

Rural communities must avoid isolation, say counsellors

People living in rural areas need to reach out to their neighbours, friends and the wider community to avoid being isolated and feeling vulnerable, a new study has found.

The survey, carried out by Behaviour & Attitudes on behalf of the Irish Association of Counselling & Psychotherapy (IACP), shows that men living in rural areas and members of the farming community are susceptible to isolation as they are the groups identified in the survey who have difficulties discussing their personal problems.

The IACP is the largest professional organisation in Ireland for the counselling and psychotherapy profession, with almost 4,000 members nationwide.

The IACP survey shows that 25% of people surveyed who are members of the farming community said that they had difficulties discussing their personal problems, as opposed to 14% of respondents in urban areas.

Of equal concern to the IACP is the fact that 7% of respondents to the national survey were men in rural areas, who overwhelmingly said that they didn't have anyone that they could share their problems with.

"The results of this survey are especially worrying, as it shows that there is a large group of people in Ireland living in rural areas who risk becoming increasingly isolated," said IACP spokesman Shane Kelly.

"There is a clear link between loneliness and depression and this can lead to more people experiencing anxieties or feeling depressed. Loneliness and isolation can also exacerbate feelings of fear and this is all the more concerning due to the fact that rural crime is on the increase," he added.

Mr Kelly advised people living in rural areas to call around to their neighbour's house, especially in the evenings, to check if they needed help with small chores. He also advised calling friends and family members in rural areas regularly to stay in contact, which, he said would help people feel connected and not as fearful.

He also said that people who live on their own in rural areas should not isolate themselves and, where possible, should accept any invitations from their family and friends to attend events.

"This kind of contact can make all the difference. If you are aware of a neighbour or family member that may be alone, consider inviting them over for a chat, dinner or to share in a family event as they may be too shy to ask," Mr Kelly added.

The IACP also advised people who felt isolated to talk about their feelings to family or friends or to consider contacting a caring professional such as a counsellor or psychotherapist.