



The Together project allow families and friends to transform WhatsApp conversations into a story booklet for a loved one in isolation

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Online tool keeps families connected during lockdown

Social isolation and loneliness have affected many people during the Covid-19 pandemic, especially those with limited access to digital technology.

Now a new website, developed by academics at Northumbria University, is providing a unique way for families and friends to connect during lockdown.

The '[Together](http://www.together.me)' website supports groups of family or friends to transform their

WhatsApp conversations into a story booklet for a loved one who may be isolated.

They are provided with topics and prompts to keep them busy and message about, allowing them to share their thoughts, photos, memories and experiences.

Using the Together online tool they can then transform their WhatsApp group chat into a booklet– which they can either print off and share with their loved one or download and email to them.

Researcher Linnea Groot is one of the team behind Together and explains how the project was inspired by a story from Holland at the start of the pandemic.

She said: “We saw an article on the Dutch news where a family whose relative was in intensive care kept a diary and gave this to her when she was discharged from the hospital.

“They wrote down what happened to her while she was in the ICU, but also what happened in the world outside, weather forecasts, some news items, and things the family had done.

“We thought this was a really nice idea and wanted to make something to support other people going through this kind of experience.

“We realise that being separated from family and friends can leave you feeling powerless, and hope that getting together as a group to engage with these topics and activities provides a space to draw strength from each other.

“Together is a really simple but effective way to make shared memories together, with your loved one at the centre of it all.”

The topics given are designed to be fun, whilst also getting the group thinking about themselves and their loved one in different ways.

Example questions include:

- Share your favourite memory of you and your loved one and/or group.
- Document something you experienced / saw / heard today that surprised you, or made you think of your loved one or this group.
- Try one of their hobbies today and capture yourself doing it, how did it work out for you?
- Try to match your outfits today in the favourite colour of your loved one.

The privacy and security of users has been carefully considered in the design of the platform. Messages and media files collected in a WhatsApp group chat remain on the user's device and are never shared or stored by Together.

The team behind Together are part of an existing research project called [Enabling Ongoingness](#), which explores how physical objects and digital media can help people maintain lasting bonds with loved ones after they die.

A large part of this is exploring how people curate their relationships with family members and friends through different media, stories, objects and rituals in everyday life.

Following the Covid-19 outbreak this research took on a new meaning, with families forced to separate and many sadly losing loved ones unexpectedly to the disease.

As Linnea Groot explains: "During the Covid-19 pandemic we have all been faced with a new global shared experience – the fear of loss and grief. It is unlike anything that many of us have experienced before and has undoubtedly changed our lives in many ways.

"Through Together we hope that we can help people capture those community bonds in an innovative way at a time when connections with other people are harder than ever before."

You can find out more about Together at <https://togather.me/>. The research team welcome feedback from users to help improve the tool.

The research team are also hoping to work with hospices to explore how the Together tool could be used to support families using end-of-life support

services. For more information please email linnea.groot@northumbria.ac.uk

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