

Staying Connected to Combat Loneliness and Isolation During the Holidays



As we move into the last month of 2020, we know that traditional holiday celebrations will need to be reframed due to COVID-19. We've been living with gathering restrictions and adhering to public health guidelines intended to keep us protected and safe. Many people are used to having full social calendars of holiday-themed events. It's hard to imagine experiencing the holidays in any other way. While some people will embrace creative adaptations, others will struggle. However, the truth is that not everyone would agree that the holidays are the "most wonderful time of the year".¹ But perhaps this year especially, it's going to be essential to recognize that feelings of loneliness and isolation can have a significant effect on someone's mental health.

In this article, we'll share some ideas and information on recognizing signs of loneliness and isolation in ourselves and those we care about, offering tips on what we can do to support one another.

The health repercussions of loneliness and isolation

The 2016 Canadian census noted that approximately 14% of the population over the age of 15 live independently. It's a similar story in the U.S., where the most recent census data revealed the highest rate of people living alone, at over 25% of the population.² Research in social isolation continues to increase as people begin to realize the serious health repercussions of chronic loneliness.

Feeling lonely and isolated all the time can put people at greater risk for compromised physical, mental and cognitive health. It's important to recognize that the feelings of loneliness and isolation that are cause for concern are very different from someone who chooses solitude. More people are feeling lonely and isolated from their social networks given the restrictions that the pandemic has created.

The consensus is that without meaningful contact, they feel their lives lack purpose, happiness and meaning. Unfortunately, studies also show that a lack of social connection can introduce or exacerbate health risks significantly.²

The effects of loneliness and isolation are "twice as harmful to physical and mental health as obesity."² Studies show that people may be drawn to smoking and alcohol use, which, apart from the consumption having the ability to compromise physical health, can be equally dangerous because of the addictive potential of these substances'. Reduced physical activity can contribute to an increased risk of stroke, heart disease and cardiovascular decline. It's easy to get into the habit of staying inside and deciding not to exercise. People are also reporting insomnia and sleep disturbances, which in turn can impair immunity. The stress they feel can weaken how the body will respond to viruses. All of these factors correlate to increased incidents of depression and poor mental health. There may even be drops in someone's ability to recall memories, hold focus, engage in reasoning and complete problem-solving. For someone feeling isolated, their brain functions can decline rapidly. One of the unfortunate consequences of COVID-19 restrictions has become increasingly evident in congregate living situations like long-term-care homes. Many residents have been affected by social isolation and loneliness that is unbearable.

Why is there so much widespread loneliness and isolation?

Some of the biggest catalysts relate to significant life transitions. People who have lost people they care about and are now alone have experienced relationship breakdowns and have separated their households, and people who have moved to a new location report feeling lonelier and more isolated as they try to adjust. These changes aren't insignificant, and as a result, they are often tied to intense grief, pain, and dissatisfaction with their quality of life. Researchers refer to this as reactive loneliness.² When chronic loneliness sets in, "individuals either don't have the emotional, mental or financial resources to satisfy their social needs or they lack a social circle that can provide these benefits."³ Declines in volunteering, attending religious gatherings and other community events also have direct effects. Even so, someone may be surrounded by people

virtually or as they maneuver safe public settings, at work, or even living with others at home and still experience loneliness. It has more to do with a person's perception of the kinds of relationships and degrees of satisfaction they have when socializing. Many opportunities for people and the frequency to socialize have been impaired with public health restrictions that have arisen during COVID-19.

What can we do to help combat loneliness and isolation, especially during the holidays?

We can do things to help address how someone might be feeling and we may offer support and help. Recognize that they might be vulnerable and experiencing symptoms of depression and anxiety simultaneously. These could show up as having a lack of energy or desire to talk to anyone, no motivation to change how they are feeling, expressing that they would like to be left alone, or even feeling tired all the time, but not sleep soundly. Underneath these symptoms, they may want to stay connected, be weary of their feelings, have a desire to be with people, and want to get a good sleep.

Becoming invested in boosting social support with family, clubs, religion, or other groups can be a good start at becoming more participative. A lot of this interaction may need to happen through the use of technology to adhere to public health guidelines. While many people may be intimidated by technology, being open-minded to try a few innovative ways can help facilitate personal connections.

Individuals may be able to share time and experiences with persons they care about and/or those within close social circles to feel less lonely and isolated from others during the holidays. Consider or suggest trying these methods:

1. **Video conferencing** – Arrange for a time to connect using video conferencing technology.
2. **"Watch" parties or games** – Many social media platforms can host "watch" parties where many people come together to watch a program simultaneously. There are also collaborative games that people can play together that allow for fun social interactions.

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- 3. Activity trackers** – Some devices allow you to issue a challenge to another person with the same equipment. You'll be able to go out for a walk "together" while staying apart. You may even be able to speak with them on the phone while you are walking. Don't underestimate the power of exercise as an excellent strategy to combat loneliness. Something as simple as going for a walk around the block can help improve someone's mood by releasing positive endorphins and helping them stay fit.
- 4. Sharing recipes, getting creative, learning "new to you" skills** – Exploring online classes or videos that help you learn how to cook, paint or knit can be an excellent way to share knowledge and discover like-minded people. Why not host a class with the family to share how to prepare a cherished holiday recipe? Or set up a time to tour people through your decorating using live broadcasts or even video.
- 5. Choose moments of isolation when you need to, so you can improve your cognitive health** – yoga, meditation, and focused breathing are three easy techniques that can bring about positive changes for self-care. Don't ignore these opportunities.
- 6. Become more aware of investing time in togetherness** – This holiday season, why not reduce the consumption of things and give people gifts of time and togetherness where possible. During the pandemic, this is especially important for the elderly, people who require assistance with daily living, and immunocompromised people. Sending a care package or arranging for a special visit could mean the world to someone lonely and isolated.

If you or someone you know are experiencing extended periods of loneliness and isolation, seek out professional support from a qualified healthcare professional. They will be

able to provide you with a range of options from therapies to medications, or lifestyle approaches to alleviate symptoms.

References:

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