

COPING WITH LONELINESS

Many of us are unprepared for the feelings of loneliness that we are experiencing now, with isolation in our homes and social distancing. Some are scared about the emergence of these feelings. We might have felt lonely before, moving to a new city, changing schools, or going through a divorce. But we did not necessarily cope well, and we have not acquired sufficient skills to deal with these situations and the feelings they generate.

The feeling of loneliness is totally normal. I will underline this: totally normal and expected. We are social beings and we have a sociobiological need to be with others. That social need is so powerful that solitary confinement is considered psychological torture that has been shown to have long term deleterious effects.

We are also experiencing anxiety and stress as this Corona Virus situation is bringing losses of various kinds and many uncertainties about the future. Normally, at times of stress many of us seek and receive comfort in being with others, and here we cannot avail ourselves to the comfort that others bring us.

So how do we cope?

I will suggest a three pronged approach. One, expanding the ways we connect with people, two, changing our aloneness into “creative solitude”, and three, become familiar with the buddhist concepts of becoming at ease with aloneness. The goal would be to balance two or three of these approaches. By doing so, you will develop your capacity and coping skills to deal with loneliness not just for this period of life, but for the future as well.

Expanding the ways we connect with people

We are so lucky with the technology that allows us to connect when we are not physically together. Can we be grateful for this for a moment? Of course, not everybody does, especially the elderly. But most have at least a phone. So how about taking initiative in connecting via these technologies to more people? Old friends that you lost touch with, relatives you had fights with, etc. If you are shy or introverted, this will take more effort. But this is your opportunity to develop. Most people will be happy to hear from you and the social interaction will be rewarded for both.

When you talk to people, express more warmth and closeness with your language and voice. Say: “I miss you”, “Good to hear your voice”, “here is a virtual hug for you”. “let’s send each other photos of ourselves at home with our uncut hair and comfy clothes, or making funny gestures”?

Some other ideas: reach out to neighbors, even if you do not know them well, and try to schedule time to sit outside and chat.

On the website, I have link to join and chat with people all over the world via a quarantine chat room.

If you are a reader, I put a link to an online book club.

Then there is online gaming. Young people know all about it and how to socialize by playing games. Older folks might be less familiar. But online gaming, particularly with multiple players can and does lead to socializing and friendships. Some of the games attract more of the older crowd. It is a very good way to stay involved and in touch with grandkids. They will tell you which games they like.

Those different measures should get you some social connection and comfort. But there is another powerful measure, and that is:
Convert your need to receive socially to find a way to give socially.

In general, depression and anxiety are linked to a state of self focus, a preoccupation with ourselves. But when we focus on others, trying to understand them, helping them, and engaging in acts of compassion, we not only help others, we get out of our head, out of our self focus and we feel better. We feel involved and energized, we feel connected, we feel pleasure. Often we also gain perspective and new ways of thinking about our own issues.

So even today with social distancing, there are ways to volunteer and help remotely. I have on the website two links to such activities. You might find additional volunteer activities with groups that you are already familiar with.

The second prong of coping with loneliness is the idea of “Creative Solitude”. Feelings of loneliness come up when the state of aloneness is imposed on us. In contrast, solitude is a state that we sometimes seek by choice. Think of creative artists. They have to be solitary, with their canvasses or their writing materials so they can get into their imagination and create.

So how about you reframe this imposed isolation to “what would I do if I was selecting solitude?” What would my “creative solitude” look like? What projects can I work on? What skills can I acquire or sharpen? Aren't we lucky that via the internet we can observe and learn just about every skill? Wouldn't you feel a sense of accomplishment if you improve your skill in a second language, make an art project, develop new hobbies? You do not

achieve these by socializing. You achieve these by putting time in “creative solitude”

The third prong of coping with loneliness comes from buddhist ideas of separating yourself from the social world temporarily for the purpose of meditation, mindfulness and reflection. On my page you will find a link to Stephen Batchelor who has written a lot about the subject having studied and taught it for decades. He explains the rewards of learning to be alone peacefully, at home and at ease with aloneness. To do so, you will have to learn some basic techniques of meditation. You can easily find them on the internet. You will have to set some time to practice these techniques daily. They will lead you to self-reflection and to getting to know yourself better. This in turn leads to better self acceptance and be more at ease with all aspects of who you are. When you connect with people again you will bring a more authentic self to others and also you will be far less reactive to others. As such, solitude becomes an element of well being. Stephen Batchelor calls this process “the art of being alone with oneself”, “the art of solitude”.

In summary, while isolation and social distancing is being imposed on us, we can mitigate the feelings of loneliness by these three approaches. If we take initiative with these approaches we can grow from them. We can develop and grow in ways that will serve us in the future. Churchill famously said during WWII: “Don’t waste a good crisis”. Can this apply to us here as well?