

# someone to tell it to



by Ruth Gerzon

Imagine that you have just found out you have advanced cancer, or you have won a lottery. What is your first instinct?

Most of us want to share our news, both the ups and downs of life, with those who care for us. "Someone to tell it to is one of the fundamental needs of humans," according to Australian writer Miles Franklin.

Yet we have fewer people to tell it to as we grow older. And even younger people are now more lonely than ever.

"Human beings, the ultrasocial mammals, whose brains are wired to respond to other people, are being peeled apart," says George Monbiot, a British writer and academic. He sees not only technological change as a major cause, but also ideology. Though our wellbeing is inextricably linked to the lives of others, everywhere we are told that we will prosper through competitive self-interest and extreme individualism."

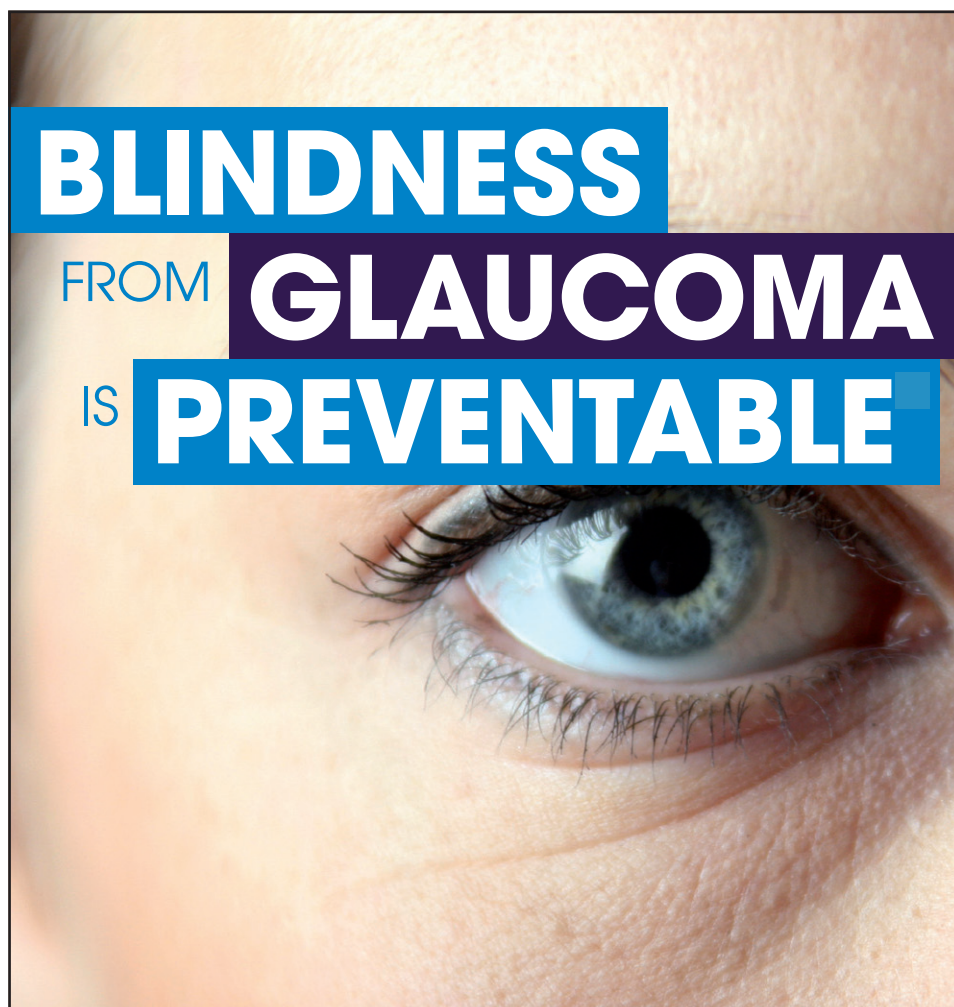


Isolation and loneliness are now pervasive in western communities, among people of all ages, and we face an epidemic of mental illness, drug addiction and suicide. This is now seen as a major issue that needs to be addressed. The British Government appointed its first minister for loneliness this year.

It is hard to admit to loneliness. "Billy no mates" is a derogatory term that implies that it is our problem because we are not likeable. Yet loneliness is more often caused by the structure of



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our communities than our personalities. Not only are families scattered but now even the nuclear family is breaking down and more people live alone.

Loneliness happens at any age but it often happens to people over 75 who have lost partners and friends. Many seniors and kaumatua thrive on hui and other social events and are quick to feel the cold when they lose their driving licence and have to rely on others.

Some seniors expect and want little from others and are happy to be alone. Others share their homes with others and still feel lonely. Busy with work and childcare, younger family may not have time for the older people in their lives.

Loneliness measures the difference between our expectations of the company of others and the reality we face. This may be behind the unexpected results of the Auckland University Life and Living in Advanced Age (LiLacs) longitudinal study of people aged between 80 and 90 in the Bay of Plenty.

The study has shown that considerably more Maori reported an unmet need for emotional support, than non-Maori. This may result from higher initial expectations. Less surprisingly more women than men felt the need for emotional support.

It is not just our mental health that is at risk from loneliness. It also affects our physical health and our longevity. Social isolation is associated with a reduction in lifespan similar to that caused by smoking 15 cigarettes a day.

This is partly because it enhances production of the stress hormone cortisol, which suppresses the immune system.

One study showed that, if you are over 70 and gain one new younger friend, you are likely to live an extra two years. I have joked that, now I am nearing 70, I must let older friends know that I will have less time for them in future as I begin to focus on younger friends for the sake of my health. Joking aside, it is true that inter-generational relationships are important for our health.

The only good thing about the loneliness epidemic is that we can all do something about it. It only takes a kind word, a greeting, an invitation to neighbours.

At its heart, our new community organisation, Eastern Bay Villages: Te Kokoru Manaakitanga, is designed to connect people with similar interests so they can build relationships. Our focus is on supporting seniors and kaumatua but we welcome members of all ages.

*Eastern Bay Villages: Te Kokoru Manaakitanga aims to foster well-being and reduce vulnerability and isolation for seniors/kaumatua by promoting mutual support. Are you looking for support and/or able to offer support to others? Contact us on 020 4161 5887 or email [easternbayvillages@gmail.com](mailto:easternbayvillages@gmail.com).*