

## A Healthy Minute

### *Loneliness: The Epidemic Inside the Pandemic*

Human beings, by our nature, are social creatures. We were created to be in community with each other. At times of high stress, our instinctive tendency is to reach out to others to find comfort from those closest to us or to offer the same to them. Either action can help us feel better and handle stress more effectively.

Because COVID-19 is spread through person-to-person contact, our usual way of connecting socially in our physical world, has been replaced by the need to conduct our social interactions virtually. For many of us, this feels much less effective and comforting than our primary form of connection; this, in turn, causes our stress levels to rise, leading many of us to feel helpless and/or lonely.

**The Most Vulnerable-** It's not surprising that our society's more 'seasoned citizens' would be the most susceptible age group to this newest epidemic, just as they seem to be to the coronavirus itself. Health officials have been quick to remind us that social distancing should not mean social isolation. But for many in this population, the two often go hand in hand. The ongoing fear of serious illness and possible death from COVID-19 affecting those in their age group can be a driving force to continue their isolation status. Some will likely choose to remain in their homes even as restrictions are lifted. They may be reluctant to venture out even for short walks and still choose to have their groceries and prescriptions delivered. Even among the healthiest and most active, loneliness and social isolation can take a high toll on the elderly. The combination of the two is linked to a higher risk of a variety of physical and mental issues, not the least of which is a marked decline in brain function, Alzheimer's and even earlier death. Research has shown social isolation (occurring outside this current viral pandemic) can lead to increased cases of psychosis, delusions and suicidal behavior.

Even more severely affected appear to be those individuals who reside in care facilities. These residents have not experienced physical interactions with loved ones since March because their facilities were the first to close their doors to anyone from the outside world. Many family members have tried creative visitations through windows or have utilized video chats or Skype to stay as connected as possible. But we are rapidly learning there is no substitution for human touch. We may eventually discover that the social side effects of this pandemic contributed to a higher death rate in this last population than the actual coronavirus itself caused.

**Treatment for COVID-19-Induced Loneliness-**Reach out to those living alone. Stay connected by calling those living alone on a regular basis. Arrange a schedule with your 'callee' that will work for both of you. Perhaps this person is a member of your parish, Bible study, book club, senior center or other social group. Perhaps several of you in your social circle can form a calling team for those folks you know are riding this out alone. Offer to pick up groceries, make a meal, or send a card. Encourage them to reach out to you for any other needs they may have, especially medically.

**Treatment to relieve COVID-19 Induced Stress-**One certainly doesn't have to be living alone to experience an increased amount of stress during these uncertain and rapidly changing times. Establish an intentional plan of care for yourself as well as those for whom you care. Limit your time listening to the news or reading articles related to the pandemic if you find that activity causing more stress for you. Go for a walk, maintaining your 6' social distance from others. Physical activity can reduce stress and improve mental health. Ongoing stress in our bodies will have negative effects if kept up indefinitely. Learning deep breathing or muscle relaxation exercises can help. (There's an app for that!) Many people find meditating or prayer helpful in calming their minds and letting go of stress. Explore the YouVersion Bible app for the reading plan "Pandemic Prayers: Seven-Day Family Prayer Guide" and choose others that offer hope and encouragement as you navigate through these challenging times. In addition, the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) website has a document entitled "NAMI COVID-19 Information & Resources" that can be downloaded or printed off. Many other websites offer similar information on managing stress and other mental health concerns during this current health crisis.