

Impact of Isolation

Isolation can just as easily affect people on the move, such as the drivers of the 3.5 million freight vehicles registered in Australia. Studies cite social isolation as a recurring theme and a cause of mental health problems and dysfunctional family relationships for truck drivers.

Recent studies have noted that loneliness can impact how our immune system functions, damage sleep quality, and put us at risk of heart disease. A study from last year argued that loneliness “significantly increase[s] risk for premature mortality,” more so than other health factors.

Depression, stress, lack of motivation and eventually burnout are all possible consequences of isolation. Other effects include experiencing fears of missing out on crucial events or decisions being made by others elsewhere – colloquially known as the feeling of out of sight, out of mind.

The impact of isolation in health has been compared to the reduction in lifespan similar to that caused by smoking 15 cigarettes a day. If the sit-to-stand desk was the response to the “sitting is the new smoking” motto, co-working is the response to isolation.

Things you can do:

Acknowledge and understand it

John Cacioppo, the Tiffany and Margaret Blake Distinguished Service Professor at the University of Chicago, IL, has specialized in loneliness, why we may experience it, how it can affect us, and what we can do to cope with it.

Denial, Prof. Cacioppo argues, does nothing but exacerbate feelings of loneliness and may lead to counterproductive strategies, such as seeking further isolation. Thus, the first step toward fighting the negative impact of this emotional state is to **recognize that what we’re feeling is loneliness**.

“Second,” he continues, “**understand what [loneliness] does to your brain, to your body, to your behaviour.**” “It’s dangerous, as a member of a social species, to feel isolated, and our brain snaps into self-preservation mode. That brings with it some unwanted and unknown effects on our thoughts and our actions toward others.” Prof. John Cacioppo

Once we acknowledge our feelings and understand that they can seriously affect our mental and physical health, as well as our behaviour, Prof. Cacioppo advises us to **respond to our sense of loneliness by forming and strengthening connections**.

“One can promote intimate connections by developing [the relationship with] one individual who’s trusted, in whom you can confide and who can confide in you,” he explains. “You can promote relational connectedness by simply sharing good times with friends and family” without any distractions.

Finally, “[C]ollective connectedness can be promoted by becoming a part of something bigger than yourselves,” so why not “consider volunteering for something that you enjoy”?



References: <https://www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/320534.php>, <https://theconversation.com/the-benefits-and-pitfalls-of-working-in-isolation-105350>



Lay off social media

Social media may be the first solution that comes to mind when we're lonely; it seems to be a quick and easy fix. However, many studies have shown that our online networks, although they may offer an illusion of connectedness, actually make us even lonelier and more segregated.

When we reach out to others, he suggests that we send out positive rather than negative messages, as well as set out clear time-frames for the social event.

For instance, sending something such as, "I miss you, why don't we catch up over coffee next Sunday?" is more likely to be effective than, "Hey, I don't even know if we're friends anymore."

Another reason why face-to-face contact is preferable to online contact is simply because humans need physical touch in order to feel comforted and connected, according to Helena Backlund Wasling, of State University of New York Upstate Medical University in Syracuse.

Of course, you shouldn't go about randomly touching strangers on the street, but holding a parent's or child's hand, or hugging a friend, could do wonders for our mental health; touch is also a tool for communication, sending messages about our emotional states.

A pet may help

When human contact is not available, it may be useful to enjoy the presence of a furry friend, some studies suggest.

A study conducted last year discovered that owning a dog can help to reduce the risk of premature death, especially among people who live on their own, who happen to be the group most at risk of experiencing debilitating loneliness.

Previous research has also found that pet owners may have better social and communication skills and engage more in community activities.

Animals can be great conversation starters, and caring for a pet — by taking it out for a walk, or to the vet — can discourage sedentarism, as well as provide an opportunity to meet new people.

If a larger animal, such as a dog or a cat, seems to be too much of a hassle or too expensive, why not consider a tiny, mostly fuss-free, and much cheaper alternative, such as fish, snails, or insects?

A 2016 study revealed that older adults who were offered crickets to look after as pets became less depressed and had

improved cognitive functioning within 8 weeks from the start of the experiment.

Or, you could volunteer at an animal shelter, or offer to look after friends' and acquaintances' pets when they're off on holiday, in order to enjoy the same benefits and improve your social relationships.

Rewrite the story or look at how you think about it

If you can't escape being alone and that makes you feel lonely, then try turning that loneliness into solitude, and use it to your own advantage. When you're stuck on your own, why not turn that into an opportunity for some "me time," so you can get to know yourself better, de-stress, and develop new, or old skills?

One study, co-authored by clinical psychologist Ami Rokach, puts forward that "acceptance and reflection" are one way of turning the negative impact of loneliness into a more positive attitude.

The authors define this approach as "using the opportunity of being by oneself and becoming aware of one's fears, wishes, and needs as the most salient means of coping with loneliness."

Rokach and his co-author explain that, when we learn to welcome solitude and use it to our own advantage, we can avoid loneliness and its negative effects.

"The results of the present study suggest that solitude (i.e., welcomed aloneness as opposed to loneliness) can aid in coping effectively with the pain of loneliness in that solitude stops attempts to deny loneliness, thereby promoting its acceptance as an existential and, at times, unavoidable human condition."

In Addressing Loneliness, researchers from Tel Aviv University in Israel additionally suggest that mindfulness meditation may be useful in this context, as it "may reduce the subjective feeling of loneliness by reducing maladaptive cognitive functions."

So, if you're alone and loneliness strikes, it might be a good idea to make yourself a cup of tea, put on some relaxing meditation music, and enjoy the opportunity of making friends with yourself first of all.

"Start thinking of solitude as a good thing. Make room for it," encourages Turkle in her TED talk, suggesting that learning to be comfortable with just ourselves might help us to break through loneliness and improve our relationships with others.

