Connecting with culture to reduce loneliness amongst ethnic minority communities: examples from the Time to Shine programme in Leeds

Introduction

Research shows that for some Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) people, cultural factors play a role in their loneliness. Some BAME communities have large family networks yet people within them may nevertheless experience loneliness due to having less involvement with peers, or activities that interest them. There is also an identified link between loneliness and the relatively high levels of poverty experienced by some BAME groups.

Emerging findings from an ongoing evaluation of a programme in Leeds, called Time to Shine, which includes targeted projects that work with older people from Indian, Chinese and Irish backgrounds, provide learning on how to support older BAME individuals who are, or may be at risk of being, lonely.
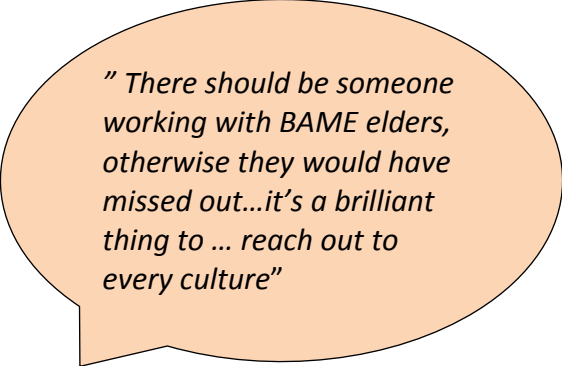
What is Time to Shine?

The Time to Shine programme, run by the Leeds Older People's Forum, aims to reduce loneliness of the older population in Leeds. It is funded by the Big Lottery Fund's Fulfilling Lives: Ageing Better initiative. The activities provided through the programme are designed by older people and aimed to be fun, sociable and, importantly for BAME individuals, culturally appropriate and inclusive (for example by recruiting bilingual volunteers and running sessions in venues where BAME older people attend). So far, almost 40% of participants supported in the programme are from a BAME background.

What have we learned from Time to Shine about supporting older BAME people?

Cultural differences mean that support aimed at the general population will not always reach or engage some older BAME people. One Punjabi speaking participant talked about how older people in some Indian communities are influenced by the views of their family members. This is why support involving a volunteer cooking a meal at a participant's home had mixed success, as some participants were concerned that family members would view this as charity, which they perceived in a negative way.

Providing **support sensitive to cultural attitudes and practices** is important when reaching and engaging some older BAME people, and enables the support to **link to their culture to create a sense of belonging.** Activities aimed at older Irish men successfully reduced loneliness by providing links to their Irish cultural heritage, such as holding events in an Irish pub or showing an Irish film. Similarly, activities aimed at Chinese older people involved purchases of chopsticks, bowls and Chinese tea for participants to use, which was viewed as helping to reinforce the Chinese Seniors' sense of belonging. Focus group participants said they particularly liked the fact that the sessions are exclusively for Chinese people as they feel *part of a big family*.

" There should be someone working with BAME elders, otherwise they would have missed out…it's a brilliant thing to … reach out to every culture"

"It's that Irish connection, although Leeds is my home, I will always have a soft spot for Ireland… I love Irish music, I go to the Irish centre, it's the connection"

A **lack of confidence due to language barriers** was mentioned by some and participants from non-English speaking backgrounds particularly welcomed projects that allowed them to chat in their own language. One participant who had lost confidence due to a mixture of bereavement and ill health specifically wanted to re-engage with Punjabi speaking peers. She was therefore connected with a Punjabi speaking family, and together they enjoyed evening meals together.

June 2018

Are there other examples of projects recognising importance of cultural differences?

The importance of understanding the attitudes and practices of different cultures has not only been demonstrated through Time to Shine, but through other initiatives. For example, Age UK's Cascade Training Programme involved a strand focusing on empowering volunteers to engage and support BAME older people. The training included helping volunteers understand the different issues and barriers that an older person from different BAME backgrounds may face when accessing existing provision. The programme successfully trained almost 300 volunteers who supported 1,224 BAME older people across England to improve their health & wellbeing, including helping alleviate feelings of loneliness.

Summary – 3 ways to support older BAME people

Some ways to support older BAME people who are, or may be at risk of being, lonely are to:

- provide support that incorporates cultural attitudes and practices
- enable a sense of belonging by creating a space that brings together people of similar culture, and cultural heritage
- enable people to participate by giving consideration to barriers such as proficiency in the English language

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