

COPING WITH LONELINESS

Living Alone During the Coronavirus Pandemic

We're all alone at times. Some of us even prefer solitude. But loneliness is different. It's not chosen or comfortable; we don't even have to be alone to feel lonely. Loneliness is the feeling we get when there's a gap between what we have and what we want or need. We're wired to connect with others, making loneliness a daily struggle for many living alone during this pandemic. There's no easy 'fix' for loneliness, but there are ways for us to cope and to connect.

Connecting with others

- › **Know you're not alone with this.** Many of us struggle with feelings of loneliness and don't always know how to reach out for what we need. When loneliness surges, use that as a cue to connect with others who may be feeling it too. Challenge yourself to reach out daily. Making the first move is a courageous way to bring compassion to others and yourself.
- › **Lean into your connection style.** Ask for or initiate what you need – a phone call, video chat, or whatever works best for you. If you'd rather be doing an activity together, think about suggesting a virtual viewing party of a favorite show or movie. Playing video games or board games with friends could be another option.
- › **Share a meal.** If eating out with friends has been a go-to way to connect, plan an online get-together instead. Support your favorite restaurant, if they offer pick up or delivery, and sit down for some virtual conversation. Or you might try a virtual 'bake off' or swapping ideas for a head-to-head taste test of favorite recipes.
- › **Schedule it.** Don't leave it to chance. Plan a regular phone call or virtual meet-up with a friend. Having a weekly, virtual 'game night' with relatives, or a lunch-time check-in with coworkers weaves connection into your day and gives you something to look forward to.
- › **Rethink how you engage with social media.** Passive browsing can leave us feeling dissatisfied and disconnected. Try to put an emphasis on making posts, leaving comments, and being more actively engaged with the content. To truly connect with someone, you have to be willing to share the "real you." Practice opening up in small ways.
- › **Learn a new skill online.** Exploring a new skill or hobby can be a distraction, but also a potential source of social connections. For example, working with a tutor to brush up on a second language or joining virtual version of a club, such as Toastmasters, to build comfort with public speaking.
- › **Mix up your media diet.** When the novelty of bingeing your favorite TV shows wears off, consider looking into other forms of media such as YouTube channels, e-sports, or blogs that focus on topics that intrigue you. As always, use your judgment on the internet, but you might just discover a new interest, or live vicariously through a travel diary recorded halfway around the world. Spending time exploring your interests online can connect you with new communities you didn't know existed.
- › **Don't give up on meeting new people.** Check local dating services, hobby shops, community centers, or other 'meetup' groups to see if they are hosting virtual events where you could meet people.
- › **Spark small connections.** Even brief, distanced in-person interactions can help us feel connected. We might not be able to see a smile under a facemask, but we can still hear it in a voice! Even at a distance, make a point of saying 'hello' to people you pass. You might be the only person who spoke to them that day. A quick chat on the walking path or a friendly wave when you're out getting the mail can make all the difference – for them and for you.

Connecting with yourself

- › **Befriend yourself.** In the stress and disruption of this situation, we can lose sight of how much we have to offer to ourselves. Try to find one thing each day that brings joy, gratitude or a sense of well-being into your life. Write it down on a sticky note and put it somewhere around the house where you will see it every day. Filling your house with these reminders can be comforting.
- › **Do things that you enjoy!** What activities engage your mind and pull you away from worries of daily living and feelings of loneliness? What helps you lose track of time? Permit yourself be distracted and absorbed by hobbies, projects, creative explorations, or even just daydreams.
- › **Think of ways to adapt.** What have been the biggest changes for you during this pandemic? What do you miss in your life? Take ownership to tap into your creativity and find substitutes if you can!
- › **Build new habits.** Have you been telling yourself for months that you really ought to get to bed earlier or maybe get into a fitness routine? Maybe you've thought about journaling or starting a weekly blog. Investing time and energy into establishing healthy and meaningful new habits can bring a renewed sense of fulfillment. This is your opportunity!
- › **Spend time with nature.** Get outdoors if you can, even if it's just to stand in a cool breeze. If possible, try to get moving – stretch, walk, run, bike – and add to this time regularly. If you must stay indoors, take a moment for quiet meditation. Breathe gently and focus on the simple pleasure of a warm sunbeam, a pretty flower, or the fresh air of an open window.
- › **Nurture something.** Caring for others shifts our emotional focus. It doesn't even have to be another person. Cuddling with a pet or tending plants or a garden can help us feel valued and valuable.
- › **Have a mantra** – a repeated phrase you can use to encourage yourself, or even just to validate your basic need to connect with others. “I am loved.” A loving kindness exercise can be another way to attend to your emotional needs and show compassion to yourself. UCLA Mindful Awareness Research Center offers free guided meditations: www.uclahealth.org/marc/mindful-meditations¹
- › **Connect with your emotions, but don't be swept up in them.** Pay attention to your thoughts. Are they good company? If you find yourself having negative, fearful thoughts, it's okay to acknowledge them and then “change the channel.” We can treat these strong emotions as a storm that is moving through, to help ourselves to not get blown away.

Connecting with help

If you're struggling with loneliness, know that you're not alone in this experience. It can feel overwhelming.

You may have difficulty getting out of bed, increased problems with sleep, or struggle with a depressed mood. You may feel unable to concentrate, or have trouble with racing thoughts.

We're all in an abnormal situation, and this can be part of a normal reaction. But if you feel this way most of the time, or it's worse each day, it's important to get help.

You can call your EAP any time 24/7/365. Your call is kept confidential.

National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) Helpline: 1-800-950-6264 offers peer support. Hours may be limited.

¹ Mindfulness Meditations created by Diana Winston for the UCLA Mindful Awareness Research Center (MARC).

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