**Loneliness**

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Loneliness poses a significant threat to our mental health in the world today even more so since the pandemic began. It cuts across generations and is reaching around the world. Millions of people today are living with sparse human contact and research tells us that lonely people are more likely to become ill, experience cognitive decline, and are losing hope more than ever before. According to recent research, two-thirds of adults today indicated they are experiencing social isolation, and 66% say their anxiety levels have increased during the pandemic. Social distancing measures are intensifying existing feelings of loneliness, and appear to be more pronounced in older adults, particularly women. Furthermore, more than half of adults, 50 years or older, have reported marked feelings of social isolation during the pandemic. Interestingly, only 11% of survey respondents turned to mental health professionals when feeling sad or down, and almost one third of people age 50 and over said they didn’t turn to anyone for support.

Two studies reported that millennials are also experiencing the highest levels of loneliness and suicidal thoughts throughout the pandemic. 80% of students surveyed for the *Active Minds Survey* reported experiencing loneliness and isolation; putting it among the top 3 most common problems they dealt with (alongside stress/anxiety and discouragement/sadness). Loneliness was considered to be an epidemic for millennials prior to the pandemic, but the isolation is only serving to exacerbate its effects.

As believers, we have the greatest tools to deal with loneliness, a life giving personal relationship with Jesus Christ. In a recent article from Focus on the Family, loneliness was referred to as an opportunity, even referred to as a gift. How can loneliness be considered a gift when often we want to avoid or run from it? In Philippians 4:8, Paul says, “whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable---if there is any moral excellence and if there is anything praiseworthy—dwell on these things.” While it is challenging for sure, loneliness can be something we can learn to praise God through and in the midst of, if we find hope in the fact that we are not alone, God is with us and will sustain us and we fix our minds on Jesus to help us get through periods of loneliness.

If we can ask God to help us see loneliness as an opportunity, **loneliness can open our hearts to others and soften our hearts to love others more**. Countless times in the past months, we’ve heard quotes from others about how people now appreciate things that they were taking for granted. For example, the freedom to attend church and worship with fellow believers has become so much more precious in the hearts of many who had become complacent about attending every Sunday. Receiving a note in the mail or kind text from a friend means so much to let us know someone is thinking about us and cared enough to take the time to write their thoughts down.

**Loneliness can open us to seeking God in a deeper way**. When we’re lonely, if we hold on to God and His Word, we don’t have to fall into despair. We can find His comfort, love, and healing by hearing His voice. We need time with God, and in ordinary times, we often fill our time and calendar up with “busyness,” trying to surround ourselves with people and activities thinking that will prevent loneliness and find ourselves leaving God out of the equation. However, these are often just distractions; the truth is that most people feel lonely even when surrounded by others and activity filled schedules. Why you may ask? While the activities allow us to be around other people, many reported not feeling connected to others due to the void of emotional sharing. Thus, people stay distracted and busy often to avoid even sharing about their own feelings for fear of being rejected or not included. Proverbs 18:24 says, “but there is a friend who stays closer than a brother.” God is our constant and never leaves us. There is no loneliness in His presence if we call on Him. Once we recognize we are accepted by God, it can open the door for us to be vulnerable with others and share about our loneliness or whatever other feelings we may be having, from a faith place of acceptance that overshadows our fear of rejection. Matthew 11:28; Isaiah 43:2; 1 Cor. 2:5-9

**Loneliness can help strengthen our character in Christ**. We can be assured God cares for us. He knows loneliness. Jesus experienced the greatest loneliness when after all of his disciples deserted him, while receiving the wrath of God in our place on the cross, was even forsaken by His Father. We become more aware of our weaknesses and deficiencies and need for God when we are lonely, because we are not distracted. As Paul said in 2 Cor. 12, “For when I am weak, then I am strong.”

If you’re experiencing loneliness, know that you are not alone! It is clear that at many times throughout this pandemic we have felt alone, but take heart God is there and there are people out there that care. Here are some practical suggestions to win the battle over loneliness:

* Pray day-by-day and read God’s Word to enjoy fellowship with God.
* Call a close friend and schedule time to have a meaningful conversation either in person, phone or Face Time. Ask for prayer if you are in need. Knowing someone is praying for you can be such a blessing and comfort in times of loneliness.
* Reengage with believers in your church family. With the pandemic, we have to be more creative; meeting virtually, outside or coming back to church. Research has shown that those who gathered during the pandemic were less implicated by mental health ails during this time.
* Find a hobby or activity that you can gather some acquaintances around and find a mutually convenient time to get together online. Learning a new skill or reconnecting with an activity you previously enjoyed is a great way to deepen relationships and challenge your brain in a new way that will build new neural pathways and help grow relationships as well.
* God has provided methods for us to continue to sharpen each other. Reach out to a friend with an encouraging word, write a Scripture on your mirror or sticky note to remind yourself of who you are in Christ and let people know when you are having a difficult time and how they can pray and encourage you (Proverbs 27:17 “As iron sharpens iron, so one person sharpens another.”)
* Most importantly, look at yourself from God’s point of view. Study scriptures that affirm your identity in Christ. Galatians 2:20, 2 Corinthians 5:17, Ephesians 2:6
* Specific Scriptures addressing loneliness: Psalms 145:18-19; Deuteronomy 31:6; Matthew 11:28-30; Isaiah 41:10; Isaiah 43:2; I Peter 5:7; Philippians 4:6-7

Loneliness is a challenge that is affecting everyone in some way at this time. If you or a loved one has experienced loneliness and need to talk to someone, or if you have more questions about how loneliness is impacting you, please do not hesitate to contact us at the Hyde Park Counseling Center.

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