

You can't beat lively conversation to brighten up dullest day of the week

Deborah Haynes

December 1 2015, 12:01am, The Times



Cheryl Price, a Contact the Elderly volunteer, hosts six people for Sunday lunch at her family home once a month JACK TAYLOR/THE TIMES

It is sometimes a struggle to fill the hours, but Joan Hanley finds doing jigsaw puzzles on her iPad a great form of entertainment. The 82-year-old retired civil servant is now an expert.

“You sit there night after night . . . but luckily this is my saviour,” she said, clutching her pink-cased tablet. “I have done nearly 5,000 jigsaw puzzles on my iPad. If I am feeling low, I just open it and have a go. I recommend this to anybody old.”

Ms Hanley, from Gravesend, has another precious lifeline. One Sunday a month she is picked up and taken for tea at the home of a volunteer from the charity Contact the Elderly. The choice of day is not an accident. Sundays are regarded

by many in old age as the loneliest day of the week. Few other charities or services operate and friends are often busy with family.

Loneliness is a blight on our rapidly ageing population and one of the greatest challenges facing our society. Half of all over-75s live alone and, for many, television is their main source of company. Loneliness is not just hard to bear, it is bad for health, with some studies suggesting that it is just as damaging as smoking.

Yet charities such as Contact the Elderly can make a profound difference, not just with the prospect of a welcoming tea party in a volunteer's home once a month, but with the guarantee of the same driver to ferry the elderly person to and fro. That in itself is the source of regular company and often a meaningful friendship.

For Ms Hanley, who never married and has no children, there is another advantage: "It is the only chance I get to have an intelligent conversation with someone younger me." She lives in a retirement complex with more than 100 other elderly people. The complex has a communal room to enable residents to meet up, but Ms Hanley said that she found it quite depressing. "All these people want to talk about is their illnesses because that is what their life consists of."

By contrast, the six families in Gravesham in Kent who take it in turn to host the Contact the Elderly get-togethers each month mix up the generations, from their guests aged from early 80s to late 90s, to the younger volunteer drivers, to their own relatives and friends.

"I find it so lovely that I can come here and converse with people who are younger than me," said Ms Hanley, her eyes twinkling as she looked around a crowded dining-room area and kitchen at the house of last month's hosts, Cheryl and Graham Price.

A toddler, the grandson of one of the volunteers, pressed his face to one of the windows to admire a large dog in the back garden, while four silver-haired women and two men made themselves comfortable on a sofa and an array of chairs. They chatted to the hosts and a group of Mr and Mrs Price's friends and fellow volunteers who had come to join in the fun, which included a traditional turn at stirring the Christmas pudding.

Mrs Price, a tall woman with a friendly face and jolly laugh, said that she and her husband got huge enjoyment from hosting the tea-parties, something they had done for the past two years.

Both have lost their own parents. “It feels as though there is something missing at the top of the tree,” Mrs Price said. “For us, it fills that gap. You look around and see old people and then they start talking about the lives they have led, the things they have done, it is just mind blowing. It’s the best thing we do.”

Other volunteers miss their grandparents. Louise Stapley, 29, a risk manager at a bank, decided to become a driver for the charity after her grandmother died five years ago. “I used to take her out every week and she loved it,” Ms Stapley said. “I used to get enjoyment out of it just as much as she did and I really missed that.”

She now drives Dorothy Rook, 86, every month to tea parties around Gravesham. It is the only time that the former foster mother, a widow, who has cared for more than 130 foster children in her life, leaves her sheltered accommodation.

Contact the Elderly, which was established 50 years ago, runs more than 600 groups like this across England, Scotland and Wales, offering friendship to more than 4,800 people aged 75 and over who live alone. Some 8,000 volunteers provide the service — a number that the charity hopes to double to 16,000 by the end of the decade, with a goal to create 600 more monthly tea-party groups and drivers.

Ms Hanley, who uses a walking frame, had to give up driving recently because of her poor eyesight. Other guests also need assistance to move around, making the volunteer drivers essential. Yet the time commitment is modest at only a few hours once a month. It makes it manageable for those with busy lives.

Douglas Rapley, 91, another of the guests at the Gravesham party, has a son and a daughter he sees regularly, but he still finds that weekends can be a lonely time, especially since his wife died at the start of the year.

“I don’t like Saturdays and Sundays. The world stops, you don’t see anybody around,” said Mr Rapley, who served in the RAF during the Second World War until he suffered an injury to both of his legs. He had to spend 15 months in hospital.

One of the veteran’s granddaughters suggested that he try the Contact the Elderly tea-parties. Mr Rapley said they had since given him a rare weekend treat to look forward to.

“It is very nice. I thoroughly enjoy it,” he said. “I get up in the morning on a Saturday and think: Oh, I am going out and I am happy.”

Ms Hanley has two sisters, one of whom bought her the cherished iPad, and two brothers as well as their respective children.

Mr and Mrs Price have also become good friends. “I actually look forward to coming to this because it’s so lively and people are talking about things. They are talking about life, not old age and not illnesses. It is really good,” she said. “They are such lovely people.”

- Barnett Waddingham, the largest independent provider of actuarial, administration and consultancy services, has pledged a gift of £20,000 to kick-start donations to Contact the Elderly to help it to launch new groups throughout the UK. A second donor who wishes to remain anonymous will match the first £5,000 of readers’ donations.