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Symposium Seeks Innovation to Overcome Loneliness

Loneliness is starting to get attention. In the media, the community and in government.

Today a symposium in Melbourne spent time exploring what we can do about loneliness, *Innovation: Initiatives to Alleviate Loneliness*, organised by Friends for Good.

Attended by academics, community groups, government and business the symposium looked at how we can address loneliness for individuals, which was described by one person as a precipice where you can slip into an abyss very quickly and realise you are spending a lot of time on your own. You may appear connected but you are not.

An organisation from rural NSW gave an example of a senior who can't see the light at the end of the tunnel, she says "I am just waiting until I am put into a home".

Community groups presented entrepreneurial ideas, including RMIT University who are developing a wearable device, an IT solution to assist people experiencing loneliness. It is

designed to look like a piece of jewellery or medal and be worn by seniors. It will calculate the number of words spoken and if this is low sends a message to a service or family member, prompting them to call the person.

The event also explored the design of cities. "Whether it's about developers, high rise buildings, or the breakdown of relationships, our built environment is in many ways a barrier to connection, as is the way our communities have developed" said Patricia Lauria, Chairperson of Friends for Good.

The many facets of these complexities were explored. Overseas examples of buildings designed around the interests of the people living in them, or particular groups, such as women, were shared. A common theme of the discussion was: if we are capable of such complex planning why can we not design places to be more inclusive?

In addition to the built environment there was dialogue about the way communities have evolved, how marginalised groups are treated as 'others' and the many difficulties in forming genuine human connection.

Dr. David Week from Melbourne University summed this up: "loneliness is produced by our cultural systems". One of the key steps that groups and individuals can take now is to work more closely together. The Friendship Alliance is a national network of organisations sharing information and developing resources. "Ultimately, connecting projects together is the start" said Dr. Peter Steker.

Friends For Good is a not-for-profit organisation aiming to free people from loneliness.

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For more information

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