



Older Men at the Margins

Guidance for practitioners and services
providing groups for older men.

Messages from the Older Men at the Margins project 2016-2019

About the project

In collaboration with Age UK, the Older Men at the Margins project identified ways of alleviating loneliness and reducing isolation for older men (65+ years of age) across hard-to-reach and seldom-heard groups. This included older men who are single or living alone in urban and rural areas; older gay men who are single or living alone; older men with hearing loss; and older men who are carers for significant others (family members, partners).

Between 2017 and 2018, 111 men (65-95 years of age) from the above groups across the south west and west of England took part in interviews and shared their experiences of combatting loneliness and social isolation in later life. The overall

aim was to better understand the ways in which marginalised or seldom-heard groups of older men seek to maintain social engagement and social participation in later life. This included participation in groups targeted at reducing loneliness and social isolation. The research identified ways in which social care and community-based services could take better account of the social wellbeing of older men.

This guidance sets out the learning from our research and highlights important factors to be considered to meet the diverse needs of older men through group programmes and interventions. It will be of use to professionals and services who wish to set up groups, or who are already running groups for older people.

What do we know from previous research on group interventions?

The evidence for ‘what works’ in reducing loneliness and social isolation among older people is limited, and even more limited when looking at just older men. While there are many examples of interventions in both grey and academic literature, too often interventions are not evaluated, or are poorly evaluated (Findlay, 2003; Victor et al., 2018) and do not distinguish between loneliness and social isolation, even though they may require different types of support to alleviate them (Age UK, 2015).

Group interventions typically have an activity, social or educational focus, such as lunch clubs, DIY, crafts, and social gatherings aimed specifically at improving opportunities for social interaction. Not all interventions may be aimed at loneliness and social isolation, but may still alleviate them (Age UK, 2015). What follows are some key messages from the literature on ‘what works’ when providing group interventions:

Focussed and targeted

Effective group interventions have focussed educational or support input and target a specific population, for example care-givers, people experiencing bereavement, or people with mental health needs.

Members as active contributors

Group interventions are more likely to be effective if older people are active contributors to the planning and running of the group, rather than passive participants (Dickens et al., 2011). Participatory elements give participants some control over the intervention (Cattan et al., 2005). Group interventions benefit from a participatory approach where older people can be involved in the planning, development and delivery of interventions (Gardiner et al., 2016). Evidence from the Men’s Sheds programme, which provides community spaces for men to connect, converse and create, shows that men highly value the sense of contributing to a group, or volunteering, rather than being clients and recipient of services (Milligan et al., 2016).

Role of the coordinator

The person in this role needs to promote active participation and encourage men to get involved in group interventions, like Men's Sheds (Milligan et al., 2016).

Being adaptable and flexible

Successful interventions need to have a degree of adaptability and flexibility to meet the specific needs of the participants, as well as allowing some local control over the running of the group (Gardiner et al., 2016).

Identify the barriers to engaging with groups

Sometimes befriending schemes and social clubs can be labelled as services for 'lonely old people' and may be less appealing for older men seeking contact with people from a mix of age groups. For others, joining a group for older adults may be associated with losing independence or becoming more reliant on others (Goll et al., 2015). Some older adults may worry about being rejected by other members of the group, particularly if there are differences between members on the basis of social identities, for example sexuality or ethnic identity. Groups may not be appealing to men because they do

not have the right activity that captures their personal interests or are largely used and staffed by women and seen to be more focused on women's interests (Ruxton, 2006).

Summary

Several factors are key to the success of group interventions aimed at the reduction of loneliness and social isolation. These include a focus on activities that are of specific interest to men; support for participant engagement and control; a sense of reciprocity and active contribution; and recognition of the barriers older men may face in engaging in group-based activities.

What did we learn from different groups of older men?

The following section sets out some key points we learnt from speaking to older men about their experiences of participating in groups. We interviewed 111 men from five different groups, which are sometimes described as ‘hard-to-reach’ or ‘seldom-heard’:

- 1 Men who are single or living alone in urban areas.
- 2 Men who are single or living alone in rural areas.
- 3 Men who identify as gay and are single or living alone.
- 4 Men who are carers for significant others (e.g. spouses, partners or family members), and
- 5 Men living with hearing loss.

Key learning from interviews with older gay men who were single or living alone

What did gay men like about participating in groups?

- Being part of a group can bring a sense of belonging, in particular feelings of being accepted and valued by others. Being around other gay men and able to share things with others who have had similar life experiences can be really important

to building a positive sense of one’s self and gay identity. A lot of older gay men have experienced discrimination and homophobia across their lifetime, as well as not being accepted by society or by the law, and as a result may not have a positive view of themselves and their relationships with other men.

- Men preferred groups which allowed them to feel like they were actively helping others and giving something back – to gain a sense of contributing to the lives of others.
- Men valued groups where they could meet new people and develop new friendships. Gay-specific groups were particularly helpful spaces for gay men to develop new friendships because they felt they could be themselves and be accepted and understood by peers with shared experiences.
- Men expressed a preference for groups that have members from different age groups – not seeking groups that are just for older gay men but also include gay men from younger generations.

What were some of the barriers identified by gay men who were single or living alone?

- Gay men told us about their experiences of feeling unwelcome or ignored when accessing gay and LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans) social spaces, particularly gay bars and clubs that were aimed at younger customers.
- Some older men may be concerned that they will be ignored or overlooked by younger gay men, that they may be misperceived as ‘dirty old men’ when trying to start a conversation with younger men or that older men do not ‘fit in’ to gay spaces.
- Some men may view groups as having too many older members and not enough younger members. Being able to interact with younger men as well as peers of similar age can be really important.
- Geographical location is important to consider. Often gay or LGBT social spaces such as bars, cafes and clubs are located in bigger cities and require long travel distances. Men may be reluctant to attend groups if these meet long distances from their home and are not easy to get to. It is important to make sure groups for older gay men meet in smaller towns as well as bigger cities.

“So, it’s a place where I feel I can be myself, whereas those who are not of my kind, they have so many opportunities, in so many ways, to socialise. But I feel that I can do it with complete comfort, if I know if I’m with my own kind. It maybe that it’s being partly still closeted, but I still feel that I’m happiest when I am with people that understand me and accept me.” **M68, 85 years, identifies as gay.**

“It’s not easy to meet new people of the same sexual orientation. When you’re younger, you go along to the bars, to the nightclubs. But, to go there as somebody who was in his 50s, heading towards 60, it’s not the place to be, really. So, that’s why I thought, ‘No, the better option is to join things,’” and that’s what I did.” **M73, 65 years, identifies as gay.**





What did older straight men like about groups?

- Groups provide focus and something to do, a way to keep busy and alleviate feelings of loneliness.
- Groups bring opportunities for peer-to-peer support - spaces to offload and share problems and to form new friendships with other men who have had similar life experiences or have shared interests. We know from our interviews that men's friendships are important and valued.
- For some, men's spaces are important places where men can engage in activities that are of interest to them, and that provide opportunities to meet other men in similar situations and to develop new friendships. This can help break social isolation.
- Similar to other groups of men, taking on a helping role and contributing to other people's lives is an important and meaningful activity. Retirement can be a difficult crunch-point in which men can feel devalued or redundant – keeping a role in actively contributing to shared, focused activity can help counteract these feelings.
- Men value being actively involved in the organisation of groups. Having a clear purpose and role within groups can bring a sense of achievement and increase confidence.
- Groups can provide a space for learning from each other - to learn something new or acquire new skills. Peer-to-peer learning is one way of making the most of the knowledge, skills and experience that older men bring to groups. This validates the contributions men can make to the learning of others.

“I have been through my past history from retirement onwards, from the death of my wife. The only advice I could give is try and find out what motivates you, what kind of interests you have, and get involved in it. In my case it was walking, it was music. It was art, love of the countryside, love of travel. Travel is important as well, holidays.”

M15, 92 years, single/ living alone

What were some of the barriers to accessing groups identified by older straight men?

- Single men can feel unwelcome or left out in groups that are full of couples. Being single and attending on one's own can sometimes make interactions in groups difficult. Some men may worry about how they interact with other men's partners or spouses. Equally some single men may be looking for comfortable group environments to meet and connect with single women.
- Groups and group activities may not be appealing if they are seen to be for older people only. Some men may not view themselves as 'old' and may not want to be surrounded by other people of a similar or older age. Some of the single men we spoke to did not consider themselves to be an 'older person', particularly those men between 65-75 years of age. This is where mixed-age groups can help.
- Some men may find it difficult to fit in with groups that have mainly women as members – this can create personal difficulties in engaging in conversations that capture their interests.
- For those living in rural areas, long driving distances can be a barrier, particularly if groups meet at night as some individuals may be reluctant to drive at nighttime.
- Money can be a barrier for men from all walks of life – the cost of getting to groups and any costs associated with taking part (e.g. taxi costs to get to groups, membership fees). It is important to keep costs low or, if possible, to offer financial or other support to help men travel to group locations.

“I sat down at the table and half a dozen blokes came in and spoke to me and asked me who I was, what I was doing and within minutes I was completely settled down with these men.”

M81, 88 years, straight





What did older men who care for others like about groups?

- Attending groups provides an opportunity to get out of the house for a short while and enjoy the company of other people. Activities within groups can sometimes provide meaningful changes and distractions from the everyday responsibilities of caring.
- Men we spoke to discussed how caring for a loved one often meant they couldn't meet up with friends like they used to, and they missed time spent with friends over a meal or in the pub. While group interventions cannot replace good friendships, groups can bring opportunities to socialise with others on a regular basis.
- Groups for carers are a way of seeking support and information, for example about accessing carers' services or benefits or the healthcare needs of loved ones.
- Groups for carers can provide spaces to seek and offer emotional support to others - somewhere carers can share problems as well as feel understood by others in the group who are in a similar situation. Groups provide spaces to be able to share stories and experiences with other carers and to connect over shared experiences.
- Men's groups give male carers an opportunity to discuss sensitive or intimate issues and worries that they may not feel comfortable discussing in front of female partners or other women in their lives. Men's groups can also provide an important sense of camaraderie and belonging.

“Yes, because men can talk to one another and say things you wouldn't say in front of women.”

M44, 76 years, cares for his spouse

What were some of the barriers identified by men who are carers?

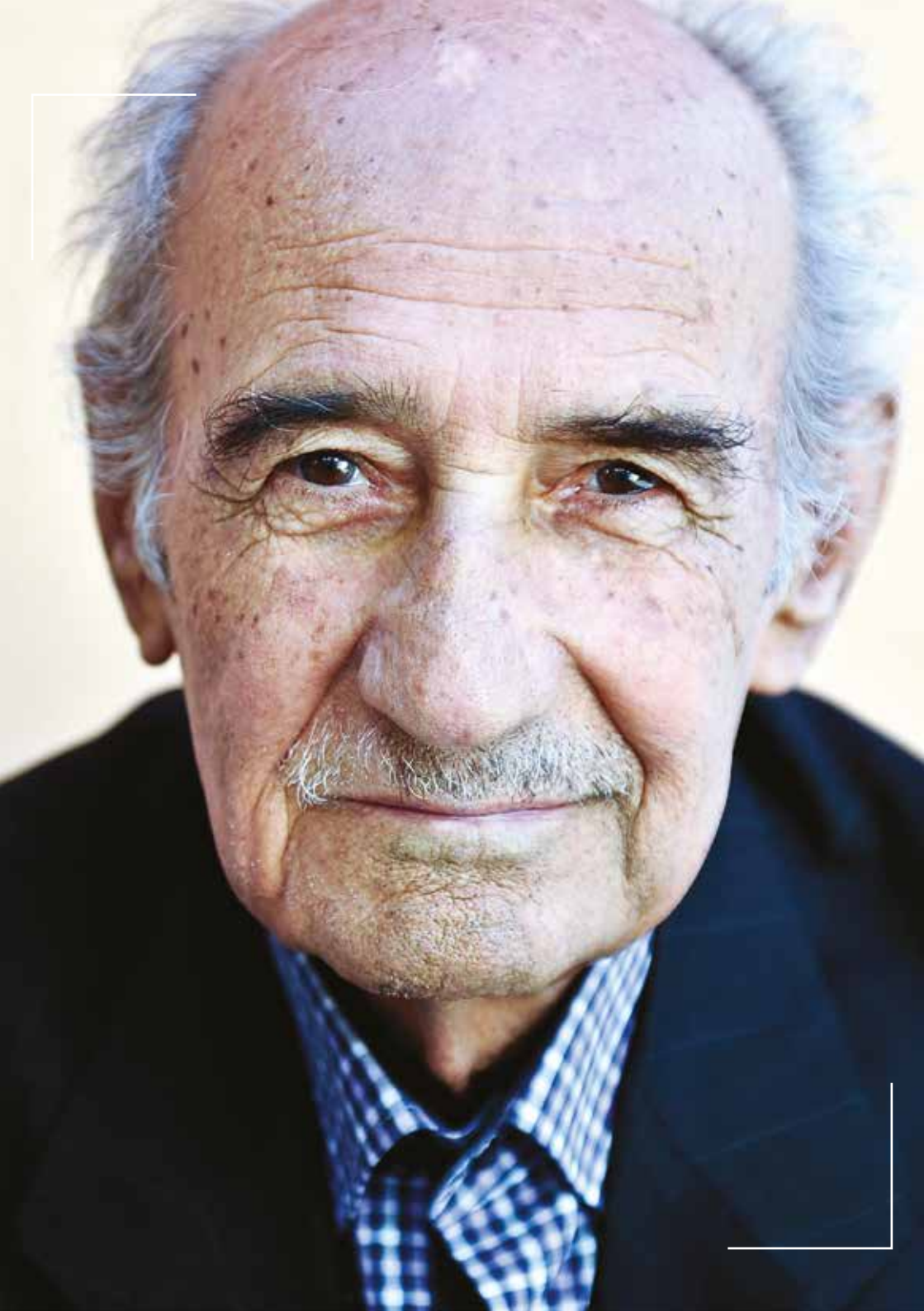
- The daily routine of caring for someone can prevent some carers from attending groups. Not having enough time and not being able to leave the person they are caring for may restrict participation.
- If the person they are caring for needs to also attend the group, this may prevent carers from feeling like they can safely share and discuss issues that are worrying them.
- The timings of carers' groups can be a problem if group meetings do not fit with carers' routines in providing care for someone else.
- Groups need to be flexible around attendance as a carer's routine and plans may quickly change depending on the needs of the person they are caring for.
- Carers' meetings and support groups can often attract mostly women members; male carers may value men-only spaces where they can discuss issues of interest and concern to men.

"I enjoy just talking to the people. I enjoy being able to let off steam. I do let off steam when things have gone wrong from this point of view... It is also quite useful to hear that other people are doing the same things. That is the main thing, in a way you are not the only one."

M57, 81 years, cares for his spouse

"It's helpful, I would say, but I did think initially, probably because things were a bit grim at the time, I remember the first few times I went I sat there thinking, "Well, if I've had to come to a carers' group for mental health problems, is this how bad my life has become?" That was my first interpretation of that, to think, "Well, if I've actually got to come to a group like this, things must have got bad." **M54, 70 years, cares for his spouse**





Key learning from interviews with men with hearing loss

Men with hearing loss valued many of the same aspects about groups identified by other men. However, their experiences of groups were often shaped by how accessible the group was to people with a hearing impairment.

- Hearing loss is a sensory disability that impacts on group participation, particularly when meetings are located in settings with poor acoustics and loud background noise. It may be a result of earlier life experiences, such as working with loud machinery, or as a more recent decline associated with getting older.
- Some men will have prescribed hearing aids but may not want to wear them all the time. This may be because they are uncomfortable to wear, hard to tune or some men may be self-conscious.
- There are many factors that can make it difficult to hear in group settings. These include: the acoustics of the room (e.g. large spaces with lots of echoing sounds), having multiple conversations happening around you at one time, having to

compete with loud music or televisions, or meeting spaces not having the right audio equipment to make sure everyone can hear.

- Some men with hearing loss mentioned feeling left out of conversations and isolated from others in group discussions. Feeling left out can sometimes make you feel excluded or not liked by others in the group, no matter how unintentional this may be. These negative thoughts can inhibit some men from taking part in groups or make them not attend again.

“... before I had my hearing checked, I think for a time I did probably avoid things ...I didn't enjoy parties, social events, because I did feel for a time, I couldn't hear what was going on. I remember one or two big family celebrations where it was a nightmare, because I couldn't hear anything anyone was saying.”

M116, 69 years, married

Overcoming barriers for men with hearing loss

Overcoming barriers to hearing in groups is fundamental to making sure that men with hearing impairments feel included – it's a universal requirement for preventing social exclusion. Thinking about the following things ahead of group meetings and events can help make sure everyone feels included:

- 1 The room location and level of competing background noise.
- 2 Number of people in the room at one time and the room acoustics.
- 3 The availability of supportive technology, like hearing loops and use of microphones. Audio technology can assist with making sure everyone can hear and participate during group meetings.

Other things to consider:

- Group speakers and facilitators need to be able to speak in a clear tone and measured pace and be clearly visible to those who can lip-read.
- Some men may use sign language (e.g. British Sign Language) and value opportunities to connect with other group members through sign language.

- Some men may prefer to sit in particular spots in the room which will assist them to hear more clearly (e.g. in the front row or close to speakers and contributors).
- If group members appear to get frustrated with hearing others in the group or hearing group discussions, they may express their frustrations at other people in the group or stop attending. It's important to catch up with them one-to-one after the group (preferably in person). Have a conversation to identify what changes need to happen in the group to make them feel more included.

“Well, yes, if you can't hear what's being said in that context, then you are left in the dark somewhat. ...You become more introverted if you're not talking. It's more and more about what's going on for you, then, isn't it? 'Don't people like me?' All that kind of negativity can creep in, can't it? 'Don't people like me? Am I not in their class?'”

M98, 65 years, single

Other important things to consider when running groups: factors identified by older men

- Restrictions on physical mobility, for example living with physical disabilities or health-related conditions, can hinder individuals from reaching the locations of group meetings. Physical conditions can also impact on how long individuals can stay seated or in one spot, for example if living with spine or back conditions.
- For some men who have grown accustomed to being alone for long parts of their life, it can be really difficult to fit into group situations and interact with others.
- Sometimes traumatic childhood experiences, such as chronic illness or living in care, can create difficulties for men across their lifetime with forming friendships and engaging with others in groups. Learning more about a person's life story can help identify and overcome concerns about participating in groups. It's essential to have one-to-one meetings to get to know a new member before they take part in a group.
- Therapeutic groups where members are invited to share and discuss emotionally-charged issues with other members can present difficulties for some men in taking part, particularly if individuals struggle to express emotional difficulties. This is where activity-focused groups in which men are making an active contribution can provide a safer platform for disclosure on their terms.
- Use of online technology and social media can vary greatly amongst older men. Group facilitators should not rely solely on the Internet or social media for advertising groups or for passing on information about meetings and events. Younger family members and friends who use social media and are online regularly may be useful contacts for reaching out to older men not connected to groups and to pass on information about groups in their local area.

What did we learn from those involved in running and facilitating groups?

We interviewed 20 people who were involved in running groups for older men or groups for older people that had a lot of male participants. Types of groups included: walking sports groups, carers' support groups, hearing loss groups, LGBT groups and reminiscence groups.

What type of group activities appeal to older men?

- Food was considered to have an important role in bringing men together and often group meetings involved meal-related activities, e.g. breakfast clubs or fish and chip lunches on day trips.
- Cultural and creative groups involving reading, film watching, singing and music, particularly playing an instrument, are helpful ways for inviting men to return to an activity they enjoyed previously in life.
- Physical activities such as walking trips and walking sports are appealing for men. Sport groups are valued as they allow familiar male interaction and walking versions can help remove barriers for members with restrictions on their mobility.

- Practical, skills-based activities, such as carpentry and engineering, were another focus for engaging men in groups. Keep in mind that these kinds of skilled activities will not appeal to all men.

What works well with keeping groups running long-term?

- Service user involvement is important for groups – from initial consultation on content to higher levels of involvement with men helping to run groups.
- Men-only groups can make it easier for some men to open up and develop friendships. In mixed-gender groups men can feel restricted in how they talk and what they talk about.
- It's vital to provide comfortable meeting spaces for men (both physical and emotional). Pubs or workshops can be familiar environments for some men. Part of providing a safe space is being prepared to respond to and challenge behaviours or expressions from group members that convey negative views towards people from particular social backgrounds (e.g. challenging racist, sexist or homophobic comments).

- Supportive gestures for new members such as a personal welcome prior to attendance can help overcome anxieties connected with joining new groups. This is where people signposting men to groups, such as social care workers, can play a role by accompanying individuals to their first meeting with a group facilitator or to their first time attending a group.
- Group leaders must make sure there is consistency in when groups run (e.g. which day of the week and time) and who runs the group – having a regular, familiar face will help members to build rapport with and trust in group facilitators.

What things can prevent men from taking part in groups?

- Some men may hold a fear of new situations, experience a loss of confidence or have personality traits such as pride and stubbornness that inhibit them from joining groups. Smaller groups may make it easier for those with confidence issues to participate. It's equally important to get to know new members one-to-one before they participate in the group.
- Perceptions of groups can be off-putting. Men are less likely to be interested in groups which appear to be mainly orientated towards women's interests

or with subject matter that they do not relate to. Gay men may not feel confident in attending older people's groups if these are not clearly advertised or promoted as LGBT-friendly spaces and include other gay men. Having gay-identifying facilitators may also help make groups safer spaces.

Summary

Finally, there are two important things to note about groups. First, not all men may prefer the company of other men. A small number of men we spoke to preferred conversations with women and found it hard to talk to other men in the same way. Mixed-gender groups may work well for a lot of older men. Second, not all men may be interested in being a part of or ready to get involved in groups. We know that loneliness and social isolation can be long-term, complex problems for some individuals. Group interventions may not always be the right solution for every individual. Other creative approaches working one-to-one may be needed to gradually increase an individual's social engagement with others.

Further information

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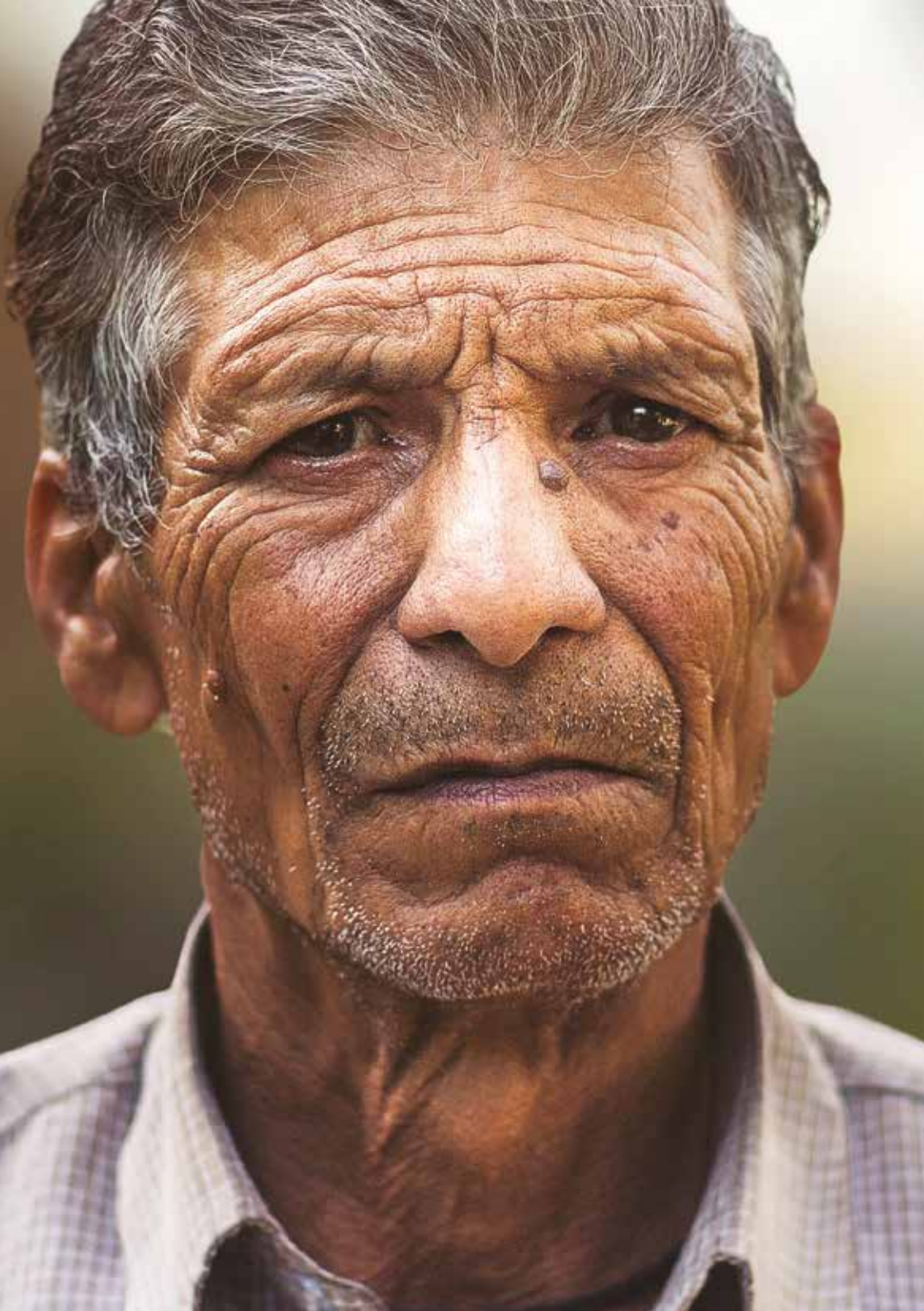
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Age UK's loneliness research and resources webpages for professionals pull together our reports and other work including the scale of the problem, what works, our heat maps, and more.

www.ageuk.org.uk/loneliness-research

Age UK also has information and advice webpages on loneliness, with information and support for people who are feeling lonely, advice for carers, as well as how to volunteer to help others who are lonely.

www.ageuk.org.uk/loneliness



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