

We need to talk about loneliness

Feeling lonely is a sign you need to reconnect, and maybe do some things a bit differently. We spoke to some experts about ways you can do this.

Long before COVID-19 was declared a pandemic, loneliness had become an epidemic in this country. The virus just made it worse. One in two people in Australia now say they feel lonely, according to a recent [survey](#) by Melbourne's Swinburne University. Those who said they were lonelier because of COVID-19 also reported more mental health concerns.

What's going on?

The findings are not surprising. Since the arrival of the virus, we have been urged to stay physically distant from one another – the opposite of what comes naturally to us as humans. We know there are health risks associated with loneliness. It can increase your risk of dying prematurely by 30%, making it as lethal as smoking 15 cigarettes a day and more dangerous than obesity, [according to Brigham Young University in the US](#).

If there is any silver lining in this era of physical distancing, it is that we really are all in this together. Many of us have been touched to some degree by loneliness during these troubled times and that may make us kinder moving forward.

“It is too early to say whether we are going to be more empathetic in the way we think and act in the future,” says Dr Michelle Lim, a clinical psychologist and one of the authors of the Swinburne survey. “But the COVID-19 pandemic has certainly highlighted social fractures in our community and our social networks.

The human cost of modern communication

Jean Hailes psychologist Gillian Needleman says many people are now discovering that our modern ways of communication – emails, texts and other online media – have come at a cost. The pandemic has laid that bare because it has made us aware of missing the sound of the human voice and the human touch.

Many of us, she says, are lonely for our structures and routines. We are isolated from our work colleagues, from our gym buddies, and from the activities that made up our daily lives. However, the pandemic has also given us time to sit and think, to explore the possibility of finding something meaningful in our lives.

Change the mindset

While Ms Needleman concedes there is no quick-fix solution to loneliness, there are things we can do to improve our lives. Consider the power of mindfulness. “Try to optimise the moments of possibilities, try to enrich the moments you have,” she suggests. “I don't have

exact answers, but it's important to think about how you stay engaged with hope, and to remember that this will not last forever.”

Invest in your health

It will not cure loneliness but, says Ms Needleman, physical activity will make you feel better about yourself. Walk, run, eat well, limit your consumption of alcohol, and get a good night's sleep. “Improve the quality of your life incrementally,” she says.

Engage with the people in your life in a meaningful way. Have the courage to reveal your vulnerability. She says it's totally okay to be not okay.

Feeling lonely is human

Dr Lim says that to feel lonely is to be human. “When we feel lonely, it is a signal for us to reconnect, to do something different to meet our ever-changing social needs.”

She says it's important to be aware of how you feel about your relationships. If you feel lonely, reassess your current social connections and networks first. Determine if you need to modify these relationships to better meet your social needs. It might be that you need to consider putting in greater effort. Decide if you would like to build new networks and, if so, what would they look like. She says it's critical to remember that there is no one size fits all.

The upside

Taking active steps to connect with people is the number-one tool in dealing with loneliness says Nick Tebbey, National Executive Officer for Relationships Australia. He has been surprised by the creativity of many people in Australia forced by the virus into physically distancing from one another. “It has been so varied and adaptive,” he says. Hand-written letters, for example, are popular again. Neighbour Day, usually marked in March to celebrate community, has been extended to every day as a way of encouraging people to regularly check in on their community. It helps to build a sense of belonging.

“We know that loneliness has always been there, but now people are beginning to talk about it,” he says. “We need a national conversation about it. We need to talk about how we can support everyone and help them to make connections.”

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