



mayday-sa
Caring during COVID

Social Isolation, Social Distancing and Loneliness during COVID-19

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Social Isolation, Social Distancing and Loneliness during COVID-19

Whilst imperative in addressing the pandemic of COVID-19, **social isolation** and **social distancing** has given rise to the **insidious epidemic of loneliness**. As aviators **non-standard operations** has become the norm since Social Isolation has forced us to disengage from normal day to day activities that we possibly took for granted. Who of us have not longed for the days of driving to work, working out at the gym, having coffee with a friend, socialising at the local pub, visiting friends and family, celebrating memorable events and grieving tragic life events together.



Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

Abraham Maslow stressed the importance of love and belonging as a basic yet fundamental human need which impacts well-being. Since our need for social connection has been deprived it is normal to feel sad, frustrated, scared and lonely. Unfortunately, the longer the social deprivation, the stronger the desire to fulfil the need ~ **in other words the lonelier we feel, the more we crave social interaction.**

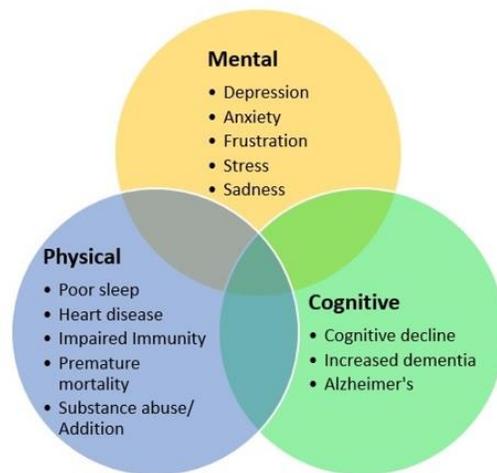
Does being alone, mean I am lonely? Being alone is not the same as being lonely. Alone is a physical state for example you may opt to live alone, go to the movies alone, or eat out alone. Being alone can be healthy as it allows you to reflect, introspect and be comfortable with yourself. Loneliness is an emotional state of sadness and distress due to isolation and a lack of authentic relationships. It normally occurs when you feel as though you have very few or no deep social relationships where you can be truly be vulnerable. Loneliness may be accompanied by feelings of sadness, fear, and anxiety. Your inability to traditionally connect with people and fulfil your need for social interaction, may currently be exacerbating feelings of loneliness.

How do I know if I am lonely? Whilst there are various indicators of loneliness, here are some possible signs:

- Lack of deep and intimate connections ~ engaging with friends and family at a surface level
- Lack of close friends ~ maintaining casual or acquaintance like friendships
- Feeling misunderstood or misinterpreted ~ no one truly understands or “gets” me
- Feeling alienated, separated and disengaged ~ feeling lonely regardless of your surroundings
- Negative feelings of self-doubt or unworthiness ~ “no one cares about me” or “I am unlovable”

It's ok to be alone and feel lonely occasionally, but it's not ok to constantly feel lonely. If left unchecked, loneliness can develop into chronic loneliness and have serious implications on your mental, physical and cognitive health.

Negative health implications from a **mental** health perspective include experiencing depression, anxiety, stress and deep sadness. From a **physical** perspective, loneliness has been proven to disrupt normal sleeping patterns, increase risk of heart disease, increase susceptibility to substance abuse and ultimately cause premature death. **Cognitively**, loneliness has negative implications on brain functioning, specifically in the area of the brain responsible for decision making, planning, attention and self-regulation. Loneliness can also cause the brain to shrink and ultimately lead to dementia and Alzheimer's.



Mental, Physical & Cognitive Effects of Loneliness

How do I combat loneliness? It is important to remember that whilst COVID-19 may have heightened feelings of loneliness, you may have experienced loneliness at different times over the course of your life. The only difference now is that we need to be **intentional, open and innovative to new ways of establishing and maintaining strong social connections**. Remember, being alone doesn't mean you are lonely, as long as you connect with people your needs and desires can be fulfilled.

1. **Be conscious, intentional and creative in social connection ~ hearing a familiar voice can reduce loneliness**

- Maintain meaningful social connections with loved ones by using technology: texts, group chats, calls and video calls
 - Plan regular virtual “socials” or “hangouts” with people from your social network for example family, friends, sports club, religious and professional community
 - Spend at least 15 minutes a day (preferably at the start) connecting with a loved one ~ good conversations with friends/family can leave you feeling good and set your mood
- 2. Establish a Daily Routine ~ Daily activities keep you occupied and take your mind off feelings of loneliness**
- Set goals you can complete within the comfort of your own home every day for example: learn a new skill, learn a new language, try a new creative project
 - Exercise and engage in physical activity: walk/jog outdoors or work in the garden
 - Keep yourself entertained: watch a movie, listen to music or read a book
 - Take time to process your thoughts/feelings and find ways to relax for example spend time in meditation, prayer, breathing or simply “chill”
- 3. Ask for Help**
- Risk being vulnerable with close friends and relatives you trust regarding your feelings of loneliness ~ it is ok to admit that you are feeling lonely and ask for regular communication
 - Consider reaching out to professional/skilled resources to receive additional support if you are feeling overwhelmed
- 4. Shift your focus outward ~ many people may be experiencing loneliness during this time**
- Voluntarily reach out to someone you think may be experiencing loneliness, especially those you may know who were lonely before the lockdown
 - Find a worthy cause/organisation where you can volunteer your skills ~ helping others can provide a sense of happiness, purpose and fulfilment

During this challenging time let us focus on purposefully building deeper meaningful connections with those we love.

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