

9. It felt like Christmas came early

During the pandemic, most of the time we were able to actually meet up. I remember when we used to sit outside even though the government was saying everybody could sit inside, but we had to sit outside, and Emma told me we were the only two tough cookies who were meeting outside. She told me other people were just on the phone. I was really glad we can meet because it's so much better when you can see the person actually face-to-face like a normal conversation. I knew Emma before the pandemic and we met every two weeks. Being able to meet up with someone helped tremendously because, during COVID and with living alone, I feel very alone at times.

My depression got worse so being able to see somebody felt like Christmas came early. I have never been so delighted actually, seeing a person face- to –face rather than just on a screen. And it feels like when you see people on telly, they're not really like real life, you know, they're real life but elsewhere, you are never going to see. So when you start seeing everyone you used to see face-to-face on a screen, it just feels so weird. So when I got to see her face-to-face it was like 'yay', I was so excited. It really felt like Christmas came early. It's having something to look forward to, knowing that every two weeks I can get to see her, that it's not just a course of loneliness.

It's important because I don't have that many friends. The friends I used to have, three of my friends died. I managed to make new friends through the church, but I don't have lots and lots of friends so having her in my life make a huge difference. We get on really well. We hit it off, actually, as soon as Clare (archway staff member) brought her. Quickly, there and then, and it's just been wonderful ever since. We are connecting on the same level, like when you almost complete each other's sentences. She's a wonderful girl and it means a huge deal to me to have her in my life.

Without her, going through the pandemic would have been much more lonely and more depressing. There's a possibility that I might have had more suicidal crises than I did. There's been times when it was really difficult and my doctor started calling me every single week when the pandemic started because he was worried. When you live on your own it's really difficult and when you feel you just survive every day there's just no life really, and then there was a long time

when there wasn't really any life. I'm not fit for work from home so it's kind of like, when you don't really have nothing to do, no one to see, it was extremely hard.

When we had the first lockdown, Clare also put me in touch with the Oxford Hub because I have asthma, which is a lung related illness. I was afraid to go out, that I might catch it and die, and so she got me in touch with them and I got a girl who used to do my shopping and picked up my medication from the pharmacy, which meant a lot. Without doubt, I wouldn't have been able to get in touch with them without Archway because I didn't even know they existed. That was a huge help.

What made a difference was finding out actually that I can have a befriender. Because the other thing I found out about Archway up until then was that it's a charity about loneliness and whenever there used to be a meeting on Wednesdays in the church in town, when I went there back ages ago with my support worker from Elmore, before I knew Emma, it was only older people so I thought the only people I can make friends with was like a pensioner. I told John (support worker) I didn't want to be friends with a pensioner because my granny died and it was really painful and I said I wouldn't be able to cope with that. I didn't even know befriending existed. I don't really remember how I got in touch with Clare in the first place because she was the one who told me about it.

I was asking Clare, 'how long is that for?' because usually with my experience with most charities it's time limited. She said, 'no, it's not time limited. We have someone who will be befriended for 24 years.' And I was really excited. She said as long as she doesn't move anywhere or, you know, nothing happens to us, it's 'til the end of our lives. I can see us meeting up when we are really old! She is French, 'cos I'm not English, and so we sometimes talk about languages, compare what you can say in English that you can't say in our languages, which is very interesting. It's a very special friendship.

It would be nice if more people got a befriender. I tried to suggest it to friends because it's a great way when a person's lonely and doesn't have many friends, it helps. You know, to get more people benders, that would be wonderful.