

Strengthening social connection through age-friendly cities and communities

A practical living guide



About this living guide

This living guide is a communications and advocacy resource produced by the Secretariat of the World Health Organization (WHO) Commission on Social Connection, in collaboration with the WHO Global Network for Age-friendly Cities and Communities (GNAFCC)¹, through the WHO Age-friendly Environments Knowledge and Action Hub on Social Connection. The guide translates key recommendations from the flagship report of the WHO Commission on Social Connection (1) for age-friendly cities and communities, building on WHO work and resources on healthy ageing (3), age-friendly environments (2, 34) and the United Nations (UN) Decade of Healthy Ageing (2021–2030) (22), as well as the experience of GNAFCC members and Affiliates. It will be updated over time as feedback, practice-based learning and new evidence emerge, including through the Hub and the wider GNAFCC network.

The guide is for everyone involved in developing age-friendly cities and communities (AFCCs), including coordinators at community and national levels, practitioners, researchers and members of civil society. While rooted in the WHO age-friendly cities and communities framework (2), it will also be relevant to action on healthy cities, urban health and healthy ageing programmes more broadly. The guide aims to:

- strengthen understanding of the importance of social connection in healthy ageing, and of healthy ageing in sustaining social connection;
- highlight how AFCC frameworks are already built to support social connection, with many AFCC initiatives already aligned with evidence-based approaches;
- suggest ways in which AFCCs can further integrate and strengthen action on social connection.

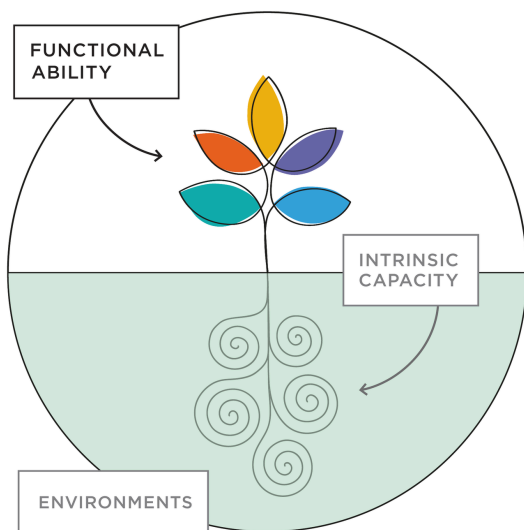
Whether the focus of action is on improving the health of older people or improving health across the life course more broadly, strengthening work on social connection will help to maximize health and wider social benefits for people, communities and the AFCC approach itself.

1 Social connection in the healthy ageing framework

The WHO healthy ageing framework defines healthy ageing as the process of developing and maintaining functional ability to enable well-being in older age (3). Functional ability refers to people’s ability to be and do what they value, including the ability to build and maintain relationships. Functional ability is shaped by the interaction between a person’s physical and mental abilities (known as intrinsic capacity) and the environments in which they live. For example, a person with lower intrinsic capacity because of physical or mental health limitations may still have functional ability if their environment offers access to the services, support and facilities they need to remain engaged in life in a meaningful way.

Figure 1. Healthy ageing framework.

Adapted from WHO, *Decade of healthy ageing: baseline report*.



Where social connection fits

Social connection is part of functional ability: the ability to build and maintain relationships. Age-friendly environments can support this by shaping the places, services, information and social norms around people.



Meet basic needs



Learn, grow and make decisions



Be mobile



Build and maintain relationships



Contribute to society

Social connection plays a central role in this framework. Evidence shows that social connection affects physical, mental and cognitive health (1, Chapter 4), and therefore intrinsic capacity. Healthy, supportive relationships, for instance, can support well-being, reduce the risk of disease and extend life expectancy (1, 4–10). In turn, good health and well-being improve people’s ability to connect with others and participate in society (1).

Conversely, a lack of social connection, such as loneliness or social isolation, can have serious consequences for health and well-being across the life course (1, Chapter 4). People who feel lonely or are socially isolated face higher risks of:

Figure 2. Selected health risks associated with loneliness and social isolation.

Adapted from the WHO Commission on Social Connection flagship report (1, Chapter 4).



In turn, chronic health conditions, mobility challenges and reduced cognitive function can become barriers to connection and pathways to loneliness and social isolation (1).

Although many of these health impacts are especially relevant in older age, the effects of social disconnection are apparent even in childhood. Loneliness and social isolation can affect people across their lives through negative effects on **school achievement** (19), **employment opportunities** (20) and **income levels** (21), which are key determinants of long-term health and well-being.

Strengthening social connection is intentionally woven into the AFCC framework to improve healthy ageing. Each AFCC domain works to shape community environments so that they enable connection and social participation, supporting people's functional ability as they age. At the same time, social connection itself helps to improve intrinsic capacity through its effects on physical, mental and cognitive health. Social connection is therefore a key mechanism through which the AFCC framework supports healthy ageing. For this reason, the AFCC framework directly contributes to commitments set by the UN Decade of Healthy Ageing (2021–2030) to reduce loneliness and social isolation (22).

Alongside the benefits to individual health, AFCC partnerships may also benefit from the wider social impacts of stronger community connections, such as social capital. Evidence shows that social capital is an important factor in improved community resilience, community safety, civic engagement, participation in local politics and economic growth and innovation (1, Chapter 4; 4).

There is growing political focus on social connection globally (1, 4, 23). The first World Health Assembly resolution on social connection, which urges Member States to take coordinated action, was adopted in May 2025 (24). Furthermore, a number of WHO Member States now have national strategies or action plans in place, either dedicated to loneliness, social isolation or social connection, or integrated within wider policies, such as healthy ageing or mental health. This changing political context can support local-level action (1, Chapter 6).

The report of the WHO Commission on Social Connection (1), published in 2025, provides an opportunity to reflect on how the latest global evidence translates into community-level action, and how AFCCs could intentionally strengthen work on social connection in the future.

2 Who is affected by social disconnection

Two of the most well-known forms of social disconnection are **loneliness** and **social isolation**. Although they are often discussed together, they are distinct concepts. While they can co-occur, many people can be socially isolated without being lonely, and others may feel lonely when surrounded by others.

Social isolation is the objective state of having few roles, relationships and social interactions with others (1). It can result from life changes, such as the death of a spouse, the breakdown of a relationship, or relocation to a new community. Chronic illness, mobility challenges or communication difficulties can also limit social opportunities and make it harder to form or maintain close relationships.

Across the world

1 in 6

people aged 13 years and older worldwide report feeling lonely.

21%

of adolescents aged 13–17 years report feeling lonely.

25–34%

of older people are estimated to experience social isolation.

Loneliness, by contrast, is a negative subjective emotional state resulting from a discrepancy between one's desired and actual experiences of connection (1). This can arise from being socially isolated, but people can have good social networks and still feel lonely if their relationships lack the support and closeness they desire. How people feel about their relationships is just as important as the number of relationships they have.

Loneliness is widespread. Within the global estimate, reported levels are highest among adolescents (13–17 years; 21%) and young adults (18–29 years; 17%), who may have greater expectations around social relationships and experience periods of rapid social change, such as changing schools or moving into higher education, employment or parenthood.

Although levels of loneliness are lowest among people aged 60 years and older (12%), underlying surveys may underestimate loneliness among older people, for example because of stigma, cultural norms or instrument design. Furthermore, global estimates are not yet available separately for people aged 80 years and older. This group may be particularly vulnerable to loneliness due to shrinking or disrupted social networks, declining physical health and increasing frailty, all of which may limit social participation.

Fewer surveys have been conducted measuring social isolation, and there are no global or large multi-country surveys. However, among older populations, where most evidence is available, 25–34% are estimated to be affected (25, 26). This suggests that, for older people, isolation may remain common even if loneliness is not reported.

Certain population groups are disproportionately affected by social disconnection, such as (1, Chapter 2):

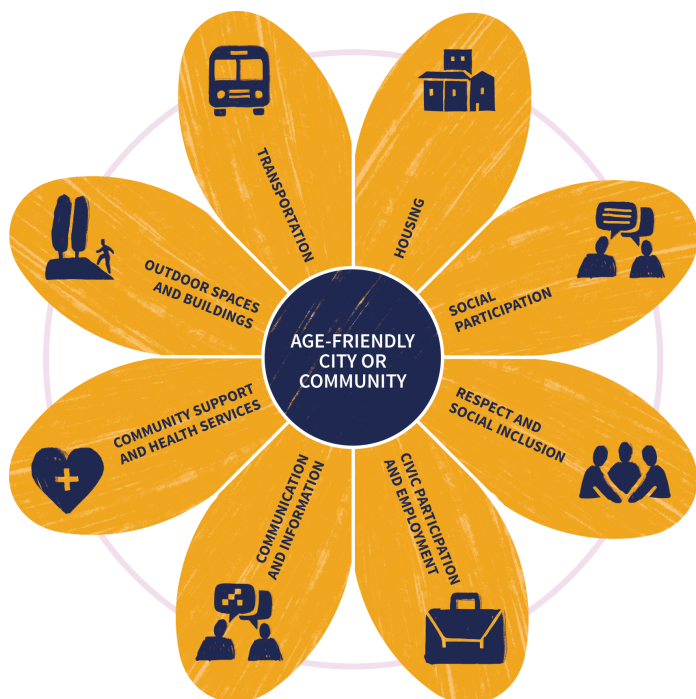
- People with disabilities,
- Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex and queer (LGBTIQ+) populations,
- Migrants and refugees,
- Ethnic minority groups,
- Indigenous people.

Factors such as stigma, discrimination, cultural differences and language barriers may limit opportunities for social and civic engagement (1). Importantly, given the impacts of loneliness and social isolation on the health of older people and across the life course more widely, these issues likely contribute to the health inequalities often seen within communities.

3 How AFCC approaches improve social connection

Figure 3. AFCC domains as pathways for social connection.

Official domains adapted from WHO, *National programmes for age-friendly cities and communities*; social-connection layer developed for this guide.



How the domains support connection

Each AFCC domain can shape whether people have places to meet, opportunities to participate, and support to stay connected.

Places and services

Everyday contact becomes easier when people can reach and use welcoming spaces and services.

Participation routes

Repeated, meaningful interaction is created through activities, roles and civic life.

Information and support

People need accessible information and support to find, sustain and rebuild connection.

With social connection firmly woven into the AFCC approach, the eight AFCC domains (2) already work to improve social relationships, especially the social participation domain. AFCCs will therefore already be supporting social connection and contributing to efforts to tackle social isolation and loneliness in their communities. In fact, evidence from Ireland suggests that older people living in cities with higher levels of age-friendliness have lower levels of loneliness (27). A summary of how each AFCC domain relates to improved social connection is presented below.



1 Outdoor spaces and buildings

Creating accessible, safe and welcoming age-friendly public spaces can make those spaces usable by people of all ages, especially older people for whom reduced mobility or chronic illness may be barriers. These welcoming public spaces act as social infrastructure and can increase opportunities to connect with others in the community. Accessible green spaces have been linked to less loneliness, although some studies find no association (28).



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Creating a community café in Japan

In Yokosuka City, a residents' association of a housing complex set up a space for people to gather, particularly older people and people with disabilities. The café opens for a few hours a day and allows people to interact with each other and the café staff, while enjoying a drink and snack. The café plays a role in preventing social isolation, helping to improve connection and interaction among local residents.

Source: Age-friendly World



2 Transport and mobility

Developing safe and accessible transport systems and walkways can help people access community spaces, activities and services, as well as connect more easily with friends and family. Although all age groups will benefit, this can be particularly important for older people who may be more reliant on public transport to move around, helping social connections to be made and sustained (29). Transport infrastructure, including hubs and vehicles such as buses, trains and boats, can also act as spaces for social connection, particularly with intentional design such as seating arrangements.



3 Housing

Creating housing that addresses the needs of residents (such as close access to services, communal areas, features to encourage independent living) can improve opportunities for residents to connect with each other and their communities. The use of intergenerational or multipurpose housing, such as housing that combines residential, commercial or leisure uses, can also play a role in generating opportunities for wider community connections (30).



IN PRACTICE

Intergenerational home sharing in Canada

In Toronto, an intergenerational home share programme matches adults aged 55 years and older who have a spare room with students looking for affordable housing. Reduced rent is available in exchange for 5–7 hours a week of companionship and light housework. Facilitated by social workers, the arrangement helps older people remain independent, creates affordable living opportunities, and supports strong connections between younger and older community members.

Source: Age-friendly World



4 Social participation

Involvement in activities that increase interaction with others in the community helps people make and sustain social connections and improve social support. Across all ages, community groups, such as leisure or cultural activities, choirs, gardening programmes, education programmes and men's sheds, are an important part of solutions to address social isolation and loneliness and improve social connection (see Section 5). Opportunities for intergenerational contact are particularly important for addressing loneliness and social isolation (31), with each group benefiting from the experiences, skills and knowledge of the other.



IN PRACTICE

Encouraging social participation through intergenerational sessions in India

In Kochi, intergenerational open mic sessions are held twice a month to encourage interaction, storytelling and cultural performances. These events allow older people to share their talents and experiences with others, including younger generations, who act as facilitators. The sessions create an enjoyable space to learn, share and interact, as well as an opportunity to break down ageist attitudes and stereotypes.

Source: [Age-friendly World](#)



5 Social inclusion and non-discrimination

Population groups experiencing marginalisation are more vulnerable to loneliness and social isolation, and so poorer health (1, Chapter 2). Action that improves the ability of socially excluded people to participate in society can also increase their opportunities to build and maintain social connections, helping to address health inequities across communities. Work to address ageism, such as awareness campaigns and intergenerational connection, can be particularly helpful in protecting against social isolation and loneliness, since stigma around older age can be a barrier to connecting with others in the community and feeling valued (1, 32).



6 Civic engagement and employment

Options to engage in community life can support social interaction and expand social networks. This includes both formal employment and volunteering. Volunteering is often regarded as a direct intervention to alleviate feelings of loneliness (33), since it can generate meaning and purpose for volunteers, as well as opportunities to build social ties.



IN PRACTICE

Opportunities for school crossing patrollers in Portugal

In Odivelas, retired people aged 55–70 years are trained as school crossing patrollers, ensuring the safety of school children in their local area. A daily wage and bus pass, if needed, are provided. These roles enable older people to contribute meaningfully to their neighbourhoods and promote the appreciation of older people in the community. The roles also help build connections between older people and children, parents and teachers.

Source: Age-friendly World



7 Communication and information

The provision of accessible and timely information about community activities, delivered in a variety of accessible formats, can encourage all groups of the community to engage in social opportunities and build and maintain connections. For older people specifically, improvements in digital literacy may also improve their ability to connect with friends and family or community groups online (1). Use of digital technology can bypass barriers to connection such as mobility issues, chronic health conditions or distance from family and friends.



IN PRACTICE

Improving access to technology in Chile

In Maipú, 1,718 smartphones designed for older people were loaned to vulnerable older people. Training sessions and workshops were delivered alongside their provision, helping older people use the smartphones confidently and continue using them. The initiative aimed to reduce technological gaps, improve digital inclusion, and enable greater social participation of older people in the community.

Source: Age-friendly World



8 Community support and health services

Community and health services that support people experiencing loneliness and social isolation, including psychological support, befriending services, home visiting interventions and mentoring programmes, play a direct role in addressing these issues (1, Chapter 8). Community-based surveillance systems to prevent, identify and address social disconnection also have a key role in ensuring support is available for those who need it most.



IN PRACTICE

Tackling unwanted loneliness in Spain

In Igalada, a community initiative, RADARS, aims to reduce loneliness and social isolation in older people through a local network of residents, local businesses, volunteers and services, with links to the city council. These networks work to identify and support older people experiencing loneliness and social isolation. Volunteers encourage identified people to participate in ongoing events and social activities that can improve their quality of life or refer to specialist services if further support is needed.

Source: [Age-friendly World](#)

4 Benefits of AFCC approaches for social connection

AFCC approaches have several strengths that create opportunities to further strengthen social connection in communities, helping to protect against loneliness and social isolation. These include:

- **Action in communities:** communities are essential settings for work on social connection and for addressing loneliness and social isolation, since this is where people live, work, grow, play and age.
- **Engagement with community residents:** solutions to strengthen social connection require input from a diverse range of people, including older and younger groups. With AFCC approaches, these links are already well-established.
- **Multisectoral partnerships and networks:** work to strengthen social connection benefits from multisectoral partnerships and networks that provide coordinated support at a range of levels. Partnership working and networking is a central part of the AFCC approach (34).

Importantly, implementing an AFCC approach can itself be part of community solutions to strengthen social connection because communities are expected to play an active role in consultation, planning, implementation and evaluation.



IN PRACTICE

Sharing learning and good practice across communities in Spain

In Mataró, Spain, yearly meetings take place between members of different age-friendly communities to facilitate learning and build connections at wider levels. Older people from each location come together to share good practice, engage in collaborative activities, and promote active and healthy ageing. The meetings help members to celebrate and value action being taken at each location and to generate new ideas for practice.

Source: Age-friendly World

Strengthening social connection and collaboration is also fundamental to the implementation and effectiveness of AFCCs. Strong relationships build the partnerships and networks that are key to delivering AFCC initiatives, support greater community input into their design and implementation, and encourage participation in AFCC activities and events. Research suggests that social participation and engagement play a key role in making age-friendly community interventions successful and achieving sustained impacts (35).



IN PRACTICE

Improving connections and developing age-friendly cities and communities in Wales

In Wales, the development of age-friendly cities and communities is supported by key policies, including the Welsh Government's 2021 strategy for an ageing society. Since 2021, all 22 local authorities have received funding to develop work to become age-friendly communities, via the establishment of age-friendly coordinators. Recognizing the importance of strong connections, coordinators work to build local networks, support collaboration and shared learning among partners, and link older people with services and organizations. At a national level, the Older People's Commissioner for Wales facilitates knowledge-sharing and collaboration through the Age-friendly Community of Practice for Wales forum.

Source: Age-friendly World

5 Strengthening action on social connection in AFCCs

Strengthening action to address social connection is both important and achievable for AFCCs. The most direct way to achieve this is through implementing known solutions to address loneliness, social isolation and weak social connection. Elements of these solutions may already be reflected within AFCC initiatives, and several examples are provided in this section.

Solutions include:

1 Advocacy, public campaigns, networks and coalitions

These have an important role in strengthening social connection, through raising awareness of loneliness and social isolation, mobilizing support, building capacity and shifting professional and public attitudes and behaviour. They can also be used to help break down stigma that may be present in communities around loneliness, mental health or ageism. At city or community level, action can include awareness campaigns and establishing local networks of organizations working to a common goal (1, Chapter 5).



IN PRACTICE

Raising awareness and networking in England

In Sunderland, a community event brought together the university, local council, community organizations, students and older people to explore ways to build connectedness and tackle social isolation and loneliness. The event allowed opportunities to share experiences, network and generate motivation for action.

Source: Age-friendly World

2 Policies

Policies that directly address loneliness and social isolation and build connection have an essential role in solutions. While national policies can be implemented at city or community level, local policies and action plans can also be developed to guide action, ensure a common language and direction of work across stakeholders, and support cross-sectoral collaboration (1, Chapter 6).

There is growing political focus on social connection (23). The report from the WHO Commission on Social Connection, drawing on a global review of national policy documents, identified eight Member States with policies, strategies, action plans, laws or advisories that directly addressed loneliness, social isolation or social connection: Denmark, Finland, Germany, Japan, the Netherlands, Sweden, the United Kingdom (England, Scotland and Wales) and the United States of America (1, 23). The same review also noted countries where these issues were addressed through broader frameworks, including Albania, Czechia, Djibouti, Ireland, Malta, Norway and Spain (23). The 2025 report on social connections and loneliness from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) describes this policy space as continuing to evolve: in addition to the direct national strategies already identified in the Commission report, it highlights initiatives in Austria and the Republic of Korea, Sweden's June 2025 national strategy, Lithuania's support for an emotional support line for older people, and broader policy approaches in Ireland, Norway, Slovenia and Türkiye (4). The OECD report also noted that the Spanish ministry responsible for social rights was developing a national strategy (4). Spain has since moved from development status to a dedicated national framework: the Spanish Council of Ministers approved the *Marco Estratégico Estatal de Soledades (2026–2030)* on 24 February 2026 (37). Some policies operate through local government and age-friendly frameworks, including Japan's priority plan, which is coordinated at prime ministerial level, strategies in the United Kingdom that feed into local-level action and Finland's action plan, which is coordinated via a Parliamentary Working Group across social affairs, education, local government and civil society (1, 23).

Community strategies

Communities are at the heart of action to improve social connection. Community strategies include strengthening social infrastructure, such as libraries, parks, community hubs, and transport systems, to improve opportunities for interaction. There are many ways that a community's social infrastructure can be strengthened, such as improving accessibility of public spaces, for example through universal design; incorporating features that encourage social interaction, such as seating areas and safe, well-maintained spaces; raising awareness of the importance of social connection with those involved in the design of built environments, and investing in community programmes and services that support interaction and help people grow their social networks, including across age groups and cultures (such as sports and recreation, shared interest groups, volunteering opportunities) (1, Chapter 7).

Social prescribing or connector services that refer or link people experiencing loneliness or social isolation to social groups and non-clinical services in the community are also an important community strategy. These may be provided within the health sector as part of integrated health care, or more informally within community settings.

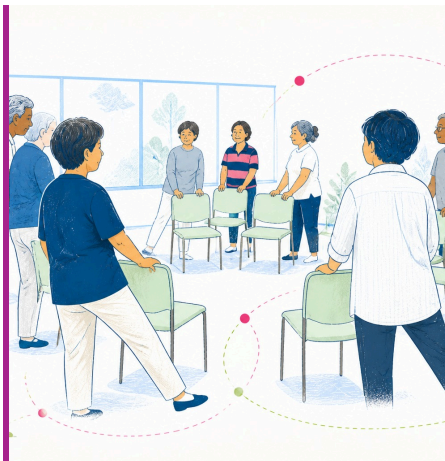


IN PRACTICE

Supporting intergenerational connection in Russia

In Volgograd, a community project connects older people and orphaned children. Older people teach crafts, cooking and housekeeping, mentor the children and join orphanage events. Older people gain from improved connections, fulfilment and contributions to their community, while the children gain from improved confidence and life skills.

Source: Age-friendly World



IN PRACTICE

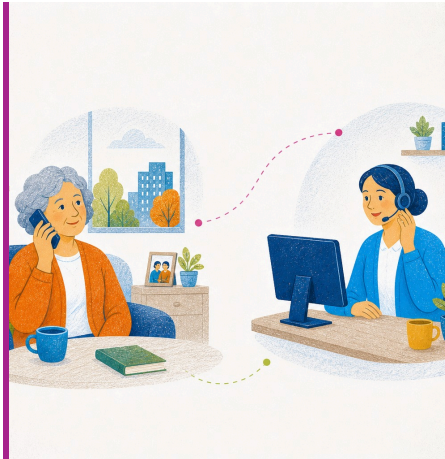
Facilitating social interaction through exercise in Japan

In Hayama Town, a community exercise programme helps to widen community networks among older residents. The programme offers simple muscle strengthening exercises once a week across numerous locations. Over time, this helps older people to remain independent while benefiting from regular interaction.

Source: Age-friendly World

Individual and relationship strategies

These strategies provide direct support for people experiencing loneliness or social isolation. Approaches can include facilitating social engagement through consistent or regular social interactions, including befriending schemes, mentorship programmes, peer support groups or animal and robot companionship. A further approach involves training in skills that help people build and maintain online and offline relationships, such as social and emotional skills or digital skills. Psychological approaches, such as cognitive behavioural therapy, reminiscence therapy or mindfulness, are also important, particularly for addressing loneliness. These approaches help people change thoughts, attention, behaviour or emotions relating to social relationships (1, Chapter 8).



IN PRACTICE

Providing social support in Argentina

In Buenos Aires, a telephone service offers emotional support and companionship to people aged 60 years and older who are experiencing loneliness. The service offers a safe space for conversation and expression of emotions and concerns and is a gateway to other public programmes and support.

Source: Age-friendly World



IN PRACTICE

Building digital skills in Türkiye

In Muratpaşa Municipality, a digital training programme for older women aimed to improve digital skills, access to online services and participation in social life. A range of topics were covered over six weeks, including how to make video calls with family.

Source: Age-friendly World

While solutions may primarily influence the social participation domain of the AFCC approach, many will also strengthen wider domains. For instance, social prescribing or connector services could help improve social inclusion. Similarly, providing training in digital skills could improve online connection with others as well as people's ability to access online information and services, strengthening work in the communication and information domain.

Other ways to strengthen action to address social connection could include:

- Increasing the potential for existing AFCC initiatives to support social connection. This could be through making time, for example before or after other activities, designing spaces, or improving opportunities for people to interact within existing initiatives,
- Including a specific goal to improve social connection within AFCC plans,
- Collecting local data on loneliness and social isolation to identify levels of disconnection and groups of the community at greater risk,

- Engaging directly with people in communities, particularly those experiencing loneliness or isolation, or groups experiencing marginalisation (36), to better understand community needs and co-design local solutions,
- Using technology to supplement in-person connections, such as online interventions or forums that can connect people. This may also require creating opportunities for people to develop digital skills and knowledge, where needed, to be safe online.
- Evaluating initiatives to assess their impact on social connection, loneliness and social isolation, establishing what works and how implementation could be improved. Many communities will already hold practice-based knowledge of successful action. Greater formal evaluation will strengthen shared learning across communities and contribute to the global evidence base.

A practical first step can be to review existing activities to identify those that already support social connection and uncover gaps or opportunities for improvement. Consulting the community, including younger and older people and other groups, can provide practical insight into whether and how social connection could be best improved for all.

Conclusion

Social connection is increasingly recognized as a key determinant of health and well-being across the life course. Improving social connection is already an integral part of the AFCC approach, with all domains offering opportunities to build stronger social relationships. Identifying and building on these opportunities will maximize benefits for people, wider communities and the AFCC approach itself.

Cities and communities already hold substantial practice-based knowledge on what works to strengthen social connection in communities. Looking ahead, a key step will be to systematically capture this learning and formally evaluate action, enabling those involved in building age-friendly communities to contribute meaningfully to the global evidence base. This guide offers a starting point for that process but should be seen as a living resource, one that will evolve over time as the network's experience and formal evidence base grow together.

Resources for more information

From loneliness to social connection: charting a path to healthier societies. Report of the WHO Commission on Social Connection. Geneva: World Health Organization; 2025.

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