



Voices of North Yorkshire – Colleen podcast transcript

Laura - As England enters another lockdown, I'm talking today with Colleen, to share some of her experiences on loneliness at Christmas and how it relates to this year.

So Colleen, what are some of your thoughts on Christmas, especially those relating to loneliness?

Colleen - From my experience, Christmas is a particularly difficult time of year for those people who are far away from family. My husband and I have lived in the UK for almost 20 years and I think in all that time we've perhaps only been back to South Africa once for Christmas. Everything about Christmas here is different – the food, the traditions and the fact that it is dark and cold – everything combined in our first years here to make us feel very socially isolated and excluded.

Laura – So, what about Christmas makes you feel this way?

Colleen - Christmas is really one of those times when it's all about family and when you can't see family and you can't celebrate those traditions which you've grown up with, it's hard and it can feel really lonely. It's difficult to ask friends to join you for Christmas as they are all busy with their own families and so for most Christmas's it is only been myself and my husband - which sometimes has felt a bit sad!

Laura – So do you have any thoughts or tips for people, especially for this year where more people might be spending it alone?

Colleen - Christmas is going to feel really different this year for everyone. We don't yet know what it is going to look like but it looks like, for larger families certainly, gatherings are out. The office party is probably cancelled and people just can't come together like they would normally do. Over the years I've developed some survival strategies for coping with Christmas away from family and I'll just share a few of them.

- Most of our traditions and expectations of Christmas lie in being able to celebrate together as a family group. But perhaps this year it's time to try something different. Have you always wanted to try a different turkey or sprout recipe or eat at a different time but perhaps Auntie Dorothy has always been a stickler for staying with family tradition? Or maybe you've wanted to change the tree decorations for years to a different colour or even maybe wanted to ditch the tree altogether, well this is the year to try something new. If it works, you could always carry it forward as a new tradition!
- Some traditions are still worth keeping, even if you can't be with family and loved ones. For example, sharing gifts no matter how far apart or how inexpensive is important, even if they are simply gift cards. Small, but thoughtful, gifts go some way to feeling connected with others. This year why not have an online unwrap or think about other ways you could give gifts and share them.
- Staying in touch, picking up the phone or having an online video chat connects you with people you care about. When we first moved here, contacting South Africa on Christmas day was almost



impossible and often we wouldn't be able to get through for a couple of days. Thankfully, technology has improved and we can now at least get through!

- Be prepared for the unexpected. A number of years ago my dad was in a residential care home in South Africa with dementia. I phoned him on Christmas day and for the first time he didn't know who I was. It was a very isolating experience and it was difficult to mention to anyone as they were all caught up in their own celebrations. This year especially, there may be unexpected stresses on families. Think about your own coping strategies now but also be mindful of neighbours, friends, and colleagues who could struggle this Christmas and be a listening ear for someone.

Loneliness could potentially be a very worrying issue this Christmas. Consider ways that you could volunteer and support others who are also feeling lonely or simply chat to neighbours across the garden wall and make those connections. Take part in any local Christmas or nativity trails and feel part of something that is beyond your front door. I'm sure there are going to be many activities online this year, but as a community make sure there are also opportunities for those people who can't access digital technology so they can also take part.