

Prevention Column

LONELINESS AND ISOLATION – APRIL 2021

Breaking the isolation: The importance of social support

Humans are social beings. We have a fundamental need to interact with others and maintain interpersonal relationships. It's essential to our growth and survival. Everyone's needs are different, but one thing is certain: isolation and loneliness are very real threats to our physical and mental health.

- In 2016, people living alone accounted for **more than one-quarter (28%) of Canadian households.**
- Reframing loneliness as solitude or time alone can have a positive impact on psychological well-being and **promote good social connections.**

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LONELINESS AND ISOLATION

A health risk

Do you know the difference between isolation and loneliness? **Isolation is an objective measure.** It's defined by the absence of contact with others. **Loneliness, on the other hand, is a subjective feeling** that's different for everyone. Someone who is isolated doesn't necessarily feel lonely. Conversely, someone might feel lonely even with lots of people around.

Regardless of a person's age, research shows that loneliness and isolation can both be perceived as threats to our physical and mental integrity. Stress caused by isolation or relationship dissatisfaction can lead to physiological imbalances: higher cortisol levels, high blood pressure, increased risk of heart disease, etc. In infants and young children, touch deprivation can significantly alter the areas of the brain responsible for emotional development. For seniors, social deprivation increases the risk of dementia and psychiatric disorders. Several studies also report a link between the absence of social contact and increased risk of premature death. It can cause even more harm than smoking or alcoholism. In short, isolation and loneliness are health issues that shouldn't be ignored.



ISOLATION FOR PROTECTION

In 2020, Canadians have been forced into isolation to prevent the spread of COVID-19. As a result, one in four Canadians aged 12 and over works or studies from home. The vast majority avoids crowds and gatherings (95%) and only leaves the house for essential reasons (71%). Unfortunately, because of these changes in social behaviour, nearly one-third of Canadians report a decline in their mental health. For many people, the absence of social contact has a significant impact on their mental and physical well-being. ■

The importance of social support

Relationships are as essential to our survival as eating and sleeping. We connect with people to feel appreciated, loved and valued by our community. Many studies have shown that social support also protects against stress and contributes significantly to mental well-being.

There are five kinds of social support:

1 EMOTIONAL SUPPORT

Sharing feelings with a confidant (a spouse or close friend). It provides a sense of reassurance and can help people get through difficult times.

2 SOCIAL NETWORK SUPPORT

Connections between colleagues and friends to exchange ideas and information about projects or common values. It promotes a sense of belonging to a group or community.

3 ESTEEM SUPPORT

Relationships in which the person feels useful by contributing to the other person's well-being. For example, the parent-child relationship helps nurture self-esteem.

4 TANGIBLE SUPPORT (MATERIAL AND INSTRUMENTAL)

Concrete actions performed by or for another person, whether a friend or a stranger, that meet an immediate need. These actions nurture the need for recognition for both the giver and the receiver.

5 INFORMATIONAL SUPPORT

Any peer support at work or support between people from the same organization. It promotes problem-solving and facilitates team-building.

The kind of support needed is different for everyone. Some people need deep conversations where they share their innermost thoughts and feelings. Others measure their support through concrete help with performing a task. Everyone has their own way of feeling socially connected, including how often those connections take place, with whom and in what context. ■

Embracing solitude

While social contact contributes to our well-being, our approach to solitude also impacts our mental health. Taking time for yourself can help you recharge your batteries, develop your creativity and find self-fulfillment. The right amount of solitude in a busy day allows you to step back and take stock of your emotions. It could even inspire some new ideas. What's more, the self-knowledge you gain contributes to genuine, healthy relationships with others.

Here are a few things you could try:

- **Acknowledge your emotions:** If you're feeling sadness or any other emotion, allow yourself a moment alone to feel it. This can help you better identify your immediate needs.
- **Listen to yourself:** If you're not available to take part in a discussion or activity, respect your limits.
- **Do something fun:** Find something fun to do on your own to recharge your batteries. You may discover some new talents or interests.
- **Take a time out:** Go for a walk, take some deep breaths or meditate. These are opportunities to get in touch with your inner voice. It might seem scary at first, but the more you do it, the easier it will become.
- **Write:** Put your thoughts down on paper spontaneously and without judgment. This can help you organize your thoughts, understand your emotions and make sense of your experiences.

Before we can connect with others, we first need to connect with ourselves. Take advantage of time alone to find your essence, discover your inner strength and learn self-acceptance. As well as enriching your life, these strategies will improve the quality of your relationships and encourage others to respect their own limits. ■

WHEN YOU LOSE your bearings

Changes in your social habits (type or frequency of contacts) may lead to worry, stress and even hopelessness. Negative social interactions or recurring communication problems can cause frustration and/or confusion. It's normal to feel this way. Poor social support has a negative impact on our well-being. Do your best to accept the situation, and don't hesitate to talk about it.

Are you experiencing lingering personal or relationship problems? Are you overwhelmed with negative emotions that, even with social support, aren't getting better? Don't hesitate to seek counselling. Whether you go alone or with your loved ones, a health professional (psychologist, psychotherapist or marriage and family therapist) can give you the help and the tools you need. ■



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In conclusion

Social contact is essential to our physical and mental well-being. Having meaningful relationships and good social support is beneficial to your health, but solitude has its benefits too if you can find a way to embrace it. ■

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