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|  | Speak Up-KōrerotiaLoneliness among young people in New Zealand16 September 2020 |
| Male | This programme was first broadcast on Canterbury’s community access radio station Plains FM 96.9 and was made with the assistance of New Zealand on Air. |
| Female | Coming up next conversations on human rights with “Speak Up” – “Kōrerotia”, here on Plains FM. |
| Sally | E ngā mana, E ngā reo, E ngā hau e whāTēnā koutou katoaNau mai ki tēnei hōtaka: “Speak Up” – “Kōrerotia”. Tune in as our guests “Speak Up”, sharing their unique and powerful experiences and opinions and may you also be inspired to “Speak Up” when the moment is right.Nau mai ki te hōtaka tika tangata, “Speak Up” – “Kōrerotia”. Today we’re talking about loneliness among young New Zealanders. This topic has come about in part because of lockdown and thinking about the implications and the impacts of that in the longer term, but also partly because it’s a really big topic that deserves attention.We’ve got three guests going to talk to us today, really excited to have you all with us here. We’ve only got one of you in the studio unfortunately because of Level 2 restrictions; Michael Hempseed, a very warm welcome to the studio and I believe you’re also another Plains FM broadcaster here?  |
| Michael | Yes indeed, I’ve got my own show here but it’s great to be here as well.  |
| Sally | Thank you and then on Zoom we have Sue Bagshaw and Holly Walker. Sue, perhaps we’ll start with you. If you could please introduce yourself and tell us a little bit about your work and why you are here today.  |
| Sue | Kia ora tātou, it’s so good to be here with you all. This is a really important topic. Sometimes I call myself a youth worker with a medical degree. I’m a GP who works in the Youth One Stop Shop with young people between 10 and 25 and we do a lot of work with young people around their mental health, to help them to try and create and maintain mental health. But we find a lot of young people with distress and also mental illness so really pleased to be able to contribute something towards maybe something we can do to help that situation and do some prevention as well. Kia ora.  |
| Sally | Kia ora, Sue.  |
| Holly | Kia ora koutou, my name is Holly Walker and I work for the Helen Clark Foundation which is an independent public policy think tank, obviously with Helen Clark as our patron and founded on the values of equity and fairness, sustainability that Helen has promoted throughout her career. My interest in this topic is that I’ve been working for the Helen Clark Foundation since the beginning of this year and my role, as well as being Deputy Director of the Foundation, is as a researcher and writer of public policy reports in partnership with WSP New Zealand who funds my role. This year we had on our list of topics to look at during the year, loneliness but we were going to look at it later in the year but when we went into lockdown it suddenly became a lot more urgent and relevant to really grapple with this issue of loneliness: How Covid-19 might exacerbate the existing risks of it; who might be most affected, including young people. And so we brought the topic forward and I spent most of the Level 4 lockdown researching and writing a report on the topic which came out in June and it’s called [*Alone Together*](https://helenclark.foundation/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/alone-together-report-min.pdfhttps%3A/helenclark.foundation/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/alone-together-report-min.pdf) and it looks at what the risks of loneliness and the rates of loneliness were before Covid-19, how the pandemic might have exacerbated them, who is most affected, and also makes some recommendations for the planks of an effective public policy response to the issue. In doing that work, I’ve become very interested in this topic. Before I worked for the Helen Clark Foundation, I worked for five years at the Office for the Children’s Commissioner. So I have a pre-existing pretty strong interest in the lives and experiences and rights of children and young people. So a nice way to tie both of those interests together with this particular topic.  |
| Sally | That sounds great. We’ll no doubt talk more about your report and the findings and the recommendations as we progress. Michael, if you could maybe tell us a little bit about yourself and also introduce your radio show as well.  |
| Michael | Yes indeed. So there’s a few things I’m involved in. I’ve written a book on suicide prevention and certainly one of the big factors that leads to a lot of suicides unfortunately is loneliness. I also have a show on here called ‘Lighthouse of Hope’ and I travel all over New Zealand running evidence-based talks on things like mental illness and suicide prevention.  |
| Sally | Three very diverse and very amazing perspectives I think we’re going to be bringing to this topic. Maybe if we can just kick off by thinking about what is loneliness?  |
| Holly | Perhaps I could go first with that one because I looked into this a little bit in preparing the research for the report in terms of defining loneliness. Loneliness is something that everybody has experienced at some point in our lives and we all really know what it feels like, there’s a particular type of pain and anguish associated with the feeling of loneliness. But in terms of technical definitions, perhaps the simplest way that I found to describe it is that it’s an unmet need for social connection. So often that can be associated with spending a lot of time alone or not seeing others, but it can also be present when you’re surrounded by other people if the connections that you have, the social connections that you have, are not meeting your needs as an individual. What do you think, Sue and Michael? Does that concord with your understanding of what loneliness is?  |
| Sue | I think that’s a really great definition, Holly, I haven’t heard that one before and I think that’s lovely. I was thinking I wasn’t sure if I could define it. What struck me when I was thinking about this was remembering my teenage time when I was at boarding school and the rest of my family, my brother, was living with my parents and when I would go home sometimes I would feel very lonely because they were all getting on with their lives, that was normal for them but it wasn’t normal for me and therefore not being part of it was part of the loneliness for me. But you said it beautifully in terms of that unmet need for social connectedness, not feeling like you belong.  |
| Holly | Yes I think belonging is a really important part of it.  |
| Michael | I might just add to that, that there’s been some really interesting studies that show that loneliness actually hurts. They’ve taken people that were rejected in some way and they scanned their brains and they found the part of the brain that’s associated with feeling physical pain - the pain that you’d experience when you break your leg - when people are lonely, they feel that same sort of pain. So loneliness is more than just an emotional thing, it’s also extremely physical and felt very deeply in people.  |
| Holly | Yes absolutely and that was the other really striking findings in research that I did around the physiological effects of loneliness. So yes Michael, you’re right, it is really associated with a painful feeling. But physiologically it also can be very dangerous for people and actually shorten life expectancy. The theory about why that is is that essentially… you know, if you think back to how human beings have evolved, we’ve evolved to live collectively with other people and we’ve evolved to rely on other people for our survival so we’re much more likely to be fed and sheltered and taken care of if we’re around others. So in an evolutionary sense, our brains are wired to experience the feeling of being isolated from the group - whether that is physically isolated as in being alone or, as you were saying, Sue, not feeling part of the group - can trigger a fight or flight or freeze response in our brains, you know, that essential stress response. And living in that state for a long period of time is very bad for our physiological health because it affects our hormonal levels and our sleep and our blood pressure and our immune system. So if people spend long periods of time feeling profoundly lonely, it can be very physiologically dangerous as well as dangerous to their mental and emotional wellbeing.  |
| Michael | I’ll just add to that the largest ever study on longevity or living a long life found that the most important factor if you want to live a long life, is how many deep connections you have. It’s not just whether you met someone on Facebook and you just befriend them, but actually a depth of connection. That came out as the single biggest factor for what determines whether people live a long life or not.  |
| Sue | Yes, no that’s right and we know that people in a good relationship for a long time really flourish much more than somebody either living alone or living in a bad relationship.  |
| Sally | I think we’ve done a really good job of trying to sum up what is a huge and very complex topic. We might have our first song and then we’ll get back into thinking about loneliness among young people specifically.  |
|  | **MUSIC BY THE REMBRANDTS – I’LL BE THERE FOR YOU** |
| Sally  | That was The Rembrandts with the Friends’ theme song which is a really cool, peppy song to get us in the mood thinking about relationships and the importance of connectivity. We’re talking about loneliness among young New Zealanders today with Dame Sue Bagshaw, Holly Walker and Michael Hempseed and now we’re going to be thinking about specifically loneliness among young people in New Zealand. There are certain demographics that are more likely to experience loneliness than others, it would be great to think about who are these demographics and most importantly, why are they more likely to experience loneliness than others.  |
| Holly | Would it be helpful if I started by sharing some of the statistics that I have looked at about this question?  |
| Sally | Yes.  |
| Holly | Ok so we’re quite lucky in New Zealand in the sense that we actually have an established and long-term measure of loneliness that’s collected by Statistics New Zealand when they do their General Social Survey which is a deeper delve into people’s social wellbeing than you would get from the Census, for example. And one of the questions that get asked in that survey, which is conducted every two years, is for how much of the time in the previous four weeks before the survey did people feel lonely. And the options are none of the time, a little of the time, some of the time or most or all of the time. And so the last time that survey was taken before Covid-19 was in 2018 and it showed that rates of overall loneliness are fairly low in the total population. When you break it down by different characteristics or groups in the population, there are certainly demographics that are more likely to report feeling lonely and for the purposes of our conversation today, young people aged 15 to 24 are definitely in that category, as well as people who are unemployed, people who live on a very low household income under $30,000, sole parents and interestingly, Māori as well are amongst those most likely to report feeling lonely most or all of the time. And of course if you are someone who has many of those characteristics, those risks will be exacerbated. I think for young people in particular, loneliness can be associated with going through major life transitions and we go through a lot of major life transitions in the ages of 15 to 24 so it can be a particularly vulnerable time.  |
| Sue | Yes interestingly the statistics just here in Canterbury where the All Right? campaign has conducted a survey since the earthquake and the latest one showed that the group most at risk of being lonely were the youth age group. It’s interesting to ponder the reasons why that is, though.  |
| Michael | One reason I’d add is unfortunately we live in a culture that prizes individualism. We often say you don’t need other people, don’t depend on other people, but that goes against our fundamental biology. As Holly said, we are wired for connections with other people and so tragically I think sometimes maybe a younger group have bought into this idea that you don’t need so many people and you don’t maybe actively try and seek out friendships and connections maybe as much as other generations did.  |
| Sue | It’s interesting, isn’t it, how that political ideology affects individuals far more than we ever thought possible. And what I was fascinated by in the lockdown was that adults discovered social media and thought wow this is great - I mean, obviously we’ve always known about Facebook but they discovered the utility of various methods of social media - and the young people found how dissatisfying social media is when it’s not accompanied by face-to-face and seeing their friends for real.  |
| Holly | Yes it’s interesting the impact of social media because I think often when people think or talk about this topic, it comes up as an exacerbating risk factor. And I think that it has a very real role in that because if you are seeing depictions of other people’s lives that look happy and exciting and glamorous and enjoyable and connected and that’s not how you are feeling, it can really exacerbate underlying feelings, like we were talking about before, of not belonging or not being part of it or missing out on something in some way. So I do think social media can have an exacerbating effect on loneliness. But by the same token, it’s not necessarily the reason that young people are more likely to feel lonely. There are uses of social media and technology that can help to mitigate against the disconnecting effects of loneliness but as with many technologies, it’s not the technology itself that is perhaps the risk but how it is used and how it is experienced. Yeah, but I do think that for young people it plays a role in perhaps amplifying underlying feelings of disconnection or exclusion.  |
| Sue | Yes totally agree. I’m sure social media is not the cause but it does amplify the worst of what’s happening.  |
| Holly | The other thing that maybe is interesting to note about age is that often when we do talk about loneliness or see it as an issue reflected in the media or talked about publicly, it’s older people who are identified as being particularly at risk. I find people are often very surprised to learn that young people are actually the most likely age group to experience loneliness. The sort of popular perception would be that elderly people are much more likely to feel lonely and that’s not really borne out in the survey data at all. In fact, there’s a really clear linear progression throughout the lifespan of loneliness being most likely during the younger ages and then people steadily report feeling less and less lonely as they get older with the exception that once you get to 75 and you’re perhaps more likely to be living alone again or perhaps have lost a spouse or family and loved ones, at that point people do start to report feeling more lonely again but it’s still significantly less than young people report feeling lonely. So we have a very strong cultural narrative around age and loneliness but actually the data suggests the opposite of what we often think to be true. Not that I want to diminish or dismiss the experience of older people who do experience loneliness because I do think it can be very isolating and dangerous for older people who are in that position but yeah, the numbers would suggest there are a lot more young people feeling lonely than there are older people feeling lonely.  |
| Sally | Yes that’s fascinating and it’s certainly not what we think, is it? If we’re thinking about loneliness, we’ve touched on some of the factors that might contribute such as income and employment. Are there any that might be particularly true for young people and I’m thinking school and that school environment, moving into university, potentially bullying. Anything that has come through your research or your work that is specific to that environment in which young people are operating?  |
| Sue | What I’ve observed from the various Youth 2000 studies that have happened - and they’re studies of high school students - the issue is finding who you belong to, who you identify with and the bullying that goes on if you’re not part of the ‘in’ group and being part of the ‘in’ group is quite hard to define and so that makes you feel rejected and therefore lonely. I think that bullying is rife throughout our society, I don’t think it’s just young people; but having said that, young people’s developing brains are far more sensitive to that and far more open to being damaged by the bullying and othering that goes on and basically the racial discrimination, the whole discrimination that happens to people who are different and I think that exacerbates the pain of loneliness too in young people.  |
| Michael | I think there’s been a loss of clubs and societies over the years. There’s a book called *Bowling Alone* that’s said in the past, people used to be part of a sports group or there’d be dances every Friday night or something like that and there’d be a lot more social events where it was a lot easier to meet people. And then tragically really over the last 50 years, starting in the 1970s, unfortunately we’ve lost a lot of those places where people connect. So a lot of people say it’s relatively easy to meet people in school because you’re surrounded by lots of people but then often they find it very difficult to meet people outside of school because there aren’t these connections, there aren’t these groups that are as visible as they used to be in the past.  |
| Holly | Yes that’s right and I think during this age they’re also likely to be moving out of home for the first time, moving from as you say the relatively established social environment of school - albeit as you say Sue, that there can be risks and bullying and things like that, but it’s a known quantity - and then once you move out of school into either employment or unemployment or education of some kind, it’s a total reset of your social setting and of course you’re going through all the changes of moving from childhood into adulthood and needing to move through the world differently and take more responsibility for your own life and decisions and all of that can be exciting and sort of freeing. And I think a lot of young people experience it that way, but it can also be very overwhelming and potentially isolating especially if you’ve moved out of home or moved to a new town or city, you don’t know other people. And as you say, Michael, there’s not the sort of built-in social infrastructure where you have the opportunity to meet others. People can find that very disconcerting.  |
| Sue | I speak a lot to Probus and Rotary and Lions and all these other groups and gosh, the average age is probably 70 and there’s nothing for younger people. I know Rotary are trying hard to include younger people but yeah, that place to belong doesn’t seem to exist for younger people so much.  |
| Sally | Sue, you touched on the idea of young people’s brains potentially being more susceptible, sensitive maybe, to the type of bullying that might be occurring. Is there any research you have seen that shows any parallels between physiological development - particularly, I suppose, in the brain - and loneliness among young people? Might that be one of the reasons why young people might be more likely to experience it?  |
| Sue | I’m not sure about any specific loneliness studies - Michael may know some of those - but in general this is a time when the feelings from your body, your sensory organs, your gut are all being channelled up through your limbic system into the cortex and there the cortex kind of makes meaning of those feelings. And that process is happening in a very heightened way during this 15 to 24 age group. And certainly that can be very susceptible to damage and going off track, if you want to call it that, and delaying sometimes those connections happening or sometimes speeding them up. So I think yes, it’s a very vulnerable time because of the development that’s happening.  |
| Michael | One of the things we know about the teenage brain - when we use the term the ‘teenage’ brain it could actually finish development as late as age 30 - teenagers feel fear a lot more and particularly they feel being rejected a lot more. So one of the things that we know that’s really protective for a lot of people is having deep connections but then if you fear that other people are going to judge you, other people are going to look down on you, you’re less likely to open up and be your true self. So there is a vulnerability there with the teenage brain that often people are so worried about what other people think of them, they’re less likely to open up and truly be themselves and then unfortunately less likely to have some of those deeper connections.  |
| Holly | It’s really interesting that importance of connection. During my time at the Office of the Children’s Commissioner, the team that I worked for undertook a major engagement with children and young people around the country to inform the government’s Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy and spoke to over 2,000 children and young people. “What makes a good life?” was the question that they were asked. That theme of connection and relationship with family but also with friends and even with teachers. You know, the idea of being understood, accepted, valued for who you are and having really deep and meaningful relationships with your family and your friends came through very, very strongly from the young people as being what they felt they would need or needed to experience a good life.  |
| Sally | Fascinating stuff, this idea of connection is coming through again and again. We might have our next song now which is ‘Jump Rope Gazers’ by The Beths, which is Holly’s choice.  |
| Holly | The Beths are a contemporary band from Auckland but the music to me very much reminds me of the type of music that I listened to as a young person. So it takes me right back to my own teenage years.  |
|  | **MUSIC BY THE BETHS – JUMP ROPE GAZERS** |
| Sally  | Nau mai, this is “Speak Up – Kōrerotia” with Sally Carlton. We’re talking about loneliness among young New Zealanders and now I’d like to think about any impacts or implications of a lockdown on loneliness among young people. It might be too early to see anything categorical, but perhaps you’re starting to get a sense of whether there might have been any impacts.  |
| Holly | Well I could perhaps briefly bring in some statistics again if that’s helpful, which is that some researchers at Victoria University of Wellington at the Roy McKenzie Centre for the Study of Children and Families and also the Institute of Governance and Policy Studies, they got onto it very quickly and conducted a survey during the level four lockdown that was looking at all kinds of aspects of life under lockdown but one of the things that they asked about was loneliness. You know, if we think about the 2018 baseline that I talked about before - and maybe didn’t actually give the numbers but about 6% of young people in 2018 said they felt lonely or all of the time - it’s a different survey, a different sampling method but during the lockdown 24.7% of young people during week three of Level 4 lockdown reported feeling lonely most or all of the time. So that was right in the thick of the lockdown itself but I think shows a very, very marked increase in feelings of loneliness. And just for context, only 10% of the general population said they felt that way which was still a big increase on the normal time baseline but for young people it was very pronounced.  |
| Michael | I think sometimes we forget about the international impact of the lockdown. For example, sometimes people from overseas, grandparents, might come over and visit once a year and there’s a huge number of New Zealand families that haven’t had those visits or even people from a different part of the country maybe haven’t been able to travel as much so I think there’s also been that loss of connection there from some of those wider travel circles.  |
| Sue | It’s interesting isn’t it, how we have been talking a lot about connection and certainly a lot of the high school students I know, really the main reason for going to school is to meet up with your friends and that’s what was missing in the lockdown so I’m not at all surprised that they’re the highest group that feel lonely. I was thinking about that connection stuff and there’s a group in the States run by a guy called Barber and they tried to define this connection stuff and they said just what you said, Holly, in terms of that feeling of being accepted, belonging, being surrounded by warm consistent loving support. But also they said respect for growing autonomy, mutual respect and the need for regulation and some structure in your day. And I think that’s the other thing that really impacts young people - they go from a very structured environment, the bell goes, you move on, you know exactly what’s coming up next, your timetable is there, to a really unstructured time in the lockdown but also as you said, when you leave school you’re going into this very unstructured world. And so that sense of connection of all those three things is gone and what the researchers said was what we need to really focus on now is what kind of environments can we create that allows connection to happen. That sense of belonging, that sense of structure and that sense of respect for growing autonomy.  |
| Holly | That’s really interesting, that thing about structure. It definite concords with my own memory of being a young person and being a university student for the first time and really struggling with that unstructured time. You know, there were lectures and things but it wasn’t the same as being at high school when as you say you know exactly what’s going to happen when and your week and days are very structured. But also - and she’s much younger than the age group we’re talking about here, but my own daughter who is just about to turn seven - at the beginning of the lockdown we really struggled. She really struggled missing her school friends and it wasn’t until we came up with the idea of creating a very structured timetable for the day which was on the wall so that everybody could see it and we would do certain things at certain times, that things kind of clicked into place for her and she was able to relax and had a much better experience of lockdown after that. But those initial days of unstructured time were really challenging and I’d totally concur with that observation.  |
| Sally | Another couple of thoughts that I had particularly affecting that 15-24 age group is things like maybe your first partners, being separated from them, and also things like sports being stopped as well. So not only providing structure but also that social connection that you’ve been talking so much about, not just the school being stopped but also all those extra curricular activities as well.  |
| Holly | Yes absolutely, I think we’re lamenting earlier in the conversation the lack of some of those things generally you know, compared to perhaps decades earlier but it is still true that things like sports teams, cultural clubs or kapa haka, music, things like that can be really significant in young people’s sense of belonging and connection and being part of a community bigger than their own individual self and so I imagine that the stopping of those things made a really big difference during the lockdown. Then the other thing I think is probably quite important to mention is digital exclusion. Obviously people perhaps couldn’t play sport but many people continued to connect with their classmates and their sports teams and other groups like that digitally during the lockdown and it caused people to become quite inventive to find ways of holding birthday parties via Zoom and lots of really creative ways of staying connected with people remotely. But there are still a very significant number of households in New Zealand who don’t have an internet connection or whose only internet connection comes from a mobile phone with a data connection who simply don’t have ready access to that online world. And so the effects of the lockdown would have been very exacerbated for young people with limited digital connection because they didn’t simply have the option of moving online. I’ve read accounts of under normal circumstances, many young people, they’ll do things like find places like McDonald’s that have free wi-fi or public libraries that have free wi-fi because they might have a phone or an internet-enabled device but that doesn’t mean that they have access to data. And so when all of those public spaces were closed as well, if they were at home without ready access to the internet or without data on their phone, they were also cut off from the alternative ways of connecting with people that those of us with sufficient resources to have a stable internet connection could just take our social lives online but it wasn’t so easy for many people to do that.  |
| Sue | Totally agree Holly, that was my observation too and I think we really need to redouble our efforts to make sure every household has internet connection.  |
| Michael | And I think it’s also worth pointing out that there’s people maybe with dyslexia that maybe find it harder to read things online. Certainly there are tools available but they’re not always perfect. People that say have an eyesight issue, sometimes many things are presented visually so text readers can’t read those. There’s some people that for whatever reason don’t go online, maybe some people have got digital addiction so they avoid it.So unfortunately we’re becoming a world where everything is online but there’s still a significant number of people including young people that for whatever reason can’t go online.  |
| Sally | There’s certainly a danger in having too much reliance on the internet, isn’t there?  |
| Michael | Yes.  |
| Sally | Just quickly then before we finish this section. Have you heard anything further from your colleagues up in Auckland about the second lockdown, the impact of that?  |
| Holly | Anecdotally I’ve heard that it was very hard, that it felt harder than the first lockdown maybe because of a sense of fatigue, having to go back and do it all again after the achievement of managing it the first time. Also the weather, you know, it’s been winter during this second lockdown in Auckland so the options for getting outside were more limited than they were the first time and perhaps just a level of Covid-19 fatigue has set in as well as fear because we had celebrated that milestone of having 102 days of no community transmission and then to have had it circulating again was quite worrying for people.  |
| Michael | There’s some very interesting research by a professor, Dr. Stephen Porges. He’s done a lot of research around what makes us feel safe and when we don’t feel safe, he said it was very difficult for us to connect with other people because if we’re in survival mode, we want to stay alive in the here and now but then other things such as meeting new people, engaging with other people. All that doesn’t happen when we’re afraid. And so if more people have been afraid in the second lockdown, sometimes that does take away people’s ability to want to connect with others.  |
| Sue | Yes. I think it brings into focus the fact that we need to keep that sense of hope going in the community so that it does help if you like, be the antithesis of the fear that’s there as well.   |
| Sally | Great place for our third and final song. We have now ‘Everyone is Lonely’ from Heather Anne Campbell.  |
|  | **MUSIC BY HEATHER ANNE CAMPBELL – EVERYONE IS LONELY**  |
| Sally  | This is “Speak Up – Kōrerotia” and we’re talking about loneliness among young people in New Zealand. I’d like to focus now on some of the negative impacts. We might start with you, Michael, with some of your work that you’ve been doing and then what can we do to try and address the issue of loneliness.  |
| Michael | Yeah well loneliness is absolutely devasting. Mother Teresa who spent her life working with people with incredible poverty in the streets of Kolkata, she said that loneliness is the worst poverty that you can experience. So that really shows how important this is. In terms of strategies with this, we live in a world with lots of people. And when I was a youth worker at 298 Youth Health, I had a lot of young people come in and they’d say well I don’t know how to talk to new people. So I’d ask well what happens and they’d say well I say my name, the other person says their name and they didn’t know what to say after that and they awkwardly stared at each other and walked away slowly. So I thought well the problem here is that they don’t know questions to ask new people. So I suggested that if you meet someone new for the first time, just ask them things like what do you like doing in your free time, do you like movies, what sort of music do you listen to, do you have any pets. Just basic ‘get to know you’ questions like that. And the next part of this is that not only do you have to be able to ask good questions but you have to give good answers. For example, if someone asks you what sort of movies do you like and you say, “I don’t know” - well that sort of kills the conversation right there. But if you say something… if you’re maybe a bit worried about what the other person might think, encourage people to give two options. So for example if you like romance movies, you could also say I like romance and comedy and something like that and sometimes giving people two options to build on, builds that conversation. And I think unfortunately one of the sad things that leads to a lot of loneliness is just the lack of some really basic social skills. There’s a brilliant book by Debra Fine called the *Fine Art of Small Talk* that simply teaches people how to get to know someone, how to start a conversation, how to keep that going. She’s also got some good videos on You Tube.  |
| Holly | You’re reminding me there Michael, I watched recently a series on Netflix called *Love on the Spectrum* which is about young people on the autism spectrum in Australia and their - a small group of them - their desire for intimate connection and romance and wanting to find a partner or find love. And there’s a psychologist who works with them to teach the exact kind of social skills that you’re describing there and she says you know, for many of us who are not on the autism spectrum or don’t have trouble with social connection in this way, it’s hard to see these things as skills. They feel innate or as though something that everybody has but actually they are a skillset that we learn just like any other skillset that we learn and that there are techniques very similar to what you’re describing to actually learn social skills.  |
| Michael | The frustration for me is that a lot of this is only for people on the autistic spectrum, there have been programmes like this developed but there’s lots of people that find it hard to talk to new people or if they go into a room full of people they don’t know what to say. So we’ve got to realise that this is not just for people on the autistic spectrum, but there’s a huge number of people that are affected by this. So we really need to widen the reach of that.  |
| Holly | Absolutely. You are reminding me also of… you know, we were talking before about technology and the role of social media, whether it exacerbates or can alleviate loneliness. There have been some apps developed in the United States in the context of young people living in university halls of residence who are away from home for the first time and feeling very isolated. An app has been developed that basically does the first step socially connecting people together digitally and it encourages exactly the kinds of conversations you’re talking about Michael, in terms of establishing a common interest but in a very low stakes way where you’re not face to face with the person and you can disengage from the conversation if you’re finding it challenging. Once those initial contacts are made, the app then encourages the young people to make a time to meet face to face. So it’s a way of broaching those initial, perhaps sometimes awkward and challenging conversations - and I think there’s a lot of research that suggests that young people do find it challenging to speak on the phone or to meet people face to face for the first time - but with some of the ice broken by the app, then to move that conversation into the real world with some of the groundwork already done and that seems to be having quite a lot of success.  |
| Sue | That’s fantastic use of social media, isn’t it, right there? I was also thinking of we did some work with intermediate aged students and what we did is we were working with parents and young people and one of the major transitions is from primary school to high school and we got some Year 9 students to talk to the Year 7 and 8 students and one of the biggest messages from the Year 9 students was join things. Join debating club, join this, join that and same for kids going to uni. But worries me is what are they going to join if you’re not sporty when you leave school and you’re not going to a tertiary training. So for me it’s creating environments in our society where people can come without fear of judgement and embarrassment and that’s the hard part, is creating those environments. Creating environments in ou whānau, creating environments in our workplaces, creating environments in our society where people can join without too much difficulty and that fear of being judged. If we can kind of focus on that, that’d be great. And that’s why I love the Māori culture in terms of your whānau is the wider community, not just your mum and dad and maybe your grandparents and actually creating a society where we can live in more a whānau environment which I think… yeah, might be more helpful in creating a place where there’s not so much loneliness.  |
| Holly | One of the things that we looked at in our report when we were making recommendations - the recommendations are very much pitched at the policy level, so less about what individuals can do to alleviate loneliness but more about what policies can central and local government adopt that will help to create the conditions for social connection to thrive - and one of the things that we looked at was the built environment. So the design of our streets, of our neighbourhoods and of future housing developments. And one model that we looked at in terms of housing is papakāinga housing which is Māori housing on Māori land and very often, it’s a growing part of the housing sector and a really important part and papakāinga developments are designed with tikanga Māori principles in mind. So they’re designed around, you know, ideas of whānaungatanga and connection and cultural practice so that… and we talked with an architect called Jade Kake who contributed to our report, on this topic. You know, you might design your collective housing so that there’s more shared space, there’s space for children and young people to play outdoors where any adult from any of the surrounding houses can keep an eye on them. There are places for the residents of the development to come together for kai, for whānaungatanga. So I think that there’s a lot we can take from te ao Māori in terms of key principles and key cultural ideas that if we design our built environment with those things in mind, you can create opportunities for more connection to take place, with more communal ways of living. This is a much longer-term and bigger picture change than what individuals can do who are feeling lonely right now, but if we’re thinking about really shifting these loneliness statistics long term, I think we need to be thinking about how we design our living spaces and our neighbourhoods and our villages and our towns differently in the future.  |
| Sue | Holly, you just described the Youth Hub.  |
| Holly | Well there you go, connection is everything.  |
| Michael | There’s a great connection called meetup.com and if you just have a look on that and look at the things that are in your local area, there’s so many different groups that meet up. So obviously there’s sports groups that meet up but then there’s groups that just go to a restaurant together that have nothing else in common other than they like food, there’s groups that say go to a pub quiz once a week or something like that. If you’re into anything at all… it could be origami, Christmas decorations, whatever it is. Have a look on there. There’s a staggering number of groups and if you’re not sure whether this group is right for you, you can always email the person organising it and you can say look, I’m new, I don’t know anyone, is this the sort of group that I would be good at coming along to and many of these groups specialise at welcoming new people. So there’s nothing worse than thinking oh there’s this new group and you go there and you’d be standing in the corner awkwardly on your own. But many of these groups specialise so if someone knew does come in, they go up to the person, they talk to them, they introduce them to other people.  |
| Sue | Do some of them have an arrangement where you could email them and somebody comes to collect you and take you, Michael? Because I know that a lot of people would find it really hard to actually get somewhere because that takes a lot of courage.  |
| Michael | Potentially, there certainly are organisations that try and do that. Another one is, if you go to the Age Concern website, they’ve set up a programme where younger people meet someone that’s older that might be a bit lonely and I suspect they might have transport options there. There’s ways to overcome difficulties if you want to meet new people but there’s a problem or something that you’re finding difficult. Maybe it’s talking to new people; well, you can learn how to do that, there’s plenty of websites and books that teach you how to meet new people. If it’s transport, there are places where you can maybe meet closer to you or there are ways to fix that. So it’s about being stubborn when it comes to problems and finding a way to overcome that.  |
| Sally | Holly, maybe we could hear from you about the other recommendations of the… |
| Holly | Sure, sure, yes. As I said I think our report’s recommendations are kind of focused at that big picture policy settings end of things of how can we collectively adopt policies that create the conditions that help social connection thrive and help eliminate loneliness.And because of the really, really strong correlation between low income and loneliness, the first key recommendation was that we need to make sure that people have enough money. You know, Michael was saying before, when you’re in survival mode it’s really hard to connect with other people. And when you live in poverty or with not enough money, you basically are in survival mode all the time; we describe it as toxic stress in the report. But you know, it’s very, very hard to get your head above water when you are very focused on the daily challenge of where’s the next rent payment coming from, where’s the next meal coming from to even think about social connection let alone afford the bus fare or the time. You know, if you’re working two jobs or whatever to seek out social connection. So income is really important, we need to make sure that benefits are set at adequate levels, that the minimum wage is set at adequate levels and that there’s ongoing support for people who have lost their job during the pandemic. Digital connection we’ve talked about in this conversation as well but the real need for, if digital modes are going to become one of the key ways that we stay connected with each other, then we need to make sure there’s equitable access to digital technology. I think that all social housing tenancies should automatically come with a broadband connection that’s paid for, would be a great start, but also looking at ways to extend that even further and make sure that everybody has got access to the internet. Community development. So often communities, when they come together to work on a challenge that they’ve collectively identified as being important, that may not necessarily be loneliness but a side of effect of communities working together is social connection takes place. So really supporting community groups who are looking to, particularly in the wake of Covid, pull together to recover and providing adequate support for those. And as we’ve talked about just before, the built environment. Designing our streets and neighbourhoods in a way that can encourage people to interact more easily with each other. Then I think the pointy end of it, which Sue and Michael will be very familiar with, is just the need for adequate funding for mental health services and targeted services for those who are most at risk. We’re well aware in New Zealand that we have a mental health crisis and I know that some effort has gone into this from the government funding a new Mental Health and Wellbeing Commission and a new frontline mental health service but that is just so needed. And for people who are experiencing chronic loneliness for a long time, it has real profound mental health impacts and I think in the light of the pandemic we’re going to see more people coming forward with those mental health concerns. So we need the services there to support them when they do come forward.  |
| Michael | Those are all fantastic things. One of the final things I’d say is that we seem to live in a world that likes to divide people. So if we look at America, there’s two major political parties over there - there’s the Democrats and the Republicans - and what we’re finding now is say if you vote Democrat, a lot of people are unfriending people that vote Republican. We seem to have this idea that you can only be friends and have connections with people that believe and think the exact same way that you do. Unfortunately, we’re becoming more and more divided and more and more isolated. But you don’t actually have to make connections with people that believe and think exactly the same things as you. There was a really interesting study that was done where a group of researchers gave a whole lot of people a test and they found one group of people were very similar and they put them in a room together and they told them and then there was another group and they weren’t very similar, they didn’t have much in common and they put them in a room. So the people where they were told oh you’ve got lots of things in common, they got on really well, they were talking to each other, they were making good connections. The group where they didn’t have a lot in common, well it was a bit awkward, people started looking at the floor and their watches and thinking when is this going to be over. However, the interesting thing is the psychologist faked the results of the test. So it didn’t actually matter whether you did have a lot in common with the other person or not, what mattered was whether you thought you did and that was what made the difference. So if we have this attitude that you know, I’m not going to connect with people that are different from me, well then we’re going to be very lonely and isolated. But maybe if we change our thinking, that can broaden our social circle.  |
| Sally | What a great point.  |
| Sue | Brilliant. Totally agree with all of those points, gosh if we could get rid of the huge equity gap that we have between the lowest paid and the highest paid, that would be really helpful. I think what we need to do is create an environment in our society where we can actually rejoice in diversity, not just accept it but actually really make sure that we enjoy it and we can actually flourish because of our diversity. I think that will be brilliant. How we do that I think is each individual does it and then as we all do it together, that makes the difference.  |
| Sally | And just finally then, we’ve talked about meet up groups but if someone is feeling that they need some support right away: I’m suggesting Youth 298 might be a good first point of call if they’re in that youth category? |
| Sue | Yes or ringing Youthline, ringing any of the phone numbers and most of them have at their fingertips groups that you can start to belong to and an encouraging voice that says hey have you tried…? What about…? and put them in touch with the service where they can make a connection with someone. And I think that’s the hopeful thing. Everybody can find someone they can connect with, it’s just a matter of keep looking.  |
| Michael | And I think sometimes it’s about forcing yourself to go even if you don’t feel like it. So sometimes someone might suggest something and you think oh, do I really want to go to that, is that interesting? And I often find the social things that people invite me to, that I think I don’t want to go to that, they’re actually often the ones that I enjoy the most. So sometimes maybe if you’re feeling a bit down and thinking I don’t want to do this, sometimes it’s about actually forcing yourself to try and get out there and remember the doors aren’t locked, you can always leave at any time if you want to get out of there.  |
| Sally | Great advice. I’d like to say kia ora, tēnā koutou mō te wā. Thank you so much for taking the time to share your vast wealth of experience with us.  |
| Holly | Kia ora, thanks for having me.  |
| Sue | Thanks a lot.  |
| Michael | Take care.  |