



The loneliness antidote

We celebrate three women who found creative solutions to stop them feeling alone and disconnected

INTERVIEWS RIN HAMBURGH PHOTOGRAPH DERRICK THOMSON

“When I learned how to love and accept myself, the loneliness stopped”

GINA SWIRE 32, SELF-LOVE COACH

Although I started modelling at the age of 17, at school I had been quiet, shy and not especially confident, so it wasn't something that I particularly wanted to do. Modelling scouts kept approaching me, and my friends thought I should do it so, eventually, I went to a casting. When I got there, they said, 'Good look, great hair but you're overweight – you need to lose a stone in two weeks.' I'm 5ft 9in and, at that time, I was a size 12. I didn't get that job, but the agency kept coming back to me.

A few years later, they took me on as a plus-sized model – but then I was told I was too small! It was easier being bigger but just as damaging, wondering whether I was going to be the right 'fit'. I *did* get a lot of work, and found an agent in London, and then one in the United States, as well as Italy and Germany. I was travelling a lot, earning really well and living the high life, partying and shopping. Everyone around me said, 'Wow! You've got a great life. You're so lucky!' But, although it was fun, life was quite empty and I was lonely. Mostly, I was always on my own in a hotel room, and moving around a

lot, which made it challenging to make friends. I started to feel very unhappy and eventually, in 2013, I quit modelling.

I came back to the UK and spent a few months getting my head in order, then decided to go to India to train as a yoga teacher. I did a lot of meditation and realised that I hadn't been accepting or loving of myself for so long. When I learned how to do that, the loneliness stopped. I now think that if you have self-love, you can never feel lonely. Now, if I spend time on my own, I'm absolutely fine. I have a whole different mindset. When I didn't love or accept myself, I struggled internally with loneliness.

While I was in India, I met the man who is now my boyfriend and I really believe it's because I felt whole; I wasn't looking for anything on the outside. Before, I had always been looking for something to stop me from feeling lonely. When I realised that I wasn't lonely, that's when this amazing partner arrived. Now, I devote my life to helping other women find what is 'missing' from their lives – and that always comes down to self-love first. ginaswire.com

>>>



“By helping others to create new friendships, people feel happy again”

AMY PERRIN, 39, FOUNDER OF THE MARMALADE TRUST

During my time as a volunteer running a tea party group for the elderly, I realised that there were people using the service who didn’t have anywhere to go on Christmas Day. I decided to postpone my own celebrations in 2013 and take them out to a restaurant instead. I was working as an occupational therapist and, when I told the rest of the team at the clinic, one of my colleagues said, ‘Can one of my patients come? They’ve had *decades* on their own.’ Before I knew it, there were 18 people coming to our Christmas lunch.

I thought it was a nice thing to do as a one-off but, when I got home after my Christmas break, I couldn’t open my front door. There were 18 cards and letters on the doormat from people saying I had changed their lives. They had felt so lonely, but our meal out had given them company and ‘family’ for the day – and they couldn’t wait for it to happen again. The following year, I set up The Marmalade Trust. It was always going to be a small, local

thing, but there is such a need and we’ve had a lot of attention – people wanting to be involved, raise money, or share their own stories of loneliness – and it’s grown.

Last year, we launched a buddy system, where we gave everybody who came to the Christmas meal a volunteer to help them find more contact in the community. We had one lady in her late 80s, who’d had 15 Christmases alone. She heard about us on the radio and came along on Christmas Day. A few days later, she phoned and said, ‘That was amazing, I loved it! I got excited about getting ready and going out. I feel I can join things now.’ We gave her a volunteer who helped her find activities to do. She goes to a weekly bingo group; a nursery to read books to children; she has theatre trips and goes to a tea party group and a coffee club. She’s made a new friend who she speaks to a couple of times a week. For us, it’s not about giving someone company for a little while; I want to help people find their own friendships again. marmaladetrust.org



“It’s easy to feel lonely, even in a crowd, if you haven’t got a genuine connection”

SARAH CORBETT, 34, FOUNDER OF THE CRAFTIVIST COLLECTIVE

When I moved to London, I didn’t know many people. Since I was a child in Liverpool, I’ve always been involved in activism – my mum is a local councillor and my dad is a vicar – so I decided to join a few groups. The problem was that I didn’t fit into any of them well. Every time I went to a meeting, I felt like the odd one out. There were some that were all about performance art which, as an introvert, isn’t what I’m good at. Others were aggressive and their default was demonising people in positions of power, which isn’t the right way to solve injustices, in my view. Sometimes it was the social aspect that didn’t work for me: in one group they would all go out and get drunk, which just isn’t me.

I knew the groups were about more than just meeting people; I went along because I supported their causes, and wanted to be part of the change I wished to see in the world – but it was a lonely time. There were always people around, but I didn’t feel like I connected with any of them

or, even worse, agreed with their activism approach. That’s when I discovered I could use craft in activism – craftivism – as a gentler, slower, more thoughtful form of activism, which suited me as a non-aggressive introvert.

I started writing my blog, *A Lonely Craftivist*, and suddenly people were contacting me saying they didn’t fit into the activism world either; asking for advice about gentle protest. In 2009, I set up the Craftivist Collective. I have given talks and hosted events around the world, and I’ve had two books published. I’ve also had the privilege of working alongside incredible people and organisations.

It’s easy to feel lonely, even in a crowd, if you haven’t got a genuine connection. Through the Collective, I’ve met hundreds of people who I’ve been able to engage with in a real way, and many of those relationships have turned into friendships. Everyone gets lonely, but it’s good to know that there are others who feel the same way – if you have the courage to stay true to yourself. craftivist-collective.com