Simple Cures for Loneliness

The most recent US data studied by John Cacioppo, a social neuroscientist at the University of Chicago, found that almost a quarter of people today are plagued by frequent loneliness, regardless of gender, race, or education levels. A 2010 AARP survey found that of the people age 45 and up who participated in their study, 35 percent reported chronic loneliness, compared with 20 percent reported 10 years ago. Loneliness clearly is on the rise.

This disturbing trend reflects the fact that increasing numbers of people are living alone, as well as reflecting the decrease in people’s joining groups and organizations that in the past fostered a sense of community. Robert Putnam, PhD, a professor at Harvard and author of Bowling Alone (2001), blames this on the long-term decline in Americans’ civic engagement. Baby boomers and those younger have been less likely to join churches or other groups that supported feelings of belonging to something meaningful. The fact that a person has hundreds — if not thousands — of “friends” on Facebook may make loneliness worse, because we seem to need to be in the presence of each other’s bodies.

The costs of this isolation are linked to serious health problems, such as depression, alcohol abuse, sleep disorders, chronic pain, anxiety, and even dementia and Alzheimer’s. The World Health Organization has rated loneliness as a higher risk to health than smoking and as great a risk as obesity. Lonely people’s immune systems become compromised, increasing their risk of health problems, and their feelings of discouragement affect their willingness to practice good self-care.

Despite this epidemic, there is a positive correlation between spirituality and lower reports of loneliness. In a study by Jacqueline Olds, MD, people who identify as “very religious or spiritual” report half the degree of loneliness than people who identify as “not religious at all.” People who attend religious or spiritual services once a month or more reported the lowest incidences of loneliness of all.

There is also a correlation between low reports of loneliness among people who donate their time to charities and other nonprofits. Volunteers who work together toward a common goal of helping others often develop meaningful relationships with each other.

Research indicates that the best prescription for preventing loneliness is simple: meet with others on a regular basis, join and become active in groups, volunteer for causes you believe in, and put into action your understanding that we are all in this together.

— Catherine Auman, MFT