Making the most of the outdoors to tackle loneliness

A person sitting on a bench next to a bicycle at sunset.

Mental Health Awareness week takes place this month (9-15th May 2022) and this year’s theme is loneliness. Have you or your learners ever experienced loneliness? In the last couple years, some of us have had to come to terms with being on our own for long periods of time and during the various lockdowns, learners’ may well have missed spending time with their friends. The toll of isolation can create social anxiety, especially on those who live alone or have lost people.Spending time in the natural environment improves our mental health and feelings of wellbeing, helps bind communities together, and can also be used as a tool to combat loneliness. Can your learners come up with ideas on how the natural environment can be used to tackle loneliness? Here are some ideas we’ve come up with.

**Get out first thing**

Start your day with a short walk in a nearby green or blue space. Getting some daylight first thing helps you feel more awake and gives you more energy for the rest of the day. It also stabilises your circadian rhythm (your internal clock), meaning you’ll sleep better when it’s time for bed. Ditch the exhaust and commute on foot or wheels to your setting if you can. Take your breakfast outside to get some sunlight and surround yourself with natural sights and sounds. Being able to appreciate the tranquillity of nature first thing can reduce stress levels and gives your brain those happy chemicals, like serotonin. All of this makes for a positive impact on the rest of your day.

**Find a ‘happy to chat’ bench**

Just having a chat when you feel lonely can make a world of difference. Inspired by the sight of an elderly man who sat alone on a bench in a busy city centre park for 40 minutes, Allison Owen-Jones from Cardiff has been encouraging strangers to chat. Alison tied a simple, laminated sign saying 'Happy to chat bench. Sit here if you don't mind someone stopping to say hello' to benches in parks around her home city and has helped inspire a movement that has spread across the world. If there’s not a ‘happy to chat’ bench in your local area or at your setting, your learners could stick a sign up or bring it to the attention of their local council. Making that first step to speak to others can be daunting and these benches help those that are feeling lonely take the first step!

**Join a volunteer or activity group in your area**

There’s usually more going on in your neighbourhood than you know. Community gardens, walking groups, and volunteering opportunities all offer great ways to spend time outdoors. Many charities and groups would welcome new members, why not contact your local Voluntary Services Council to find out what’s going on in your local area. A great opportunity to learn new practical skills, enhance your connection with the natural environment whilst meeting new people. Want to be more active? Why not join a running or outdoor sports club in your area or contact [The Ramblers](https://www.ramblers.org.uk/wales.aspx) who have walking groups all over Wales with walks ranging in terms of difficulty and distance. There’s something for everyone!

**Explore somewhere new!**

If walking around your local neighbourhood or workplace is getting boring, take a day to venture out somewhere further. Why not check out a section of the Wales Coast Path or look up green spaces you haven’t been to before that are easy for you to access. Check out our ‘[Places to visit](https://naturalresources.wales/days-out/places-to-visit/?lang=en)’ webpage for inspiration and new places to visit near you. Your new favourite walking spot might be closer than you think.

**Looking for learning resources, information or data? Please contact:**

[education@naturalresourceswales.gov.uk](mailto:education@naturalresourceswales.gov.uk) or go to <https://naturalresources.wales/learning>

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