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Strategies to Overcome Loneliness UVA FEAP

TRANSCRIPT

I believe that everyone experiences loneliness at times in their life, and it has a powerful impact on us. It impacts our neurological state, our physical state, and goes way back to our evolution. It is connected with our survival, because we are more likely to survive with others than by ourselves. So it's deeply rooted in us. When we feel lonely it's painful. It is also prevalent because we have been through, what I am terming, a collective trauma.

And as Mary shared, I am the trauma counselor in this program.

We are very close to the year anniversary of the pandemic, which has profoundly impacted all of us in our day-to-day lives. And through the shutdowns, isolation, the way it's impacted our social lives, our family lives, in so many ways, it's impacted us. Financial systems, school systems, healthcare systems—it's the ripple effect all around the world. We have been slammed by this.

That, along with the social and political unrest, and the images that we've seen—the impact that has had on us. We have had a lot of trauma. And from these experiences, I believe that has had a very natural side effect of loneliness. There has been a significant increase in people reporting experiencing loneliness all around the world.

So today we're going to look into your definition of what loneliness is. We're going to understand it more thoroughly, and then we're going to look into ways to strategize how to deal with it, how to overcome it, and practices you can do. And whether you're here because you're experiencing loneliness yourself, or you're concerned about a loved one, there's going to be a lot here today. So, here we go.

I like to begin with this quote: "I am too alone in the world and not alone enough to make every moment holy." I like it because it has the term "alone" in it. And when I first started looking into research about loneliness, "alone" was actually included as a part of the definition of "lonely." Which is interesting because the reality is, we can be alone and not feel lonely. And we can also be in a crowded room or a full house and feel lonely. So "alone" is not necessarily directly aligned with loneliness.

And at the same time, it's very important, as we'll delve into later, how you deal with your experience of being alone has a big impact on how you potentially counter the feeling of loneliness.

So here's the definition we're going to use today, and I got this from Julianne Holt-Lunstad She's done a lot of research about loneliness and has collected a lot of existing research about loneliness and is a source of incredible information collectively.

So this definition is, "Loneliness is when a person is experiencing a discrepancy between the actual and desired level of social connections in their life." So it's helpful to think about, "What does loneliness look like?"

There are stereotypical images of what it looks like when someone is lonely. And what's helpful to recognize is, it's not necessarily what that image is, of someone living alone in their home, or someone in the corner of a room in a social gathering. It can look like someone that just feels like if they disappear, no one would even notice. Or someone that feels like they're all on their own—it's just so heavy. There's no time for any enjoyment or pleasure. That feels very lonely. Or someone that experiences, "I have a wonderful spouse and family. Why do I experience—there's just a huge void in my life." That is experiencing loneliness.

One of the elements of research that I found profoundly helpful to understand is that there are three dimensions of loneliness, based on three types of relationships which we have naturally in our life, and need. And if there's a lack of any of these types of relationships, it can invoke a sense of loneliness.

The first relationship type is that of an intimate relationship. And this is with a confidant or intimate partner, one with whom you share trust and vulnerability. And this can be someone who is a spouse, significant other, or it can be a very close friend. When one is an adolescent, it can be a parent, or a sibling, or very best friend.

The next is relational or social relationship. This is a friendship-based relationship or social connection. And this is often groups of people. It can be sports groups, a few people that you get together with at the gym, it can be your work group. It can be peer groups, in schools for adolescents and kids, it can be neighborhood people that you walk with, a few people. It can be just a couple of people, it can be a group of people. But it's again, socially connected and often people that you see on a regular ongoing basis.

The third is the collective relationship, and this is community or network based.

So we're going to tap into now opening up the door to a poll. And I'd like you guys—it's all done anonymously—I'd like you guys to think about if you can identify with one or more of these arenas and if what you're feeling is a void or sense of loneliness. And if you could tap into identifying and registering which ones you feel a lack or a sense of loneliness I would much appreciate it.

Very interesting. So, this is fascinating. I did this workshop a couple weeks ago, and the statistics are very similar in that an intimate relationship—last time it was 32%—also identified with intimate relationship loneliness. So very interesting, that was completely aligned with the last group.

Last time, the relational social was up quite a bit more. I believe it was 68%, and the collective relationship was a little bit lower. I believe it was 58%, but pretty close. So this is fairly consistent. I find it very significant, that over 50% in the relational and the collective.

I'd like you guys to take this information as directive. Because as we tap into areas and ideas of where you can help yourself moving forward, be mindful of things that you can invest in. If it is in regards to intimate relationship, thinking about someone that you're close to where you can intensify that relationship, and invite someone that you're close to to be a closer friend or confidant. And if you don't have someone, again, looking into how you could open up that door somehow.

In regards to relational and social relationship. Many people are obviously feeling this. The doors have been closed socially, these opportunities. The gyms are closed, the restaurants are closed, this makes a lot of sense. This is a circumstantially reduced scenario, but again, how can this be opened? This is an understandable void, and how can you begin to work on expanding that?

Also, the collective. This is so understandable. Socially, people are concerned about the safety issues inhibited, and a little bit lost. And there's a lot of things that can be done to expand or reconnect with community, and sense of country. And these are all very important things that can be done moving forward.

So thank you so much for sharing, and again, this is this is something you are not alone with. This is very interesting, how it's very much like the last time.

So before the pandemic, I did this talk about loneliness. And what was emphasized then were some other issues. Prior to the pandemic there was a very slow, gradual increase in loneliness that was being observed. And what had been identified was some pre-existing elements of changes, socially, that were having in influence, such as forms of communication, social norms, and social media.

So texting is our number one form of communication. It is also the most likely form of communication for there to be miscommunication, and conflict to arise. It is very limited, it's the number one form in which it's used.

Social norms have also changed. So between Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, all of these forms of communication, there's been a change in the way people communicate. People have become much more aggressive and less cordial. I know a number of people who have retracted from some forms of social connection because they've been deeply wounded by comments made that seemed very assaultive or hurtful.

And of course, social media is bombarding people with upsetting, disturbing images, fear-inducing images. And all of these elements have contributed to people becoming more isolated, more withdrawn, and feeling more vulnerable.

Since the pandemic, this is a very interesting view of just general mental health issues. And this is a comparison from 2019 to April/June of 2020. So this is fairly early into the pandemic. It's a very large population.

And what it generally shows is people were identifying and self-reporting 31% increase in people identifying feeling depressed or anxious, 26% increase of people identifying feeling trauma or stress, 13% identified substance abuse, and 11% reporting seriously considering suicide. So this is the general mental health issue.

Now with loneliness, significantly on the rise. Two particular populations had consistent over 50 percent reports of people saying that they were suffering from loneliness. And that is the adolescent and young adult population, and the elderly. 65 percent, in this particular survey that I used, 65% saying that they were suffering loneliness. And the adolescents and the elderly, 56%. This is significant, this is more than 50% of the population and I'm hearing this from people that I work with. Great concern of our youth and our elderly populations.

So getting on to the impact, the experience that loneliness has on us. Neurologically, when we experience loneliness, it literally lights up in the pain center in our brain. It hurts to feel it. And as I mentioned earlier, evolutionary wise, we know that we're more likely to survive for the tribe than alone.

And interestingly, the University of Oxford discovered in 2011, through anthropological work with Suzanne Schultz, that they were looking at evidence that over 52 million years ago from apes and monkeys, way back that they originally thought were living in pairs—they were already living in groups. So it goes way back. And again, in earlier human development, group gathering and group survival was very much, it's very much etched in us to be with others.

One of the things that's very interesting, however, is that if we are estranged from, if we are isolated from group, there is a very interesting paradox that happens neurologically. And that is that we become hyper vigilant to others. It's sort of a protected mode. We become a little more suspicious. And one of the things that was identified by Stephanie Cacioppo, if I pronounced that correctly, from the University of Chicago, is that people who identify feeling lonely—the lonely brains—detected social threats twice as fast as general population. And so when someone is experiencing prolonged loneliness, they become hyper vigilant, and develop what can be experienced as a threat perception. And that can invoke further loneliness. And that can also then be joined with a sort of increased self-focus. And those two elements can sort of fuel and feed further loneliness and isolation.

So I want to emphasize that it is something that can fuel itself, and it can become a chronic state of experience. So it's very important, you know, as we're processing this, to recognize that it's been a year long that we've been experiencing this pandemic and more isolation and it's going to be really important to counter this and not let this become a chronic state.

Another thing that's very helpful to remember is that the physical effects are just as negative as obesity or smoking. As well as, this was a powerful research showing that social isolation can even cause shrinkage of the brain. This was done with a group in Antarctica over a 14 month span where they did MRIs pre and post that time. And they literally displayed a shrinking of the brain size with that amount of time.

So again, it has a big impact on us. When we are socially isolated, there can be an increase in blood pressure, circulating stress hormones, and inflammation in the body. And all of these combined can promote one to have long-term health problems. And if there is a pre-existing health problem, that can exacerbate what already exists.

Bottom line is, it's not good for us in so many ways. And again, very worth countering and being mindful of. And mindfulness is a profound tool and skill to use to counter it.

So we're going to shift now to understanding how this can naturally happen with circumstances that invoke it, as well as natural reactions that happen in response to it. And now we're going to work on how to stop the pattern and overcome it. The way we're going to approach it is thinking about what you can do by yourself, what you can do with others, and then just general overall life skills that you can integrate and tap into and interweave with this awareness.

In relation to what you can do by yourself, the most important and significant impact you can have is to establish a new relationship with yourself in relation to how you experience time alone, and time with other people. Being grateful is a very significant key factor in this. It's profoundly impactful in how you experience both of those times in life. And how we define things is how we experience them. That is a game changer of a concept. I use that statement in counseling over and over again. And one of the ways I like to sort of visualize this is, envisioning people who have a beautiful castle or mansion up on top of the hill.

Some people define that as being very fortunate, and they are grateful and they delight in it, and they're generous and happy. And other people define it as not enough, and they're suspicious and miserable, and greedy, and unhappy. It's just it's how one defines it, and it can be heavenly, or it can be miserable. So very important to recognize that the very definition of something is how it is experienced.

So we're going to delve into thinking a lot about what time alone means.

I love this quote, "Every particle of creation sings its own song of what is and what is not. Hearing what is can make you wise; hearing what is not can drive you mad." So as I begin to talk about specific ideas, I'm going to throw out a lot of potential things that you can do. Take what you like, leave the rest behind. Some are for people who have creative imaginations, some are very pragmatic, some are physically oriented, some are interpersonally related, some are very personal. Again, take as much as you want, expand them, individualize them, or leave them alone. It matters not, but work with what's available and what isn't your cup of tea you do not have to taste.

So in regard to time alone. Something that can be very helpful is to learn to appreciate some of the positives of time alone. A lot of people counseling-wise that feel sensitivity to time alone are people that have had others in their lives and are experiencing aloneness in a new way, whether that be the death of a loved one, divorce, or kids off to college. And what can be helpful is to learn to really hone in on some of the ease with which alone can be pleasurable. Such as being able to pick out whatever it is you want for dinner, and whatever it is you want to watch, and even integrating new ways of decorating homes. Situating things on the table and that kind of stuff. So enjoying and personalizing how you live your life, and really appreciating that can be a way to expand enjoyment of alone time.

Some of the other ways can be inviting some new ways of learning what it is to experience alone time. I like to think countering alone with the A's can be a fun way. One of those can be inviting tapping into animal totems. There's a book by Ted Andrews called *Animal Speak*, and he taps into birds and animal totems. This can be fun for people who like to connect with animals out in nature. If you notice a cardinal passes your window in the morning, and you notice one on the way going home in the afternoon, it might be fun to look up what cardinals represent. That can be sort of a way to just tap into a different element of connecting with nature and other symbolism.

There's also a great book by Caroline Myss called *Sacred Contracts*. She has a lot of archetype information. And that's a really fun book about the myths and stories throughout books and history. And again, this can be alone time of learning about archetypes within yourself and other people, and sort of a creative expression. You can find yourself noticing other people. Who's the warrior, who's the hero, who's the jokester. And again, identifying yourself. Who's the maternal nurturing one, who's the healer, and just inviting new ways of viewing things and seeing things.

Dreams are fun also. Another good book by Ted Andrews, "*Looking into Dreams*." Inviting creative ways of experiencing some of your time alone can be good.

Another fun thing is archangels. I know a lot of people who've had times of feeling very fear-based in alone time. Sometimes envisioning protection can be interesting to look into some of that.

And then another one is ancestors. That can be a really nice connection, is connecting with loved ones that have passed and even the sense of just history of ancestors. I share the story sometimes of my history with going to Oaxaca and learning from a shaman there. Their belief is our ancestors are always with us, behind us. And there's actually an image of that in the movie *Coco* as well as the movie *Mulan*. That's another culture that envisions the ancestors with us. And she expressed that they're watching over us always, and supporting us through all the hardship we have to go through. And they know our good intentions and how hard life is on Earth, and just feeling their presence can be very encouraging and supportive when we feel very alone all by ourselves. And knowing that any time we keep a family line tradition going that they're proud of, our ancestors are so pleased. As well as any time that we stop something that's been in a family line that's not a healthy habit that has harmed other family members, and we stop it, they're especially pleased with us. I think that's a beautiful image and concept to think about.

So those are just a couple of, again, when feeling very very alone and needing some forms of comfort in creative imagination kind of ways. Those are some extensions and ways. And then finding appreciation and time with others. There are many ways, and I'll go into other extensions of that. But everything from greetings with people, to honing in more specifically every encounter. And just really relishing in what it's like to make a stranger smile. And setting that kind of goal can be very powerful.

So gratitude, as noted before, goes a long, long way. And mindfulness is a very powerful tool. There are some wonderful resources available as apps. Many people know of Headspace, that's one free and available on phones. Another one is Relaxed Melodies, in which you can select sounds like running water, or rain on rooftops, or violins, or crickets, whatever sounds you like, and set a timer on it and just play that and again, invite relaxation and introducing those kinds of techniques.

And inviting calming to also be a welcoming of you expanding a sense of, "This is my experience now, and I want to welcome appreciation with this time." Whether it be me alone in my home, appreciating my bed and my pillow, and whether you're in your home alone or with your family, and extending that out to people in the home. Extending that out to people in the neighborhood. Extending it out to people in my community. Extending it out to people in my nation and extending it out to people in the whole world. And again, finding ways to connect and expand and invite a new way of countering loneliness.

Another nice ongoing practice for mindfulness—it's very very simple—is in the very beginning and the very close of your day. So the beginning of the day, when you first wake up, checking in with yourself and inquiring, "How do I feel? Do I feel rested? Am I still tired?" And if you feel tired, seeing if there's sometime in the day when you can maybe have a hot tea in the afternoon. You can just close your eyes for 10 minutes. And offering that to yourself, and then setting a goal.

"I want to make a connection to counter this sense of loneliness today."

"I'm going to reach out to a friend i haven't reached out to in a while."

"I'm going to buy a card and mail it to someone."

"I'm going to go to a coffee shop and I'm going to make a comment and see if I can make someone smile."

Just setting goals like that to try and overcome the sense of loneliness. And then at the end of the day, see if you can connect with that goal. And if you made it, great. If you didn't, no judgment, no hardship allowed. Just that information.

"Wasn't so easy to make that today, I'll try again tomorrow."

But again, "What can I be grateful for? I'm looking for one or two things."

So we're going to tap into now and open up chat about things that you can identify as ways that you can welcome gratitude and mindfulness into your practice. So feel free to start putting some of that out there.

Excellent. Take coffee to co-workers, fabulous idea. Making something beautiful and giving it to someone. Excellent, excellent.

Ah, very good. Calling people that are important to us and not just texting. Helping out an elderly neighbor, beautiful. Beautiful ideas, these are fabulous.

And something that's so wonderful is when we start doing these things, they just expand. The ripple effect is fabulous.

Gratitude journal, excellent. Volunteering to relieve depression and anxiety. Sending notes to someone you're thinking of. Voluntariness, the ideas are fabulous. Baking, cooking, wonderful, wonderful. Walks, inviting friends, countryside, all of these things are just fabulous. Sunshine.

The most wonderful thing is, it is contagious, and it feeds itself.

There's been more than one "identifying the elderly." They are in such need.

My dearest friend from graduate school works specifically with the elderly population, and she expressed that they, who have been through two world wars and the Great Depression—many of them, if not all of them, expressed to her that this is a time like they have never seen. And they are so devastated by it. So reaching out to them is very, very powerful.

And on that note, as I'll get to, there have been some beautiful other ways.

One of my clients was expressing she was missing her grandmother. And what they set up was Thursday night poetry night. Because this client is a college student, and her grandmother was a former English teacher. So Thursday night, she would call her and read poetry. And what unfolded was, the grandmother began dressing up and putting lipstick on. And my client began lighting candles and reading poetry to her. And then the grandmother began sharing stories, and stories that she would not have otherwise heard. And so they just both love Thursday night.

So there are just beautiful ways things can expand and turn into connections of real intimacy and ways of connecting that would not have been there otherwise. Again, welcoming creativity.

And thank you guys for sharing beautiful ideas.

On that note, I want to share this really beautiful element of Julianne's research. She did this research project in which she had people working on a stress inducing task, and had them hooked up to measure their blood pressure, heart rate, sweat, stress indicators. And prior to doing this task, she had all these questions. What she was trying to find out is, did they perceive that they had a good support system? It was sort of hidden within the question, so they didn't really know what she was looking to see.

What the results showed, is that people that believe they have a good support system did not show indications of stress while performing these stress-inducing tasks in comparison to those that did not identify as having a good support system. So that just shows the impact it has when we assess that we have a good support system.

Another way of just personalizing and connecting with others is to be aware of your greeting. Nowadays, we can't even tell when we're saying hello to people because we don't hear hello. We don't see if someone's smiling So I really encourage you to recognize how you're greeting people.

I love this reference: "I see you!" "I am here!" It is specifically making reference to the bushmen in Africa. This is how they greet each other. If they hear a brother or sister coming up from the bushes, they will call out, "I see you!" And the response is, "I am here!"

And it's just such a beautiful welcoming to someone they don't even know.

I was recently in Roanoke—not a familiar town to me—and I found myself, while working on this workshop, being very mindful of my greetings and just inviting an awareness of all the different ways we can greet people in all the different cultural ways. Even if we have limitations, being aware of bowing, and nodding, and hand signals. People are doing the elbow, but that's with someone you know. Even people you don't know. Being aware of how you greet people.

In one of my friend's neighborhoods there's this elderly couple that walks around. And if a car goes by, they're like "Hey!" They just wave like crazy. It's so overwhelming, but you can't help but wave back. You cannot help it.

So again, being mindful of that and the new ways to connect with existing loved ones, like the grandmother and the granddaughter that I shared. I also know of family members that are connecting with Friday night and Italian night, and they have Zoom dinners together. And everybody cooks their favorite Italian dinner and again, can light candles, put on music, and connect. I know of book groups that have started back up. There's so many ways of connecting with existing loved ones. Just being creative, finding ways.

And also reaching out to new ways of connecting with people. There are instructors out there that teach guitar, or knitting, that are longing for students. And there are classes that you can take. So thinking about where you might have an interest, how you can connect with people. Looking into that is a great way to expand not only what you can do while by yourself, like playing guitar, knitting, but also connect with a group.

This is a connection from thevirginpulse.com, which is a great resource listing many wonderful ways to combat loneliness. You can connect there, share great ideas with other people, connect with people.

The other element that I hadn't mentioned prior is physical activity. It's wonderful to combat loneliness. Exercise and so powerful—finding a neighbor, finding a friend that you can walk with. Connecting with other exercises. I know a number of people have again found a Zoom instructor for doing personal training in their home. Wonderful ways to connect with people and to counter some of the natural neurological and physical impacts of loneliness.

Also fighting monotony. It's great to change things. Rearrange your den, clean out your pantry, paint rooms. All of those kind of things can be great changes. Investing in the relationships you have, finding new ways of connecting, expanding connections, establishing work groups or clubs. All of these are great ideas. I believe some of these I've already delved into.

Again, seeking that local involvement is a very powerful thing now for that latter group and community connection. That can be very, very powerful.

Another couple of wonderful things are connecting with nature. Just going outside is very very healing for us. There's all kinds of research that shows just breathing outside, connecting with nature, is very healing, calming, and good for us. We are about to head into spring. As Matt acknowledged, it's beautiful outside. And with pets! It is no coincidence that shelters all around our country are empty. People are connecting and adopting animals and they are such beautiful examples of unconditional love and wonderful ways to feel companionship, and have that kind of physical touch that is also so important to us.

As well as connecting spiritually, whatever that may be for you. I often think that awareness of our well-being in the four quadrants: mind, body, emotions, and spirituality. Which can be your values, your ethics. Those are really helpful to integrate in your sense of your overall well-being. And just be aware of the different practices you have, and how that's serving you, and the ways in which it can tap into different arenas of how you experience life.

One of the great examples I love to use is, there's a fabulous walk that's right by the river that I love to go to, because from the start of it, all along the river I'm going against the currents. And I like to think of that as washing away all the stress. It's like a cleansing, and I find that to be emotionally and spiritually washing—while it's also physically exercising. And then I turn around at the end and I go with the current. And it's very much aligned. So that's one of those exercises that's both physically, emotionally, mentally, and spiritually of service to me.

So when you think about what you're going to try and integrate, think about the different dimensions in which it serves you. And when you feel that, when you feel the ways in which it's serving you, it will just intensify the benefits.

So we've got a few moments open, and I'd love to throw out time for questions.

If you recognize the hypervigilance in someone else, can you help them? Being there to listen, I think, is sufficient. That is very helpful. The hyper vigilance isn't something that people choose to do. It's an automatic natural reaction. And so being present with them is very helpful. Explaining that, in a sense, that this is a normal reaction. This is understandable. And inviting them to practice calming techniques could also be helpful. I mean, as funny as it sounds, I don't know how close you are with this person. But even just reaching out and touching their hand. Physical contact that's safe to do.

Is it proven loneliness can cause physical pain?

Absolutely. But all mental health, all emotional challenges, can easily manifest in a somatic way. That's not uncommon at all. It's not uncommon that we don't even pay attention to some of our stress until it becomes somatic.

Many people know where stress aligns in their body. In a lot of people it's the shoulders, back, for some people's GI and stomach. And loneliness, interestingly, is very common within the chest around the heart. It can also be in the throat. It can be headaches. It's not uncommon. Not for everyone, but for many.

Again, it's an individualized experience. So being attentive to yourself and listening to it and honoring it, and then inviting ways that honor that and meet that need. Where the physical pain is, tending to that as well as countering the element of loneliness in some of the ways that we've

discussed. And really looking into where that void is in your relationships, and trying to meet those relationship needs. Again, aligning what your desires are with the social connections and what the actual element is very helpful for that.

So that's a really tough one, our adolescents and young adults are having such a difficult time. It absolutely breaks my heart. I wish I had an answer to that. I think what is very important right now is to validate and affirm that this is so difficult, what they're going through. Something that's helpful to remember is at that stage of development, what's most important to them is being with their peers. And that is really not available to them in a way that is natural for them.

So they have a real lack of their needs being met, and physical contact with peers, social connection, it's not there. If you remember, you know, at 16, 17, 18, 19, you want to just be with your friends and close to them and that's just not available like it has been before. So they're really at a loss. And so validating that, finding ways that they can safely connect with a safe support pod group of friends can be really really helpful, and providing them with a resource to process it and find ways to reinforce that they'll make it through this and that it's temporary. Things are getting better, and emphasizing safe choices and their well-being. And adapting to how things are now.

So we've come to a close, time-wise. Thank you all so much again for attending, and take good care. This too, shall pass—and be sure to connect. We will make it through this, and we are in this together. We are all one.

Thank you very much, Joyce.