



Finding  
friends  
and coping  
ok with  
loneliness

## About Angus McFlourish

Outside the Box has been working with Angus Voice, a mental health advocacy group in Angus, on the Angus McFlourish project which organises things for people with mental health problems to do to reduce social isolation and loneliness.

The first part of this project is making a diary of events for people to go to. We want to find activities that people can go along to alone or with a friend, that don't cost a lot of money and give the opportunity to make new friends. So far the group have come up with a lot of varied ideas, including having a photography taster session, starting a walking club and a creative writing club and meeting monthly to go to the cinema together.

The second part of the project is putting together a list of businesses run by other people that are 'mental health friendly' in Arbroath or the surrounding area so we can ensure that people with mental health problems in Arbroath can go to businesses that are warm and welcoming.

The third part is sharing tips on how to prevent loneliness. From discussions with Angus Voice, and other groups we work with, we know that feeling down and isolated can be quite a common experience if you have mental health problems. To see more about what the group is up to, take a look on Angus Voice's website: [www.angusvoice.co.uk](http://www.angusvoice.co.uk)



## About this booklet

This booklet comes from the Angus McFlourish project. It brings together the experiences of people who live with mental health problems and others who experience social isolation or loneliness from time to time.

The tips here go alongside the ideas on ways to meet people and find things to do in our other booklets:

- **Surviving Christmas and New Year.**
- **Keeping Well and Enjoying Ourselves.**

We hope this booklet gives you ideas on ways to become and stay more connected to the people around you, and feel ok at times when you do feel lonely.

We want to thank people who are part of Grampian Opportunities, Mind Waves, Tweeddale Youth Action, Women's Support Project, other projects in the Social Isolation and Loneliness programme and all the other people who contributed their suggestions.

# What loneliness and social isolation are

Being around other people is a strong human instinct. For most people, most of the time, it is better to be near other people: we are less likely to be harmed and, if something bad does happen to us, then there is a better chance of us getting the help we need. A caveman who was with friends would have a better chance of surviving than a caveman living on his own.

**Social inclusion** means having connections with other people. When we use that term today we are including all sorts of connections: houses that are near others, good communication connections that let us use phones and internet, transport connections that let people in outlying areas come into town when they want to, contact with people who share our experiences or interests, and being with people to whom we feel very close.

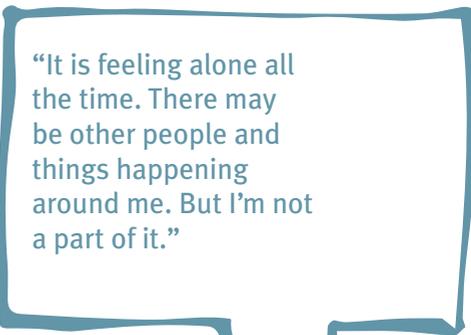
**Social isolation** is when we don't have enough of those contacts. It is what each person needs, as all our circumstances are different. So the ideal is for people to have lots of ways to stay connected as that way we can all be included in the communities that matter to us.

**Loneliness** is a normal feeling that everyone experiences. It is when there is a gap between the

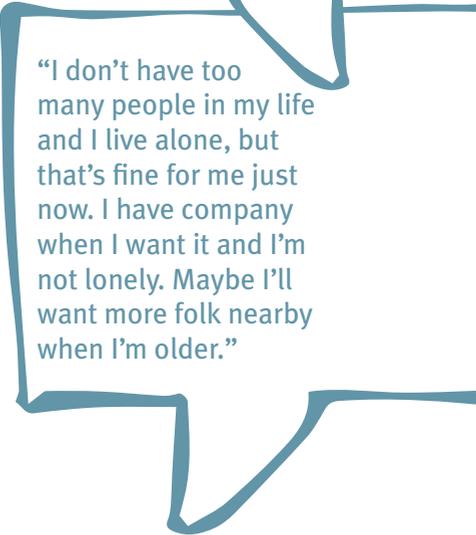
human contact we want and the contact we have at that time. It is our body and mind reminding us that we should get nearer to other people in order to be safe.

Loneliness is about the type of contact as well as the amount of contact. So someone may have lots of people around them but that doesn't replace having one person to whom they feel very close, for example.

Loneliness becomes much harder to cope with when we are not able to make the contacts that we need with other people, and especially when this goes on for a long time. In these circumstances loneliness is bad for our mental and physical wellbeing.



“It is feeling alone all the time. There may be other people and things happening around me. But I’m not a part of it.”



“I don’t have too many people in my life and I live alone, but that’s fine for me just now. I have company when I want it and I’m not lonely. Maybe I’ll want more folk nearby when I’m older.”

# Friends in the physical world

We tend to use the one word – friend – for lots of different types of relationships.

There are the people we recognise and say hello to – our acquaintances:

- These include neighbours, people we see in places like shops and people who go to the same places that we do.
- It is good to have people like this around us. The relationships are not deep, but they still matter.
- Some of these people could become closer friends if we got to know each other, but we don't know that at the start.

There are the people who we know better, and who most people think of when they talk about friends.

- We usually share at least some interests and/or experiences with them.
- We like them and know they like us.
- We enjoy spending time with them.
- Our friends might also know each other, or we might be the only person who connects with each person or group.
- We might confide in or trust them on some matters but wouldn't expect to share other things with them.

There are people who we know through one shared experience or interest.

- This can be through a club or sport or hobby or similar activity.
- It can be people who share our faith or language.
- It can be other people who are gay.
- People might feel able to confide in each other about one aspect of their lives, yet not be especially close in other ways.
- There will be degrees of closeness among the people we know here, just as with friends from other situations.

There are the few people we know very well and trust a lot, who most people describe as close friends.

- These are people who we can share personal things with and tell them what we really feel.
- We know we will each be there for the other.
- We are in this for the long-term: we have probably known each other for a while and expect to stay close in the future.

Family members also tend to be spread across these types of relationships.

- There are the aunts and cousins we exchange Christmas cards with. We know we are related but don't feel particularly close to each other.
- There are the people we like seeing at family occasions and who we meet if we are near by.
- There are people we think of as close family, who we see or talk to regularly, and we know each other well.
- Again, people move between levels of closeness over time.
- Family can be friends too.

"I've got my yoga friends and neighbours who are friends and people I used to work beside. Within that there are 2 or 3 people I would turn to if I needed to talk over something that was worrying me."

"I saw my cousin at gran's funeral. We went for a coffee a few weeks later and it was really nice seeing her again. We found we've got similar interests and now we meet once a month or so for lunch and we sometimes go to the cinema together. I never thought of family as a place to find friends."

## Friends in the digital world

Most people nowadays have some sort of social connection with people online. This could mean anything from using emails to stay in touch with friends who have moved away to forming whole new relationships and becoming part of a community online.

Having friends who you connect with online, or over the phone, can be just as nice as having friends you meet up with face to face. Also, if you live quite remotely, or find it hard to get out and about, having friends online can be really helpful. You might also have a specific interest and not know anyone nearby who shares this with you. Making friends online can be a great way to connect with a community of people who are interested in the same things through routes like forums and Facebook groups.

Online friendships can also be a helpful way to share how you feel. Some people find it easier to open up about their feelings and experiences online than they do face to face, so chatting to friends online can be a good way to offload some of your worries.

Doing activities online can be a good way to be part of a community, meet people or even make a contribution. This could be anything from playing an online game to volunteering to be part of an online project.

There can be a big crossover between online friendships and real-life ones. For all sorts of reasons, it can be hard to get together face to face regularly, but online contact can help build and maintain relationships in between.

Online dating and friendship sites can be a good way to meet people. Sometimes, you can feel like you know someone quite well before you ever meet in real life. However, remember people are sometimes different from how they present themselves online. If you arrange to meet up, choose a public place where you feel safe and you can leave easily if you want to.

Remember that looking at what people share online can sometimes make us feel like our lives are boring in comparison. Try to remember that most people only share their best days on social media. Behind the scenes, everyone has bad days.

“Social media sites like Facebook or Instagram can be a good way of keeping in touch with people, whether you see them every week or not at all.”

“I find digital friendships easier than face to face ones. This can be a good way to talk to people when you are feeling shy or not confident.”

“Don’t be put off by stuff in the news about bullying on social media. There is bullying in the real world too. I’ve got friends in both places who have helped me deal with that.”

“My wife came out as trans a few years ago and lost a lot of her friends. Where we live she doesn’t really feel safe trying to make new friends so all of her good friends are online, on websites like Tumblr. It’s great that she has been able to make such a supportive group of friends online.”

“I’m part of hobby groups that bring together people from all over the world. It doesn’t matter what time of day or night it is, there are always some people on the forums who want to talk about photography. That has got me through some really difficult times. You can find the same for your hobbies and interests too.”

“I found a book group online. We get together once a month in real life to talk about the book we’ve read, which is great. We have a group Facebook chat where we organise our get-togethers, but we also share links to other things we’ve been reading and generally have a bit of a laugh. The combination of the online and real life interaction means we’ve built up proper meaningful friendships over time.”

“There are Facebook groups for people from different countries who live in different cities in the UK. I go on the one with people from my country so I can see how they feel about events happening back home. It makes me feel a lot more connected and we have good chats.”

# Tips on finding the friends you want

## Making friends

Often we find our friends among our acquaintances, and our close friends among our friends.

Be in places where you are likely to meet people.

- Go to places where there are people who probably share your interests.
- Get to know your acquaintances better.
- Be there regularly. We get to know people when we see them each day or week or month. It lets us pick up on the conversation we had the last time.
- Go back to places and groups that you used to be part of, even if you have been away for a while.
- Look for situations where people talk to each other naturally.

Ask the people you know to help you make new friends.

- They can help you build your confidence and remind you what you enjoy doing and are good at.
- It can be easier to go to a new group or place if you have a pal with you for the first few times.

Be willing to take the initiative.

- Say hello and smile to start off a conversation.
- Suggest going for a coffee after a group you both go to.
- Offer to help with practical things, as that often is a good way to get to know people and feel involved.

Put in enough effort.

- Pay attention to the other person. Listen to them. Remember what they are interested in.
- Have something to bring to the conversation. Topics like what is happening in television soaps and football are good topics for conversations with people you don't know well.

Don't expect too much.

- Give enough time for any friendship to develop.
- Remember that not all friendships are the same. Take each friendship as it comes.
- Be aware of what the other person expects from a friendship.
- Remember that you can be friends and not agree on everything.
- Don't compare a friendship with other relationships – either the other friendships you have had, or with what you see in places like films and social media.

## Keep yourself well and safe.

- Remember that most people are nice, but there are some people who target isolated or apparently vulnerable people, especially women and people who are older.
- Let any new friendship develop at a pace that is right for you.
- Be aware of signs that this may not be right for you – such as if the other person does not listen to you or respect you, or makes you feel uncomfortable.
- Don't rush to share personal information.
- Talk it over with someone you do know and trust if you are feeling unsure about anything.

“If there are opportunities to get to know the people who live in your village or street, or workplace or sports club, take them. I wouldn't say the people in my street are all my friends, but I say hello to 3 or 4 people every time I step out my front door.”

“My bus got me in half an hour before the training session was due to start. At first I just checked my phone, stuff like that. One week I went in because it was raining and helped to set up the equipment. Then I did that each week. You feel more involved when you are doing something like that.”

“My sister persuaded me to go along with her to a choir that she went to. The other people there were nice but they all knew each other and I still felt on my own. One week they needed some folk to help with setting up for the tea break and my sister volunteered us both. After that I offered to help with the tea break each week. It is a good way to get to know people because you chat as you are clearing up. By the end of that session I was on ‘hello’ terms with everyone in the group and felt closer to the other people who organise the tea. I now go every week, even when my sister can’t get. I’m more involved in the choir now than she is.”

“Try things that you used to enjoy. I was dead keen on art when I was wee, but you start believing you are no good at things like that. There was an exhibition by an art class at the community centre and I popped in when I was there for something else. Some of the paintings were good but others weren’t that great. I thought ‘I could at least manage that’. One of the people who was there said hello. He was a member of the group and they were hoping to encourage more people to join. I went when they started after the summer. It helped that he came up to me the first night and said he remembered me. He sort of looked after me for the first night. But by then I was hooked. I’ve been going for 3 years now and made such good friends. We have such a laugh.”

## Keeping friends

Keep up the contact if you can. Even small things help people stay friends over periods when you are both busy with other things in your lives.

Don't expect a friendship to always have equal effort. Sometimes your friend will be struggling and you do most of the phone calls and arranging to meet. Then there will be times when it works the other way.

Remember it is ok to get back in touch with someone after a break – these things happen, but you can pick up the contact again.

Try to find the balance that works for you between digital contact, like talking on the phone, and physical contact. Remember that this can change over time. You need to decide what works best for you.

“I had a best friend where I lived before. I realised I was looking for a replacement for her. Now I enjoy being friends with people here in a different sort of way. But the best thing was making the effort to keep in touch more with my old friend. We use social media a lot and try to meet somewhere every month or so.”

“It doesn't have to be deep and meaningful all the time: just sharing a funny picture of a cat on WhatsApp is enough to let someone know you're thinking of them.”

## When friendships end

Remember that most friendships have gradual endings as well as gradual beginnings.

- People often drift apart as other things happen in their lives.
- Don't worry or take it personally when this happens.
- It is ok to be the one to end a friendship, or to make it less close.
- Ending a friendship doesn't have to be done in a dramatic way.
- If anyone is making you feel bad or is hurting you, then move away.

If you feel that you do need to end a friendship, or make it a lower-key relationship, you can tell your friend that you are busy or unable to meet up. If you want to explain to them why you think you shouldn't be friends anymore, or see less of

“Make the effort to see each other often. Getting out and seeing people who all care about each other is a boost any day but especially when you are feeling down.”

“Sometimes I'm happy with texts and so on. But there are times when you need to meet your pal for coffee and have a hug at the end of it.”

“I haven't stayed in contact with anyone from college. It's a shame. But it's ok.”

each other, then that is ok too. Sometimes a letter or email can be a good way to explain this as it gives you time to work out what you want to say and it means the other person has time to process the information.

Usually the other person will understand why you are now seeing each other less. But sometimes when people feel rejected they get annoyed or become quite defensive. Here are some ways you can look after yourself if that happens:

- **Make sure you speak to friends and family who can be supportive and help you.**
- **If the person is rude to you, don't respond as that could mean that things get worse. Record anything bad that happens, like any mean text messages you receive, in case you want to refer to them later on.**
- **Any bad feelings the person has towards you will probably go away with time though.**

“I was sad when I realised that many of my old friends had moved away or we just didn't see or phone each other much now. But that prompted me to start doing things that interest me now. And that's where I found people who I have more in common with now.”

“I have a friend who expects me to speak for hours to him on the phone all the time about his mental health. But that triggers bad feelings for me. I am going to distance myself from him a bit because it's important that I look after myself.”

- Remember why you have decided to not be friends with the person any more. It's important to put your wellbeing first.

These are things you can do if you find that the other person is no longer keeping in touch with you.

- Talk to other people you know – other friends and family, people at groups like Angus Voice.
- You can talk over how you feel with a volunteer or worker, such as a support line. There are contact details at the end of the booklet.
- Remember that this happens. It is a natural part of many relationships.
- You can find more people to talk to and that is where you will find other people to be friends with now.

“It’s important to remember that having bad relationships with people can make you feel worse than spending time by yourself. It’s ok to sometimes choose to spend time alone instead of forcing yourself to spend time with someone who doesn’t help your mental health.”

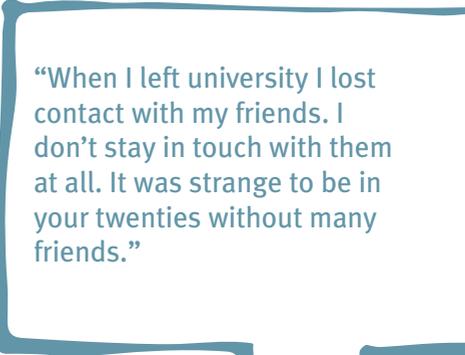
“I have a friend who expects me to speak for hours to him on the phone all the time about his mental health. But that triggers bad feelings for me. I am going to distance myself from him a bit because it’s important that I look after myself.”

## Social contact and mental health

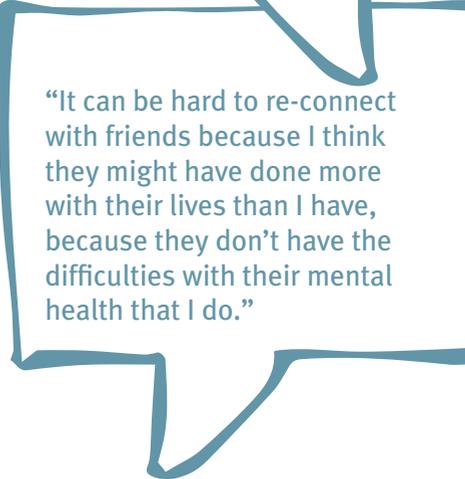
All of this is harder when we have mental health problems.

Some people will have missed the friendship stage that happens in our late teens to twenties. That early adult time is when some friendships from school move into adult roles while others drop away, we meet people at college and our first jobs who share our experiences and interests, or we move away from home and find other people in new places. That is also the age when people can experience the first major episode of some significant illnesses. If we are in hospital or at clinics a lot at that time, or dropping out of college or not able to work when we are unwell, then we miss the contacts that could grow into stronger friendships.

If someone has had time away then it can be harder to have the usual social chat that is the first stage of getting to know people.



“When I left university I lost contact with my friends. I don’t stay in touch with them at all. It was strange to be in your twenties without many friends.”



“It can be hard to re-connect with friends because I think they might have done more with their lives than I have, because they don’t have the difficulties with their mental health that I do.”

The symptoms of some mental health problems, and the impacts of medication, can make social contact more difficult. Examples include:

- **Finding it hard to concentrate.**
- **Coping with hearing voices.**
- **Feeling tired and lethargic.**
- **Feeling anxious when there are too many people around.**
- **Finding rooms get too hot and feeling you can't breathe.**

It can be hard to understand all the small nuances around contact with other people. A lot of social contact, especially between people who don't yet know each other well, relies on body language and small verbal clues, with patterns that are shared for each place or setting. This can be hard to understand for anyone, and harder when you have not had so much practice or when you are not well.

If people have let you down in the past, such as dropping contact when you became ill, it can be hard to open up to new friendships in case you are hurt again.

These are our tips for the early stages of getting to know people.

- **Have things to talk about.**

- Have ways to describe yourself that will be ok for most people and situations.
- Don't put yourself under pressure: some people you meet will not become your friend and that is ok.
- Don't expect too much from other people.

People who know each other through mental health groups like Angus Voice – and other sorts of peer support groups – can help each other.

- Encourage each other.
- Look for things you can do that bring you into contact with more people. An example could be 2 people going to a hobby group that one person wants to do, just to get over the first few sessions. Then you go together to something that interests the second person to let them find some friends there.
- Practice listening to each other.

These are our tips for helping friendships work in the longer-term.

- Explain to your friends what you need from them.
- Say it is ok for them to tell you what they need, if it sometimes is hard to you to work that out.
- Have photos of your friends, and of you with them, to remind you of the people who care about you.

“My friend knows that sometimes I come over too strong – phoning every day, expecting she will respond as soon as I share something. We’ve agreed that it is ok for her to set boundaries and add that she still likes me.”

“Our walking group has a closed Facebook page, just for members of the walking group. I keep in touch with people through this when I’ve been unwell and not able to go out. Friends there have texted me, made the effort to include me even when I wasn’t responding much. That made it easier to get back in touch with them as I began to feel better.”

“At first I was so worried about the mental health thing that I probably said it too soon and came over as far too odd and anxious. Now I’ve realised I can talk to people without mentioning that part of my life. Then after I know them more it is easier to mention I’ve had mental health problems for several years. By that time they usually react well. And if they don’t, then they are not the people I want to be friends with anyway.”

“If someone asks ‘what do you do?’, I say I spend a lot of time on photography. That gets us on to talking about photographs, or where I go to take them and so on to the countryside round here, or on to their hobbies, and stuff like that.”

“Remember that your friend may be having a difficult time or just having a lot going on. So if someone is not responding in the way you need, it doesn’t mean they no longer care about you.”

“I’ve realised that when I’m not so well I withdraw from people. So I tell my friends that I need them to make the effort for me – ring me each week even if I’m not chatty, keep sending me funny cat clips and so on.”

## Coping ok when you feel lonely

There are things that can help you get through the next few hours or days, and things that will help you in the longer-term. It is good to think about both of them as they each help you in a different way.

If you are on your own, find things to do that keep you busy and will make you feel good about yourself.

If you want to be with other people, do activities that also bring you in touch with people and are able to lead to longer-term friendships.

It helps to reflect on whether you want more friends, and what types of friends would help you. Then you can think about the suggestions here on where to find those people.

Sometimes helping other people is a good way to help ourselves. This is where many people say being part of a peer support group or becoming a volunteer has been a big part of managing better.

Sometimes we know we are lonely because we miss one particular person.

- **Other people will not replace that person. But they may be able to help you cope with this. And there may be new friendships that bring their own happiness.**

- It is good to remember the happy times you did have with that person. Talking about them with someone else is good – that makes you smile and laugh, and that gets the positive feelings and thoughts going.

It is ok to tell people how you feel. Other people have felt that way too and may understand more than you think they will.

You can draw up your own plan for coping with being lonely. It can be finding things that work for you, or rediscovering things that worked before – and probably a mix of both.

- Take time to do it – make a list and come back to it over the next few days.
- Be gentle with yourself. It's ok to feel this is not easy. And it's important to tell yourself that making your list is a good and brave step and you should be proud of yourself.

“Remember feeling lonely sometimes is normal and it happens to all of us.”

“Make yourself busy in your own home by tidying or doing other chores so then in the evening you feel that you deserve some time to relax.”

“Phone friends and family for a chat.”

“Get used to your own company and try to see it as time to enjoy.”

- List out the things that get you through times when you do feel lonely. Think about what has helped you before.
- List out what you want to change, to help you make this situation happen less often.
- Then think of what steps you can take - such as starting to get involved in more hobbies, or getting back into the way of social chats.
- Change your thinking and be positive: What do I like doing on my own? What do I enjoy?
- Recognise the times that are like to be difficult. For example, many people find Christmas and New Year hard – and that is where the suggestions in our other booklet can help.

“Do something active, like going for a walk or a swim. Better still, go with a walking group as you’ll meet people there.”

“Find things that keep you busy and occupied. Get outside where you will speak to someone. A walk over to the shops can mean a chat with half a dozen people.”

“Watch a film that makes you laugh.”

“Use social media to connect with people you care about. Don’t look at anything which is all about people pretending to have perfect lives.”

This is what a plan could look like.

## My lists for coping ok

### When I'm feeling lonely

#### People I can talk to

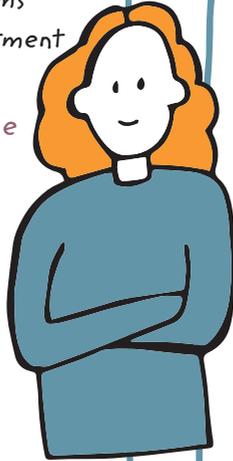
- Phone my sister
- People at Angus Voice
- Photography forums
- People at the allotment

#### Things that make me feel good

- Getting outside
- Happy films

#### Things that keep me busy

- Walks and taking photographs
- Garden and allotment
- Making jam
- Sorting my photographs
- Photography websites and forums



### Looking ahead – how I'm going to be less lonely

#### Getting more people in my life

- Talk to people at the allotment; offer to help them get ready for open day
- Go back to the photography group in town
- Get more confident about using transport on my own – ask people at AV to help me with this

#### Feeling ok when I am on my own and missing someone

- Be able to get to the cinema again
- Plan walks I want to take, so it is easy to decide what to do – keep list on the fridge
- Get my photographs out to remind me about taking them and being in places I enjoy

This is something that the people who are in your life can help you with. If you are part of a group like Angus Voice, you can help each other develop your list of what helps you cope ok.

“I talked to the others about finding friends. I’d sort of forgotten that it won’t happen if you are not out and meeting people, just day-to-day things where potential friends will be. Getting involved with the group at this project has been good for me in getting my confidence back and being able to do that again.”

“Keep it simple. Start with small steps.”

“We put together our emergency playlists. It was a laugh doing it – admitting that we liked some really cheesy songs and singing along to them. Now when I play it there are 2 nice aspects – cheering me up and remembering that there is a good friend who helped me do this, even if we don’t see each other as often as we would like.”

“Include things that make you feel good in your ‘cope in the short-term’ list. I’m into bubble baths and watching old musicals in my jammies. You might want to go for a run. It’s whatever works for you.”

“I know that the anniversary of my partner’s death is hard. So this year I’m going to be ready for it – have something nice planned for that day with a close friend who understands.”

## Sources for more information and support

**Local Support.** There are good local projects and services across Scotland.

**Breathing Space and Samaritans** are places where there is someone who will listen when you need to talk. The websites give good advice on how to get started – and this can help when you talk to people you know about how you feel. They both give support to callers who are worried about someone else.

[www.samaritans.org](http://www.samaritans.org)  
Free phone line 24 hours  
116 123  
Email contact: [jo@samaritans.org](mailto:jo@samaritans.org)

[www.breathingspace.scot](http://www.breathingspace.scot)  
Free phone support  
0800 83 85 87  
(available evenings and weekends: Monday-Thursday 6.00pm-2.00am, Friday 6.00pm-Monday 6.00am)

Living Life is part of Breathing Space. Trained counsellors give telephone support on dealing with feelings and coping with problems.

**Cruse** is a charity that provides support for people who have had a bereavement. There is a phone line and useful advice and resources on the websites.

[www.cruse.org.uk](http://www.cruse.org.uk)  
[www.crusescotland.org.uk](http://www.crusescotland.org.uk)

**Mind** has tips for people living with mental health problems on coping with loneliness.

[www.mind.org.uk/information-support/tips-for-everyday-living/loneliness/](http://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/tips-for-everyday-living/loneliness/)

**Moodjuice** is a resource that NHS Forth Valley developed to enable people to think about their emotional problems and work towards solving them. It is on-line, so people can go at their own pace. It complements other sources of care and support.

[www.moodjuice.scot.nhs.uk](http://www.moodjuice.scot.nhs.uk)

**Digital stuff.** Some of the people who helped us develop these tips were part of a project that produced tips to make digital inclusion work for people who have mental health problems. This is useful if you are not sure about this for yourself or for people you know or support.

[otbds.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/Digitalinclusionmentalhealthhintsandtips-2.pdf](http://otbds.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/Digitalinclusionmentalhealthhintsandtips-2.pdf)



outside the box



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