



March Wellness Tip:

From Loneliness to Connection

Maybe you've struggled to make true friends. Or maybe you have lots of friends and still feel lonely at times. Truth is, all of us at one time or another have felt lonely and disconnected from others. In fact, it is so widespread that loneliness is viewed as an epidemic.

In May 2018 the global health service company Cigna surveyed over 20,000 Americans aged 18+ and the results were alarming. Nearly half reported sometimes or always feeling lonely or left out. Only 27% feel they belong to a group of friends, and just 24% report they can find companionship when they want it.

Sadly, Cigna found a 7% rise in loneliness since 2018. Social media use and poor work-life balance are noted as significant contributors.

The belief is often the older one gets, the lonelier they are, but in actuality the results did not support this as younger adults reported greater loneliness than older adults. Still, the level of loneliness in older generations are alarmingly high. In Japan, lonely deaths among the elderly have a name: Kodokushi.

Loneliness is not necessarily related to the number of people around you. *People can be alone and content, and can also be in a large crowd and feel lonely.* It is about feeling disconnected and isolated.

What are the effects of being lonely?

Loneliness can be detrimental to our physical health. Quality of sleep can be negatively affected, and stress hormones and blood pressure can be elevated.

In 2015, researchers at UCLA discovered that cellular changes that result in chronic inflammation can be triggered by social isolation, predisposing the lonely to serious physical conditions like heart disease, stroke, metastatic cancer, and Alzheimer's disease. A Harvard Business Review essay cited a study that said social isolation is "associated with a reduction in lifespan similar to that caused by smoking 15 cigarettes a day."

Loneliness can be so hard on our health that in one 2015 analysis, which pooled data from 70 studies following 3.4 million people over seven years, found that lonely individuals had a 26% higher risk of dying. This figure rose to 32% if they lived alone.

Bert Uchino, professor at the University of Utah who studies relationships and health, has said that loneliness is also linked to mental health issues such as depression and anxiety. It is important to note that loneliness frequently co-exists with depression, although it does not always. One can lead to the other, and vice versa.

What can be done about loneliness?

As mentioned, loneliness has often been called an epidemic as it is that major of an issue. The government in the UK took note when it was revealed that up to a fifth of all UK adults feel lonely most or all of the times, and appointed the country's first Minister of Loneliness to help address this growing concern.

I prefer a title such as Minister of Connection, since what we focus on grows, and wish more countries (including ours!) would follow suit. Although government can, and should, do more on this issue we can directly affect it ourselves.

You can change things!

When my mother was showing the first signs of dementia, she moved into a seniors' facility. Not only had she left her home, where she had lived for over 50 years, but she also moved cities – from Edmonton to Victoria, where one of my sisters lived. On the first day, the manager came to her room to welcome her and asked what time she would like to go for dinner, as it was served any time between 5 and 7 pm, and since my mom didn't know anyone yet the manager was going to sit her with someone.

To be honest, I would have felt relief that I would have someone to eat with. Not my mom! She replied "Oh no that's okay. I'm just going to look around the room and find someone who looks like they need a friend and go sit with them". Needless to say, my mother made many friends quickly and was soon quite popular in the whole place.

We often wait for others to be and do what we need from them. I bet most, if not all of us, has at one time or another thought we need more friends and wonder where we can find them. Instead, let's reach out and BE a friend.

Look around. Who seems a bit quiet, on the outside, by themselves often, perhaps shy and maybe they are lonely and would love if you would be their friend. By giving what we need, we get our own needs met.

Put down your phone! Social media is full of the highlights of a person's life so when comparisons are made with your own life, it can be distressful. Not only that but when your head is buried in your phone, you miss out on meeting people in real life.

Start with a smile, a hi, then engaging in small talk can lead to something more. Be the initiator instead of waiting for others. Work on being a good friend to others and you will attract more friends.

If you want to expand the people you know, join a group doing what you love (e.g. dancing, artwork, climbing, etc.), volunteer for an organization you believe in, attend a meet up group. There are meet ups on a huge variety of topics in Edmonton – check them out at www.meetup.com.

“We feel alone, and in this we are connected.”

- Leo Babauta



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