

Cheese, biscuits and TV: that's life for lonely Esther

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HER work with the free telephone counselling services ChildLine and The Silver Line has helped millions of vulnerable children and isolated elderly people but now Esther Rantzen has admitted she is suffering from acute loneliness herself.

"There is a stigma to admitting you are desperately lonely," said Rantzen, the TV presenter and campaigner whose husband, Desmond Wilcox, died in 2000. "For me the worst part is not having someone I love to share the best times with."

Describing her efforts to combat loneliness, Rantzen, 75, who was made a dame earlier this year, said: "I binge on cheese and biscuits because I love them and binge on X Factor, Strictly and Downton. I watched five instalments of Downton in one afternoon . . .

"What you realise is that if you are facing a crucial loss in your life, like a partner or sight or hearing, it is very difficult to fill that vacuum, so you find distraction. I am



Esther Rantzen says loss of a partner is a difficult vacuum to fill

doing so much that when I get home at night I just keel over and fall asleep in the bath."

After Maureen Lipman, her actress friend whose husband, the dramatist Jack Rosenthal, died in 2004, began seeing a "gentleman friend", Rantzen considered joining a dating agency but decided her fame would make it impractical.

"I'd love to go on a dating site and absolutely yes it works, but could you imagine if I did that? I once advertised for a cleaning lady and when I opened the front door she

looked at me and said, 'Oh God no,' and ran."

Despite that, she is exploring the idea of launching a dating agency for older people. "We are talking about creating 'Silver Dating'. A lot of my callers are pleading for it, because they are lonely, have lost a partner and want a new one."

Rantzen founded ChildLine in 1986. It dealt with almost 287,000 in the year to March 2015. The Silver Line has handled about 500,000 calls since 2012.