documentary about a pair of neighbours, ['Dien en Eric'](#). What makes it stand out is the equal footing that the two neighbours are on: Dien (95 years old) is not pitiful, and Eric (53 years old) is not a volunteer, but a neighbour. They both like music and a drink from time to time and are very fond of one another. Dien: 'Eric is like medicine to me. His presence alone can cheer me up. He is just a big ball of love. He allows me to be a part of everything, as though I am a family member.'

We have a wonderful relationship. I really love the guy.’ Eric: ‘Everyone appreciates her wisdom and her ability to lend a listening ear. Dien really showcases the power of old age.’

There are no have nots; everyone has something to offer

People who are different, socially inept, so to speak, often get left out in society. After all, who wants to sit next to someone who smells bad, or live next to someone who has psychotic freak-outs from time to time? And yet, it is precisely these local residents who often live immensely lonely lives. Therefore, the fight against loneliness is about building local communities together that welcome even those who do not fit into the norm of that community – not out of pity (‘even this wretch needs a place to go’), but out of an understanding that everyone has something to offer. ‘We need you, it’s more fun for everyone if you join in. We could learn something from you, do something together.’ Allow me to reiterate: ‘There are no have nots.’



This requires you to view things from a different perspective, by looking at what people do have, instead of what they do not (or no longer) have. Looking at what they like to do, are still able to do, what hidden desires they harbour. Loneliness often arises due to the fact that no one is appealing to what that person has to offer any longer, leading them to feel meaningless.

If you want to know happens when such a person is once again invited to bring their assets to the table, watch Cormac Russel’s [Ted Talk](#) about Robin from Leeds. This example also shows the effects of someone initiating and creating initiatives or activities themselves, as opposed to consuming the initiatives or activities of others.

Instead of more professionals and projects, increased power of community and more community builders

Professionals usually base their approach on the contrast between ‘vulnerable’ and ‘powerful’, and the assumption that you have to (be able to) make people better through interventions and programmes. Their focus is on tracking down and solving problems. However, it is debatable whether that’s a very effective approach, particularly when dealing with issues of loneliness. As Annie M.G. Schmidt once said: ‘I no longer believe in helping, because it doesn’t help at all.’

Community builders base their approach on



the premise that personal relationships and friendships and caring, open communities can be of greater value to people's lives than social work programmes and charity projects. You can diagnose someone as being lonely and then have them join a group activity or pair them with a buddy, but true change will remain elusive until that person feels acknowledged and as though they are a part of something – of a club or setting that matches what is important to them.

Consider the so-called 'city villages' in Amsterdam. All surveys among members reveal a single overriding thing that everyone appreciates and lists as a reason for their membership: getting to know other people, spending time with one another, feeling more at home in their neighbourhood. And to stimulate that kind of development, you don't need professionals – you need initiatives by local residents and community builders, who are able to navigate the neighbourhood and local communities freely, irrespective of protocols and schedules.

Make a difference in your neighbourhood yourself

There are lots of low-effort ways for you as a local resident, neighbour, or social initiator to do things that will help people in your area feel more seen and less lonely. For example, consider greeting everyone and taking a moment to chat with people you encounter regularly, even if you see them in a professional capacity. 'Small talk is the smallest link in humanity's social chain,' says Lenette van Dongen. The effect that saying a simple 'good morning' can have on people was tested by Jeroen van Osch from Brabant. He was so stunned by the impact of doing so that he then went on to start a full-blown ['good morning movement'](#).

That way, loneliness will only remain a public health concern if we let it

Another way is to go looking for 'pegs' in your own neighbourhood to all have a more enjoyable time together, such as by inviting people who aren't really a part of things right now to join as well. Start by asking yourself and your neighbours different questions, such as 'How many people on our street/in our neighbourhood do you know by name, and who do you (and don't you) regularly chat with? What is it that you do within your street/neighbourhood, in what ways do you come into contact with your neighbours? What do you guys do together? Is there anyone you know in your street/neighbourhood that isn't really a part of something, or who lives a rather secluded life? What do you really know about these people?' You might find that your life is enriched by dealing with more people who are different from the rest of your social network – people whom you normally wouldn't reach out to as easily.

That way, loneliness will only remain a public health concern if we let it. There isn't an expert or professional in the world who is able to change this trend, and the societal call to embrace and support senior citizens isn't providing much relief either. Meaningful relationships, being able to make a meaningful contribution, achieving your full potential and really being a part of something – those are things that will make a difference. Let's all get to work in our local communities and make sure that everyone, including your lonely neighbour, is able to contribute to and be a part of community life. And let's stop investing in anti-loneliness programmes that look for volunteers to alleviate the burden of loneliness for people.

Birgit Oelkers - The Netherlands - www.planenaanpak.nl - 2018