

MAKE THE CONNECTION

Glance at a group of people glued to their smartphones at a restaurant table and it's easy to think we've lost the art of socialising. But the truth is, we have more ways to connect with people than ever before

WORDS
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Sundays can feel like the loneliest day of the week. Of course, you can shop or hit the pub, but it is still seen traditionally as very much the day to spend with family. So if, for whatever reason, you can't, you can be acutely aware of being separated from the people you love.

But one life-affirming ritual set to fix that is rapidly growing in popularity. The Sunday Assembly is a twice-monthly gathering of non-church goers across the country looking to replace the traditional Sunday service. Two hundred people turned up for the first Sunday Assembly in Islington in 2013, and now there are 68 meetings in eight countries worldwide. There's group singing of uplifting songs (Queen's *Don't Stop*

Me Now is a favourite), a 'thought for the day' style speech or poetry reading, then tea and cake.

There's been much media coverage of loneliness in recent months, with studies reporting that it's not just a problem for the elderly. A Relate study found that 20 per cent of 35- to 44-year-olds feel lonely (compared to 13 per cent of over-75s), because only one in seven of us have daily contact with friends, and only 40 per cent count any colleagues as close friends.

We also know loneliness impacts our physical as well as our emotional health – US research shows ongoing feelings of it increases inflammation levels in the body, raising the risk of heart attack, stroke and even premature death. But what's been overlooked is the flipside: that the loneliness epidemic has been a force for good when it comes to getting people to become more innovative about their social lives.

'The problems created by the recent digital revolution have led us to pursue community,' says social trends commentator Hayley Ard, head of consumer lifestyle at Stylus UK, an innovation and advisory firm. 'Spending time on devices can ▶



Hi! Zumba class @ 7pm tonight. See u there!



HOW TO FIND YOUR TRIBE

- **FOLLOW YOUR PASSION.** Joining a group based on a real interest, rather than something you think you should do, increases your chances of meeting like-minded people. Type your postcode into a site like meetup.com, and you'll have a choice of local events and groups from walking to knitting.
- **GO ONLINE, THEN MEET OFFLINE.** The internet has made it easier to meet new people than ever – around 1000 women a month make new friends via Netmums' 'Meet-a-Mum' forum.
- **GIVE BACK.** Volunteering boosts your mental wellbeing by giving you a sense of purpose. Try Timebank (timebank.org.uk), The Conservation Volunteers (tcv.org.uk) or GoodGym (goodgym.org).
- **JUMP IN!** Joining a new group can give you that 'first day at school feeling', says psychotherapist Hilda Burke. 'Allow a few weeks to settle in; if you continue to feel out of place, it may not be the group for you.'

numb feelings of social interaction. If we have a lot of text conversations for instance, we can feel deprived of facial expression and eye contact, and as a result, may have a stronger drive to connect with the wider community.'

The boundaries between screen and real life are blurring; many online relationships develop offline, just as when you meet a new friend offline you connect with them online, says integrative psychotherapist Hilda Burke (hildaburke.co.uk). 'The internet is a gateway that helps us find like-minded people.'

We've always found ways to get together in groups, and whether it's bingo and bowls or CrossFit and Zumba, the underlying aim is the same. 'A desire to come together is in our DNA,' says Burke. 'As hunter-gatherers, we were safest when with others and in more danger out on our own. That doesn't apply anymore, but we still feel safer in a group.'

Rather than simply seeking new friends, or an enjoyable way to pass time, we're looking for groups that reflect our desires to live purposefully, says Ard. 'The drive to live this way will soon be as big as that to be eco-friendly,' she says. We're wising up to the fact that pleasure doesn't bring happiness unless it's balanced with a sense of purpose, adds Paul Dolan, professor of behavioural science at London School of Economics. 'Doing meaningful and purposeful activities promotes better health, social integration and daily functioning. To be truly happy, you need to feel pleasure *and* purpose.'

Our drive to be part of something bigger may also be a reflection of the times we live in, believes Burke. 'We're exposed to 24-hour news coverage of unrest around the world, which can make us feel powerless. But we can make a difference in our local community.' It may explain why more of us are volunteering – 71

“ WE WANT TO MAKE CONNECTIONS THAT ALSO HAVE MEANING AND PURPOSE ”

per cent do so at least twice a year, and are joining groups such as the Women's Institute (WI). Over 50,000 women have joined the WI in the past three years, attracted

by campaigns to protect legal aid for domestic violence victims, and to employ more midwives.

There's a dynamic that happens when we connect with a supportive, purposeful group that can radiate across our whole life, says Burke. 'Research shows that people who regularly go to church are 35 per cent more likely to live longer than non-churchgoers. But this applies even to people who don't have religious beliefs – simply coming together with an encouraging group of like-minded individuals on a weekly basis conveys the benefits.' So, whether that's the traditional kind, the Sunday Assembly or something completely different, finding your own 'church' and connecting regularly could be the best investment you make in your long-term health and wellbeing. **B**