

AS TIME GOES BY

THOUGHTS ON WELL-BEING IN LATER YEARS

COLLECTED AND WRITTEN BY
A GROUP OF OLDER PEOPLE
IN BRIGHTON & HOVE
FOR THEIR PEERS EVERYWHERE

Acknowledgements

This booklet draws on Older People and Well-being Research Project which was carried out by:

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A copy of the full research report is available at:

www.brighton.ac.uk/sass/older-people-wellbeing-and-participation

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University of Brighton



As Time Goes By... Thoughts on Well-being in Later Years. Collected and written by a group of older people in Brighton & Hove for their peers everywhere.

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A larger text of the booklet is available. For more information contact Beatrice Gahagan, Age UK Brighton & Hove on 01273 720603.

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INTRODUCTION

Why do we need another guide to well-being in old age?

This one is different in that the research and findings have been carried out by older people themselves, all the contributors being in their 70s and 80s.

It started as a joint research project in to well-being in old age between the University of Brighton and Age Concern Brighton, Hove and Portslade, taking over two years, and resulting in an academic report. But the information from the interviews (all done by the older people themselves) seemed too important not to be more widely known, and this is the result.

All the subjects and suggestions are based on these interviews and the experiences of the interviewers themselves. It was done at a local level in Brighton and Hove, though most of the findings are applicable nationally.

It was found that certain themes came up time and again, such as the importance of family and friends; the availability of public transport; housing, health and finance. Some of the elderly interviewees were eager to learn about new technology, in particular systems that helped them to keep in touch with family far away, and access to internet information. Others were more concerned with immediate problems such as getting practical advice and help locally.

Some were feeling quite low, others enjoying life as fully as possible and, as all were talking to their contemporaries in the interviews, they were quite open in their comments and talking about their worries and how they tried to solve them.

We have tried to gather the main points raised with suggestions of possible solutions, remembering that it was older people themselves who provided the material. The sections in italics are direct quotes from the older people who were interviewed.

It's great that you don't have to work any more... every day is a holiday really, I mean, and every day you are not quite sure what every day will bring... well-being comes over you in waves of it. Sometimes it's difficult to understand where this feeling comes from... it can be simple things like getting up early in the morning... sometimes you feel 'this is good, it's another day'.

Our Finances

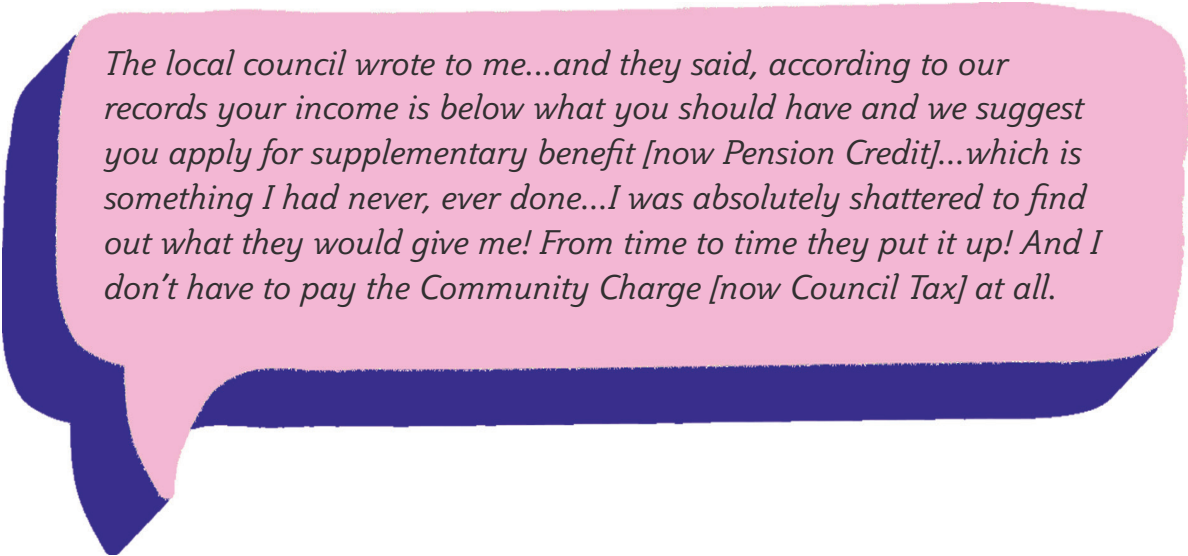
Taking Control Of Finances

Most of us anticipate being less well off once we have stopped full-time working. As we approach retirement, or now if we have not done this recently, it is a good idea to work out how much money we spend in an average month. This will require keeping careful records of all expenditure and making allowance for irregular expenses like birthdays and the annual service on the car. This needs to be compared with the income we expect to receive after retirement, taking into account savings and any income we can expect from these. It is also prudent to consider how we use credit cards or other financial services where we may build up debts which have to be repaid. Ideally we should reach retirement debt free. If we do have any significant debts it is very important to seek advice as soon as possible to work out how best to repay them. Age UK or Citizens Advice are among the organisations that can give help with this.

If our future income is likely to exceed our expenditure, all will be well for now, although we always have to be mindful of inflation. Also, as we get older we may need to pay for help with things that we have always done ourselves such as cleaning the house, tending the garden or getting the shopping.

If the income will not cover our present expenditure, we need to consider how we can reduce our out-goings. This may involve changes such as how and where we take holidays, reducing our generosity to children and grandchildren, purchasing less expensive food items or even changing where we live. What is very important is that we do not get into debt in order to maintain our lifestyle. So if we still use credit cards we should try to ensure that they are fully paid off monthly, or perhaps we should think about changing to using a debit card?

As we get older however, many of us do worry about not having enough money - announcements in the press can cause worry even if they never come to fruition. Those of us on very low incomes may be entitled to statutory benefits. These are an entitlement and no-one should be reluctant to apply.



The local council wrote to me...and they said, according to our records your income is below what you should have and we suggest you apply for supplementary benefit [now Pension Credit]...which is something I had never, ever done...I was absolutely shattered to find out what they would give me! From time to time they put it up! And I don't have to pay the Community Charge [now Council Tax] at all.

There are a number of agencies and services available - it's best to start with the ones you know and trust – which can help us establish if there are benefits to which we have become eligible, such as housing benefit, the winter fuel allowance to help with rising fuel prices or attendance allowance when we need help with personal care. Getting help and advice about money management can reassure us, when we have limited means, that we can find a way of meeting our financial commitments.

Financial Security

Increasingly we are being expected to pay for things by card or other electronic means. Payments over the phone or on the internet can cause worry and it is advisable to check that we are dealing with a recognised company. Our personal details are unique to us, and we must be careful to whom we give them. We must not be afraid to question a caller and ask for proper identification of anyone asking for personal information. If we are unhappy about the credentials of someone on the phone, we should take their name and phone number and the name of the organisation they claim to represent. We can then call back if we wish to proceed having carefully considered the situation and possibly discussed it with someone else.

The internet can be a very useful way to shop but we must ensure that we use a secure site. These sites have a prefix '**https://**' and a padlock appears in the browser window. Another good tip is to keep one credit card just for internet shopping and to have a really safe password that someone would be unlikely to guess. It all seems very complicated but if we are unsure it is advisable to seek advice before becoming involved in internet shopping.

Age UK charities across the country provide Information and Advice services for anyone over 50 and will be able to provide advice on financial security.

Getting Your Affairs In Order

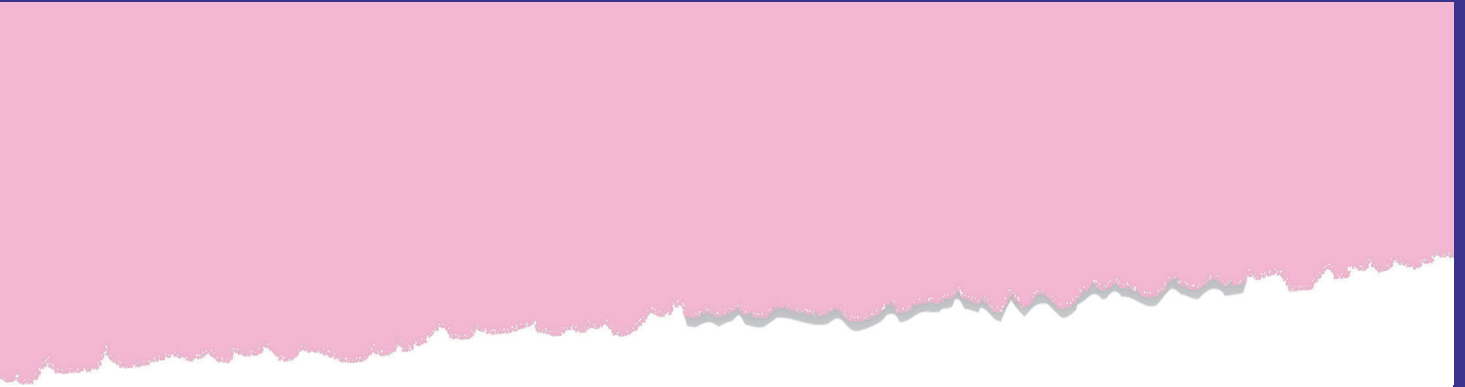
Some of us refuse to discuss the possibility of death and reject the idea that at some time we won't be around; others plan their funeral down to the last Amen. But whichever camp you are in it is important to make some provision - for the sake of your family or whoever will have to cope with your affairs.

First, do make a Will. You will not die any quicker if you do so, and even if you feel that you have little to leave there is always something. If you don't say what you want done with it, it may go on the tip or to the Government.

My son is my beneficiary... (but) somebody told me the other day that if I don't make a will it could go to the State and he'd have an awful job. I mean I haven't got much obviously, but what I have got should go to him, so therefore I must make a will so that you know everything's above board.

It really does save a lot of hassle and argument if a Will is made and kept up to date. This can easily be done, with a solicitor if you have one, or organisations such as Age UK have free will-making services. It is important to make sure that your Will is properly drawn up, witnessed and signed. Your Will should then be lodged with someone close to you that you trust or with a solicitor.

*'My aunt she died a month ago
And left me all her riches
A feather bed, a wooden leg
And a pair of calico britches!'
Old nursery rhyme.*



Another major help is to give someone Lasting Power of Attorney.

This is a legal document appointing someone to act for you if you are unable to do things for yourself, or look after your affairs. You can choose anyone: a family member; a close friend or solicitor; preferably someone younger than yourself, who you trust to act in your best interests. Unfortunately, there is a charge for registering this document but it can be downloaded from the internet. You may need a friend or family member to help you complete this document or a solicitor will complete it for you but most solicitors charge heavily for this.

Lasting Power of Attorney replaced Enduring Power of Attorney a few years ago but if you already have signed an Enduring Power of Attorney it is still valid if it was signed before 1st October, 2007.

It is also possible to make an Advance Decision, often called a Living Will. This is a signed and witnessed document that says that, should you become so ill that there is little hope of recovery, you would not wish to have medical treatment to keep you going. Gloomy as this seems, it can be a great help to your family to know your wishes in this matter.

If you do decide to make a Living Will it is advisable to discuss this with your GP and ensure that a copy of the document is kept with your medical notes. A Living Will can also suggest how you would like to be cared for if, for any reason, you cannot speak for yourself. This would not be legally binding on those caring for you but would help them to know how you would wish to be treated.

Advice about these options can be obtained from Age UK, Citizens Advice, or your GP.

Keeping Up With New Developments

Our son lives in the States and...we do communicate with him by Skype on the computer and he speaks to us on that and we see him and speak with him and his family that way... it does help that you can see them.

The world around us is changing so quickly and it is understandable to feel more comfortable with methods of doing things which have become familiar over the years. It is, however, vital to be aware of what is changing, to assess how these changes may impact on our lives and, if necessary, to take appropriate steps to familiarise ourselves with new gadgets and methods of working.

Methods of communication are changing rapidly. No longer do grandchildren send an endearing thank you note but are more likely instead to send a text message – that is if we have mobile phones and have learned to ‘text’! Forms that have to be completed for all sorts of things increasingly have to be done ‘on-line’. If we haven’t learned how to use a computer and do not have access to one, we become dependent on others to this for us. Also, as we become less able it could be a blessing to be able to order our shopping on-line and have it delivered to the front door. Many organisations including Age UK Brighton & Hove offer free training in the use of the internet. If you do not have a computer of your own, many libraries have them available for you to use for your own purposes.

*E-mail is just wonderful, and if there was one thing that was taken away from me that I would miss most, probably it would be my e-mail...
I can be in touch with people all over the world’.*

Our Health

Taking Care Of Your Health

Our physical and mental health change as we get older but there is a lot we can do to slow down the process. We are bombarded with health advice on eating, drinking and exercise. Take on board what is sensible for you without impinging on your enjoyment of life.

Healthy eating is important: if you find cooking difficult or a bore consider the luncheon club in your area. There are many companies that deliver meals which can be both tasty and nutritious.

Physical exercise is good for you and can also be a source of enjoyment. There are many clubs for the older person to join which organise walks, swimming or dancing; they take into account your personal level of fitness and current abilities.

A short walk every day will help to keep you mobile; arranging to do this with a friend can provide both social contact and motivation. Some of us are unable to achieve this but it is possible to perform some exercises whilst sitting in a chair.

Keeping mentally active has been proven to be important for general well-being. Exercising your brain can be enjoyable, be it doing crossword puzzles, Sudoku or by going to book clubs, playing cards or attending educational classes. There is something out there for everyone.

All I can say is that you need to be involved, I think with your friends if you have got any... family, friends, church life, social life like clubs... not just to sit in the chair.

It is easy for us to ignore persistent physical symptoms, not wishing to make a burden of ourselves. However seeking medical advice early on can alleviate worries and may prevent a minor ailment becoming more enduring.

Coping With Disabilities

You can get help, there's an awful lot available. It makes me cross when they say there is not...

We are all likely to suffer some of the problems that age can bring - some more difficult to manage than others.

Don't be afraid to ask for help when needed.

This is not being weak but being realistic by accepting both our own abilities and needs, and usually people are very ready to help.

We can talk to family, friends and advisers and it is often true that 'a problem shared is a problem halved'. We may well find that others have similar troubles, and it can often be helpful to share and compare how we cope. It is often a comfort to know that we are not alone. There are also professionals and advisers who can signpost you to sources of help.

Mobility Problems

If stairs, bathing and so on are becoming increasingly difficult there is help available in getting adaptations to your home; even such small things as handrails or lever latches instead of door knobs can make life easier and help keep independence both inside and out of home. Get in touch with the Adult Social Services at the Council for advice and information, or Age UK Brighton & Hove. There are also voluntary organisations that can help with, for instance, someone to come to visit or escort you out on a walk.

If you have pets and are worried about their care, or you have to go into hospital for a while, there are organisations such as the Cinnamon Trust, or 'borrowmydoggy.com', that can help.

There is also specialist help for particular ailments. The Parkinson Society or the Osteoporosis Society for instance, most of which have local support groups.

...but I've found out unless you orchestrate it to happen it is not going to.

We should seek their advice and information when needed. The 'stiff upper lip' is not always the best way, though to many of us it is not easy to ask for help.

But help is there and there are many resources aimed at keeping us independent.

Hearing Problems

It seems odd that we seem to treat loss of hearing so differently from loss of sight. We accept the wearing of spectacles - and indeed make them a fashion statement – while resisting the hearing aid, though in many ways loss of hearing can affect us even more than loss of sight.

Communication difficulties can be frustrating when we try to take part in discussions or family gossip, and can lead to a feeling of isolation, or even suspicion that we are being deliberately excluded. But hearing aids really can help and they have improved very much. Many people are put off by the very high cost of some of the aids, but it is worth looking at the options available, and the free NHS ones are very good now. It is important to get your hearing checked as it might be useful to have an aid before it is actually necessary in order to get used to it by the time it is really needed.

Hearing aids may not be high fashion, but they can make a huge difference to our independence, inclusion in conversations and general well being.

Loss of Sight

If you notice even the slightest change in your eye sight get it checked as soon as possible. If there is nothing wrong you will be reassured or, if there is something amiss early diagnosis is all important.

The most common eye problems in older people are Glaucoma, Macular Degeneration (AMD) and Cataract. A Cataract can very often be successfully treated by an operation, but the other two present more problems which is why early diagnosis is so important.

Your optician may refer you to the Eye Hospital and the Liaison Officer there can give information and help in referring you to other organisations, such as the Low Vision Clinic which can provide advice and aids such as magnifiers. There are local support groups for Glaucoma and AMD where you can not only get information but social activities.

The RNIB or its local associated ESAB (East Sussex Association for the Blind) are ready with helpful advice if needed.

There are good Audio books available from the public libraries as well as from the RNIB or specialist libraries such as Calibre. Most books come as CDs or Memory sticks, (for which you may need a 'boom box' from Calibre - easily available).

No physical impairment is fun, but help is offered so seek it out and accept it.

And a cheerful ending: If you like going to the theatre, cinema or to concerts but are finding it daunting, it's worth asking if they offer discounts or special facilities for those with hearing or sight loss. Most theatres offer generous discounts for those who need assistance and a companion. Ask about their Access list. This entitles you to much reduced seat prices and your companion goes free. Often the seats are in the front of the stalls and accessible. Don't miss the latest attraction!

At a particularly lovely Flower Festival someone was at the door telling all the people who entered to go the altar to see the blind man's contribution. When they got there they saw a lovely display of greenery. They asked the blind man how he had managed to work out such an interesting design without being able to see. He told them he had managed to work out that each green felt different due to hairs on the leaves. This has led to a renewed interest in flower arrangement groups in that area.

It also helped some older people who had sight problems realise all was not lost. They could adapt some of the things they wanted to make.

Becoming Forgetful

Throughout our lives we can and do forget things, especially when we are stressed and have a lot on our minds. When we are younger this is a minor irritation or can be a source of amusement. But as we become older and more forgetful it could be more serious. 'Am I getting Alzheimer's? Is this the beginning of dementia?'

So many of us have had these worries but so often we keep them to ourselves. Somehow a problem relating to our brain may seem less acceptable than a physical illness and we are reluctant to discuss it with anyone lest they agree with our fears.

Most of us lose our keys at some time or another but when we find them we are relieved and get on with our lives. It is only when we find the keys but do not know what to do with them that we may have something to worry about. This, of course, is a gross over-simplification but can be reassuring when once again we cannot find something or cannot remember the name of a book we read only last week!

If we begin seriously to fear that this is more than normal forgetfulness, it is important that we discuss it with someone we trust rather than worrying alone. The Alzheimer's Association can give valuable advice at this stage. At the same time it is essential to visit the GP to discuss the symptoms that are concerning us. The GP may be reassuring or may make a referral to a consultant who can do some tests. Research is going on all the time and medication is being developed that can help delay the symptoms of dementia. As with most illnesses, the earlier we get a diagnosis the greater chance we have of receiving appropriate treatment and support.

Coping with incontinence

As we age going to the loo can become a bit of a worry. Whether that is because we need to go more frequently, we can't move as fast, or we find we have less control over our bladder or bowels. Medication can also make us need to go to the loo more frequently and upset our usual routine.

It is tempting when one is experiencing bladder problems to avoid drinking as much. However, it is absolutely essential to have plenty of water and fluids for all aspects of health and well being. So it's far more important to tackle the continence problem and maintain your fluid intake with confidence.

Many people suffer continence issues including younger people, for a variety of reasons, so it's nothing to be ashamed of. Although it can feel very embarrassing, most people will be more than happy to offer help in this area, as it's a common experience we can all understand.

There are a wide variety of continence pads available in chemists and supermarkets as well as on line. There is also a bladder and bowel service which can help and may provide pads following an assessment. This can usually be accessed through your G.P.

Worries about continence can, if we let them, act as a barrier to going out. It's good to know where there are public loos available and this will often be a deciding factor when we are thinking about whether to go out to a particular place or not. Don't be afraid to ask so that you can identify places you will feel safe and where you won't have to worry.

Although sadly, public loos are not always in good supply or working order, it's worth remembering that most major shops, as well as cafes and restaurants and some public buildings such as libraries will have toilets and should be happy to let you use them especially if you are a regular customer.

In the home, a commode can be a very useful addition, particularly for going to the loo at night. Many are designed to look like an ordinary chair and can give you close access to a toilet when needed. These can be purchased from mobility shops and catalogues, or may be provided free by an occupational therapist following an assessment.

Nutrition

When we get older, particularly when we are living alone, its only too easy to snack and reach for a biscuit or piece of cake instead of having a proper meal. However, its really important to our health to maintain a healthy body weight and our strength and resilience is always supported by a good diet. If we are taking medicines, unless we have been advised that particular nutrition and diet is required, in general a healthy diet will help us to process our medication.

Ready prepared food is available from supermarkets or companies who will deliver to you (usually in one weeks supply or more so freezer space is important).

Many meal recipies are usually designed for 4 people unless otherwise stated, so you can continue to do this having one portion and devising the rest into portions that can be frozen and eaten later. Fresh and whole foods are best for our health. Soups are quick and easy to make, no special skills are required and are a good way to consume fresh produce. Soups can be both nourishing and comforting, and also, once made easy to keep and heat up with little fuss.

Age UK and the Food Partnership produced an Eating Well to Stay Health As We Age guide in Brighton and Hove, if you want more advice or guidance on this. You can get a copy by contacting Claire from Age UK on ClaireG@ageuk-bh.org.uk or Jo from the Food Partnership on jol@bhfood.org.uk.

Seeking medical help

Our experience with the medical profession can vary a great deal. Some of us are content with the services offered by our GP practice but others are not so fortunate.

The first hurdle can be making an appointment; it is as well to establish the procedure followed by your own particular surgery. However, in the case of an emergency, we should not hesitate to call an ambulance. The problem will be dealt with sympathetically and efficiently.

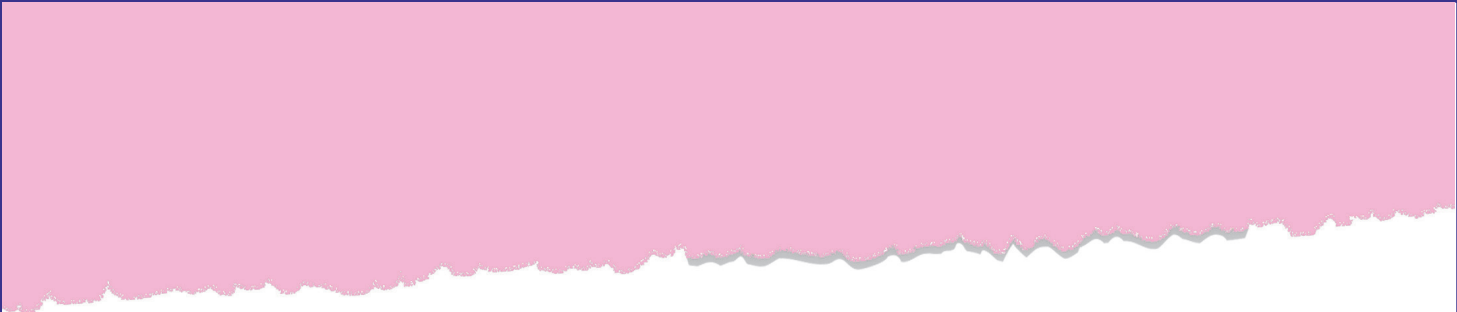
Many of us feel comfortable about going to the GP when we are unwell with a virus infection or ongoing medical condition but we often hesitate when other problems arise. 'Perhaps it is just my age', or 'I am making a fuss', or 'I don't want to be a burden', can cross our minds. We should, of course, make that appointment and, at best, ease our concerns.

'My doctor's a bit dogmatic. He doesn't appear to be user friendly but you have to break him down and give as good as you get with him and then he's alright'.

It is good to prepare for a medical appointment by making a list of symptoms in advance as often, afterwards, we realise that we have omitted to tell the practitioner something significant.

It can also be useful to take someone with you. When we are unwell we can feel vulnerable and insecure and may even find ourselves unable to question or take in what is being said.

Pharmacists can be a good first port of call for any queries we may have with regard to medication or minor ailments. Many offer services such as blood pressure checks or blood tests. Medical advice can also be obtained over the telephone from NHS Direct. This service is open 24 hours a day, every day of the year.



Many GP surgeries now offer telephone consultations, which can save a difficult trip to the surgery at a time when you are feeling at your worst. GPs do also do home visits to those genuinely unable to visit the surgery.

Questioning advice or treatment given by a doctor can seem daunting. Many of us have grown up revering those in the medical profession. However, GPs, as everyone, are fallible and can have 'off' days and make mistakes. If you are unhappy about medical treatment you receive your surgery will have its own complaints procedure. Organisations such as Age UK can advise about this, similarly, the Patients Advice and Liaison Service (PALS) can help should you feel dissatisfied with hospital treatment. You can also change your GP if necessary without giving a reason.

It is your body and your health.

We are entitled to appropriate medical treatment and also to be treated with dignity and respect.

Our Home

Security when out and about

Sometimes we feel a bit vulnerable about going out and it can be helpful to plan ahead - for example work out the route and where you can stop for a rest. If possible we should take a mobile phone (and be sure we know how to use it!). Not everyone knows of a system used by the emergency services when someone they are helping has a mobile phone. In the address book you enter a name as 'ICE' which stands for 'In Case of Emergency'. Then you add the phone number of your next of kin, or someone else you would want to be informed if you have an accident. If necessary, the emergency services will contact this number on your behalf.

Those of us feeling a bit unsteady on our feet may find a stick or pole gives confidence. Hiking sticks have a more sporty appearance to normal walking sticks and can provide support and confidence without making us feel we look really old!

What about trying Nordic walking:

Some time ago a group of skiers decided they did not want to stop skiing when the season finished so they used their ski sticks for faster walking. Now many walking groups are using Nordic walking poles for their walks – they are kinder on the knees, are adjustable, you can walk more quickly and exercise the whole body. With the poles one walks upright but if you use a walking frame there is a tendency to double up.

Of course using two sticks means that you will need to carry anything else in a rucksack - and don't be afraid to ask people to pack your bag for you so you can hang onto your sticks!

Security when living alone

For those of us who live alone there is the worry of what will happen if we get ill - will there be anyone who can get in to help?

For those without family living nearby, having good relationships with neighbours who will look out for you can be really helpful. Leaving keys with a trusted person can be convenient as well as reassuring. On the other hand some of us value our privacy so much that we are reluctant to leave a key for someone to get in.

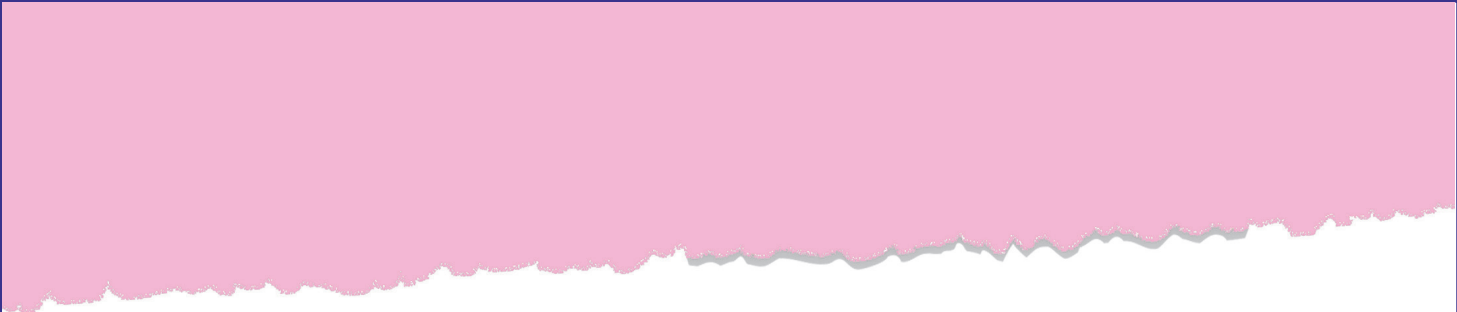
One solution to this is to have a personal alarm system. This involves wearing a small call button around your neck or on your wrist. If you should fall or get into difficulties and be unable to reach your phone you can press the call button and be put through to an emergency centre who will be able to speak to you through your call button. If you don't have a named person you can trust to be a key holder you can have a box with a code for emergency services to get in as part of the package.

... one morning I woke and felt pretty ill. And I pressed that. It was wonderful. Very clever...within 15 minutes an ambulance was here...

Of course such services have a financial cost but are useful for those of us who feel more comfortable with technology than relying on a neighbour who may not be available to respond when needed.

Thinking ahead and having planned strategies can give us a feeling of security. Those living alone can create the impression to strangers, when answering the door or speaking on the phone, that there are others in your house by using the word 'we' rather than 'I'.

As I'm about to open the front door, I shout up the stairs, 'its alright, I'll take this!', giving the impression that I'm not on my own. Bit daft but I think if you came to the door and I shouted that you'd think, 'this old dear isn't on her own'.



Remember, we do not have to let anyone into our homes without prior arrangement, especially if we don't feel confident about who they are. If someone calls and wants to come in for any reason and we are not happy about it we can suggest that they make an appointment at a time when someone else can be there.

How many of us use our door chains on a regular basis? It can seem silly to put the chain on before answering the door. But unless you are sure who is there it is silly not to use it because the person outside could be seeking entry for a bad reason. We should also use the chain while checking the credentials of legitimate callers such as meter readers. And ALWAYS check their identity if you don't know them. Genuine callers won't mind – it is only the cowboys who may object, and you don't want them anyway. However, once the caller has left, it is very important to release the chain. In the unfortunate event of you having an accident and someone needing to get in to help you, the chain could delay their entry. So, normally, chain off, but when an unexpected caller comes – chain on!

A new initiative by Brighton Lions is a '*Message in a Bottle*'. This is a distinctive plastic pot which you keep in your fridge (in case of fire). Inside you enter important medical information about yourself and details of next of kin. On the fridge door you display the sticker provided which would alert the emergency services, should they need to help you, that the 'bottle' is inside the fridge. These 'bottles' can be obtained from Age UK Brighton and Hove or from local chemists. They may be available in other parts of the UK.

Should I move?

Our home is probably our most important possession and we are naturally reluctant to give it up. But sometimes things get a bit too much and we have to think of ways round the problem. Are there too many stairs? Too large a garden? Too far from the shops? No transport? Even with all these things to consider it doesn't necessarily mean you have to move.

Consider a stair lift, or a shower instead of a bath; if you have access to the internet you can shop online for many things and get them delivered; if the garden is too much there may be a neighbour who would like a bit more space, (try www.landshare.net) or a flat-dweller who feels deprived of a garden and would like to help.

If you have the space, you could consider taking a lodger or student, who could give a little help in the house or with the shopping in return for a modest rent, and who would be company as well. It is advisable to arrange this through a recognised scheme, possibly through your local college or university.

Only when all such things have been thought about should you consider moving. And that doesn't mean having to go into a Residential Home, though some people choose that as it provides them with security and company as well as care. But there are many sheltered housing schemes, when you can have a small self-contained flat with the freedom to live your own life, but with the reassurance that there will be a warden at hand if required.

If you do think of moving house there are several factors to take into account. When there are two of you it is not so difficult to make a choice, but life can be cruel and we have to think, 'What if I am left on my own?'

It is better to go somewhere where you know people or the surroundings are familiar. Remember the pretty cottage in small hamlet where you had happy holidays may look delightful in summer, but what would it be like in winter, when the path and steps outside are a sheet of ice. And you can't get to the shops. And there is no street lighting. And you are on your own and no neighbours nearby. **Think very carefully:**

*"A bus stop is worth more
Than roses round the door"*

Getting to know your neighbours

It's not a place to get to know anybody...I've got someone with a door absolutely opposite me.... and I've never seen or heard them go in or out and, presumably, they've never seen or heard me, and our doors are bang opposite... you might meet somebody down in the laundry room... but we don't know one another, just passing acquaintances really.

We should all try to get to know our neighbours. We do not have to sit in each others pockets, but it is good to be at least on nodding terms. We should not be afraid to knock on their door and introduce ourselves - they may have been meaning to do the same, but never got round to it. Or we can at least say 'hello' when we see them around.

Good neighbours are invaluable, and we never know when we might need - or be able to offer - help for each other; even a small thing such as taking delivery of a parcel for them can be the beginning of a warm relationship.

We are often shy of making contact with strangers, but remember that this cuts both ways; strangers may be shy of us too, and welcome our approach. Apart from anything else, it is useful to know who they are, for then we can be aware of any strangers who may be hanging around.

My neighbours have got keys... but I know every day that unless they see my bedroom window open, [they] are in here like a shot. So I am not worried about being alone.

Ourselves

Thinking ahead

Many of us have someone who is highly significant in our lives – a spouse, a partner or a close friend. Often we live together but, sadly, the reality is that one of us is almost certain to be left alone when the other dies, or one of us may become severely incapacitated and be unable to fulfil the role that they did when we were both fit and well. Hard though it may be, it is important to begin thinking now about how each of us would cope if we had to do all that we share at present.

Many of us have shared the roles between us. One may take all responsibility for shopping and food preparation, the other may be responsible for tasks related to household maintenance. One may take a major role in dealing with finance issues and the other may take the lead in organising social activities. It is very important that we begin to discuss these matters to ensure that each of us has enough knowledge and skill to take over these responsibilities if the other is not able to do this.

Some couples do everything together, such as shopping, visiting friends, taking trips and going on holiday. This is a very important part of our relationship, but how would we manage if we had to do these things alone?

But what is a big problem is that I have to do all our jobs...[husband] used to have a traditional male role...and I did the female role...[now] every decision is mine, every problem is my problem.

Maybe we should consider doing some of these things separately sometimes. Perhaps each could pursue a separate interest outside the home, leaving the other to spend some time at home alone? This would give us the opportunity to see how we would spend time if our partner was not there. We might even consider taking a short holiday separately. This may be a first but is worth a try to see how we would manage alone. It would probably be easier if the holiday involved other people with a common interest.

Losing loved ones

Relationships with family are often the longest of our lives but friendships can also be long lasting. As we get older those long relationships are an important source of shared experiences and shared history. This makes it especially hard when we lose someone we have known a long time because of the loss of a shared life and of continuity. We may feel there is no one that can remember the things we went through together or understand the past experiences in the way that the lost loved one did. This can make it hard to relate to others.

Although this won't bring them back memories, letters and photographs can help us to recall and savour the good things.

It's also important to remember that losses can lead to new and unexpected relationships emerging. Perhaps we can now meet up with estranged siblings, or younger relatives we never got to know or to renew connections with family or friends. It is important to try to be alert to the opportunities that change can bring to relationships despite the pain and the loss that we may be feeling. Remember it's never too late to form new relationships or rekindle old ones.

Feeling lonely

Living alone is not the same thing as being lonely. Many people living alone have active and social lives and, although they may have lost a partner, after a while they may find single life enjoyable again.

They are the lucky ones, for others who may not have a family, or one near, or who are housebound, it is a different matter.

It is important, however difficult it may be, to keep positive and not sink into a feeling of self-pity which can discourage potential visitors.

For some, the radio is the only human voice they hear all day, for others it is a quick visit from a carer who has no time to chat.

It is easy to say 'join a group' but many people find this quite difficult and there is always the problem of how to get there. There are groups with specific interests that may appeal and schemes that provide volunteers who will visit the housebound.

This is not 'charity' - the volunteers do it because they want to, and warm friendships can result. There is always something to talk about - TV or radio, current affairs, our own past history, families for instance. If you have a computer it is easy to get connected to Skype which means that you can be in touch with family and friends, watch the grandchildren grow up and feel part of the family again.

Some people say they don't want strangers in the house, but they are only strangers at the start, they soon become familiar. Ask Age UK Brighton & Hove about the local schemes.

And don't despair: help is there.

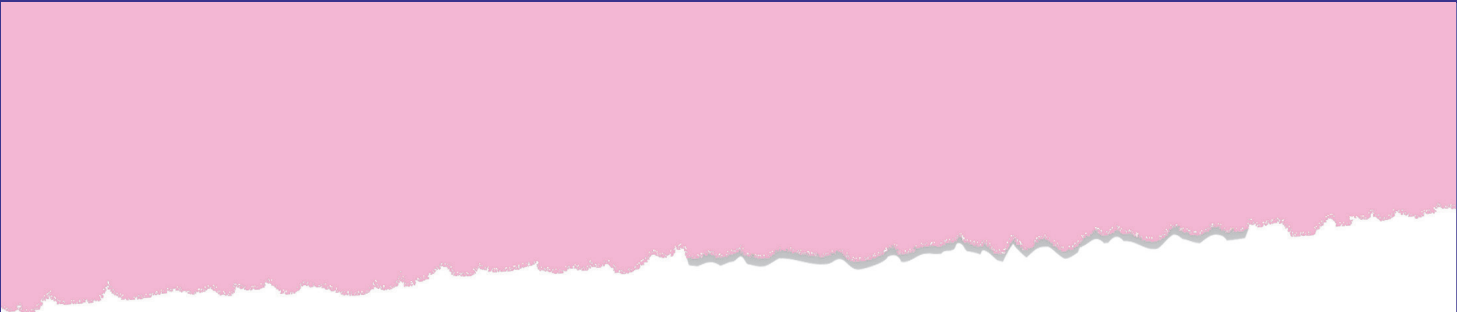
Making new friends and keeping up with old ones

Meeting new people can feel a bit daunting or difficult but finding someone who has a shared interest can be a good way to form a lasting bond. Joining groups and finding acceptance from others can give a real boost to our sense of well being.

A group of older people wanted a regular coffee morning. There were people to make the coffee and cakes but no one to set up the stall or do the washing up. They then realised that there were some people who felt they could no longer bake cakes but would be happy to help in other ways. The result was a much larger group of older people happily involved in the group.

You may want to take up an activity that you enjoyed when younger or you may now have the chance to develop a new interest. There are many organisations which run meetings and events for those with special interests, for example birdwatching outings and talks about birds with the RSPB. There are others such as University of the Third Age (U3A) and Lifelines which run classes catering for many varied interests. Public libraries are a good source of information about activities available locally. Age UK has lists of day centres and lunch clubs. Brighton Council runs health walks in various parts of the city.

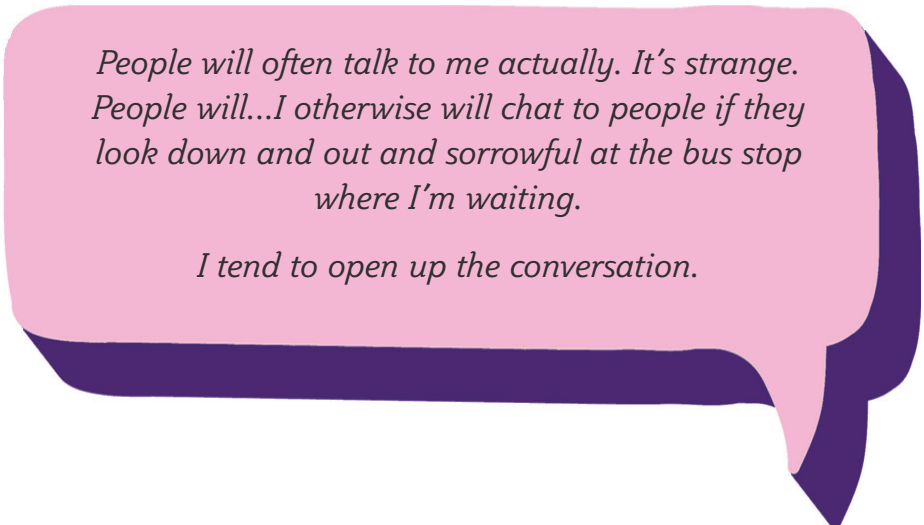
Those Christmas cards you have exchanged over many years with old friends with just a few words of news, may now prove to be the source of renewed friendships. Even if distance and disability mean it has to be letters, the telephone or e-mails rather than meeting in person, it can be most rewarding to exchange reminiscences and up-to-date news. And those of us with access to the internet may be able to make contact with long lost friends via sites such as Friends Reunited.



With life's ups and downs we can easily all lose confidence and this can make it difficult to form new friendships. For example being ill makes it difficult as one can't get out and meet people and the world can seem to close in on us.

We might feel its best not to ask people because it can feel embarrassing if there is a rejection or refusal of our efforts. But we don't know if we don't try and the person we feel afraid of talking to might feel the same way about us. We often forget that others may have worries or problems of their own and breaking down barriers and offering our own strengths will contribute to our sense of well being - it is something that all human beings can be good at!

Even casual social contact can really brighten the day - for example a chat at the shops. You would be surprised how many people forget that staff at checkouts, whatever their age, can feel neglected, unnoticed and low too. You could brighten their day with a brief chat, a smile or kind word in a way that will make you feel better as well.



*People will often talk to me actually. It's strange.
People will...I otherwise will chat to people if they
look down and out and sorrowful at the bus stop
where I'm waiting.*

I tend to open up the conversation.

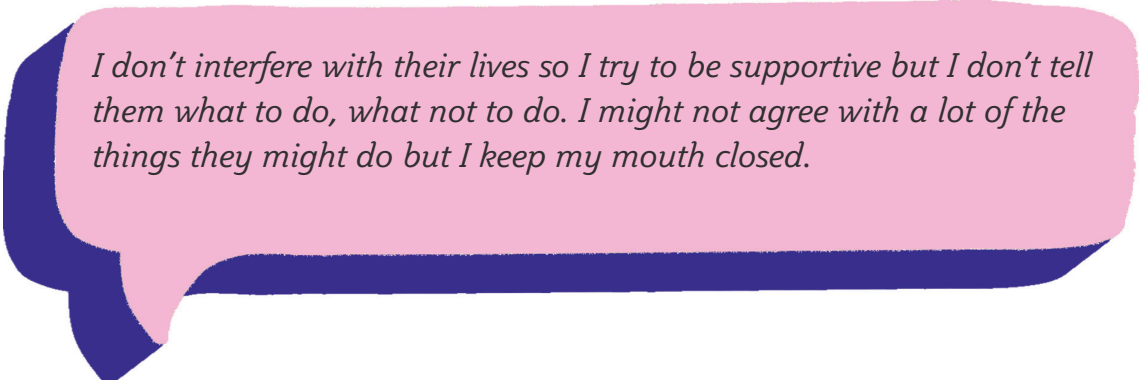
Relationships with family

Our relationships with our children are some of the most important relationships we have. Whether they are positive and straightforward or complex and difficult, they are bound to have an impact on how we feel. Generally speaking a close family contributes strongly to a feeling of well being and rifts tend to cause great sadness, but these things are not of course entirely in our control. It is easy to assume if you have difficult family relationships that you are alone but that is not necessarily so as many family relationships are notoriously complicated!


In relationships between parents and children adjustments are needed on both sides as our children grow up and we grow older. These kinds of adjustments are not things we normally plan or prepare for they just start to happen and we have to find ways to adjust. Things we may have done or provided for our children in the past can become difficult and we may have to change and our relationships and roles. We may need their help with things we would prefer to be able to do ourselves. On the other hand we may be able to offer caring, wisdom and support to them in new ways too.

It is natural and normal to want to see children more frequently as our lives become less busy - but it is important to remember that this is often at a time when our children's lives are at their busiest. This applies to those living quite close and having frequent contact as well as to those with families far away whom they see infrequently.

In the time we spend together it is the quality of attention we can give each other that can make a real difference - and of course this works both ways! Maintaining a satisfactory relationship requires sensitivity, diplomacy and careful handling and this is especially true when grandchildren are involved. Of course, we all know that a particular hazard to avoid is that of criticising the way our children bring up our grandchildren!



I don't interfere with their lives so I try to be supportive but I don't tell them what to do, what not to do. I might not agree with a lot of the things they might do but I keep my mouth closed.



Grandchildren, however, can bring great pleasure and fun and there can be immense satisfaction in watching another generation progress towards adulthood. Young life also keeps us fresh and up to date with the present world.

The world is a different place to when we were young and parents have many concerns to juggle that did not apply when we were parents. They do their best – if we think they are making mistakes we must think very hard before saying so. For, unless they have asked for advice, it is unlikely they will welcome our 'suggestions'!

We should not, of course, hold back if we have serious concerns over the welfare of our grandchildren.

Of course there have been big changes in family relationships over the last 50 years or so and many families are widely spread. Generally speaking there were greater expectations on families to care for one another in the past than there are now. Many people also travel much greater distances to work and have less time available to for each other. People are no longer expected to look after family/parents. Families are much more widely dispersed and live far from one another. Using the telephone can be a good way to keep in contact or perhaps we should try more modern forms of technology such as texting, e-mail or Skype.

Giving and receiving care

As we become more frail and perhaps less able to do everything that we used to, it is inevitable that we will have to rely on help from other people to some extent. Most of this help will be informal and will come from family, friends and neighbours. It is only when we have the very greatest needs that health and social care professionals will become involved in our everyday lives.

Giving or receiving care of any kind creates a relationship. At its best this can be both supportive and rewarding but if it doesn't work it can be very negative. Any relationship is a two way response and there are three strands that make up the important ingredients: reliability, reassurance and respect. However grateful we are, the caring relationship puts a great strain on both sides. There will be times when tempers flare with carers feeling unappreciated and those being cared for feeling frustrated by their inability to do things for themselves.

But how do we conduct ourselves so that the help often offered very willingly, at least at first, does not become a burden? If we need help, we must be realistic and accept that contact with any helper may be less than we would like. We must avoid criticising and, for example, accept that when a substitute has to be made for something on the shopping list, much thought probably went into the alternative even if it is not something we would have chosen! We must remember too that friends and neighbours are also ageing and may no longer be able to give the help they did in the past. When this happens, we must be prepared to accept alternatives, possibly provided by professionals.

Remember, if things are not going well, there are many advice services available which can help. You do not need to suffer in silence – it's better to speak to someone in confidence who is independent and can listen to your concerns.

You may have a neighbour friend or relative helping you on an informal basis and this may work perfectly well. On the other hand if you are entitled to financial help with your care, using an 'individual budget' (money that social services allocate to you direct to pay for help) can formalise and set boundaries to a previously informal 'care' role. This can sometimes be helpful if things are not working quite right or you feel uneasy about the relationship.

Giving care can be very rewarding and satisfying but can also be difficult and demanding. Being a carer can also make it very difficult to maintain old relationships or form new ones. Being a carer is such an important and difficult job and takes so much out of us that it is important to make sure we have support from other people and we must not be afraid to ask.

It can be really helpful to have a network of support to boost the spirits and help us to fulfil the caring role with renewed energy. Crossroads is one of a number of organisations able to give support to carers.

Recognise your own strengths

'You have to come to terms with life... and bad things can happen at times and then life goes on, so you have to carry on and take a different pathway. Just do what you can and try and make a life, that's all you can do'.

Retirement we are told is the beginning of a 'third age' a new page in the book of life. For some of us this can be a challenge but for others daunting. How we approach later life is a very individual thing, but we must not lose sight of what we have gained over the years. Throughout our lives we have learnt to cope, adapt and be resilient. Experience has given us many practical skills and emotional strengths which we may now need to use. It can be all too easy to focus on the things we can't do anymore. However, listing what we are able to do can be a surprise and prompt old interests that can be re-kindled or new ones to try.

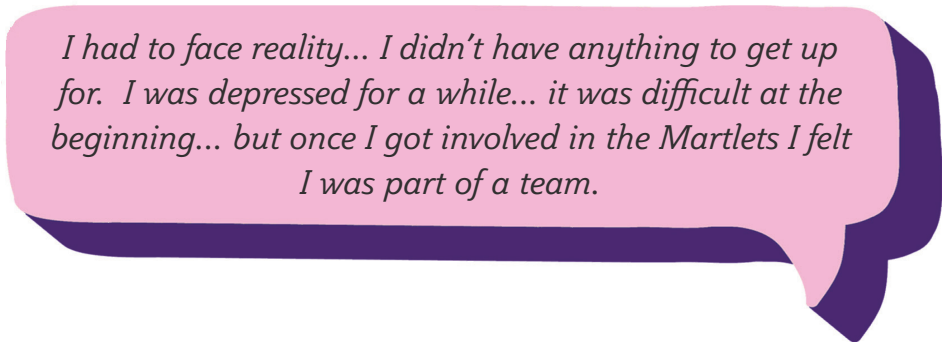
Our practical skills can be used in a variety of ways be it developing pre-existing hobbies; trying something new or helping others. Often the process of supporting someone else can make us feel useful and, therefore, good about ourselves. At times, all of us can feel lonely or depressed. Over our lifetime we have acquired internal strengths and reserves, which we can now bring to the fore enabling us to cope and help overcome the problem.

There is no point dwelling on what we should or should not have done but live for today and the future. Growing old can't be learnt but accepting change and adapting to it can be. We now have time to reflect on all the positive things gained over our lifetime that we can use to enhance our well-being today.

*Because you can, you know,
if you've a will.*

Volunteering

Do you ever feel like a challenge? If so, you might try making use of your talents and consider becoming a volunteer. There are many charitable organisations who would welcome you with open arms. For example: visiting the house-bound for a cup of tea and a chat; serving in a charity shop; receptionist answering the telephone; hospital friend etc. The opportunities are there to take advantage of.



I had to face reality... I didn't have anything to get up for. I was depressed for a while... it was difficult at the beginning... but once I got involved in the Martlets I felt I was part of a team.

By becoming a volunteer, in whatever capacity you choose, you will be helping yourself as well as helping those who are in need - isn't that what life is all about? It's well worth a thought or two. Libraries often have adverts of opportunities for volunteering.

A group of people enjoyed knitting, now they were older they found it too complicated so they stopped doing it and they all became very down. It was soon realised that younger people wanted to knit and sew but could not find people to help them. Recently the group has re-opened under the name of Knit and Natter. They help people who want help to make garments for sales or to send overseas. Some of the group are now finding out more about these countries, adding to the interest.

List of Contributors

(ages listed at time of first edition)

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Your Notes...

The first edition held a list of useful organisations. For up to date information about all relevant organisations that can offer advice and support please contact Age UK Brighton & Hove's Information & Advice Service on 01273 720603.

Your Notes...

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Your Notes...

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