

Dealing with Loneliness During a Pandemic

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A majority of Americans are forced to stay home due to the coronavirus pandemic, meaning it is time to talk about a little bit about loneliness and how self isolation can hurt out mental health. Therapist Laura Walton, owner of [The Phoenix Center for Grief and Trauma](#), discussing the trauma of loneliness during this pandemic and things we can do to deal with this unique challenge.

What is loneliness? Loneliness is an emotion that arises when emotional, social, or physical needs are not being met. We have a tendency to label loneliness as a bad thing, and thus try to avoid it. But I don't like to label any emotion as good or bad. Emotions are simply natural responses to the way in which we perceive any given situation. In the context of current events, if you are used to interacting with x amount of people per day, and then that number of interactions is greatly reduced, it is completely natural that you might feel lonely. It is not bad. It just is. How might your experience of loneliness be different if you approached it from the perspective of being curious about what exactly you are lonely for and how exactly that loneliness feels, as opposed to immediately labeling the experience of loneliness as bad, and then doing whatever possible to avoid it?"

Can loneliness be considered a form of trauma? Why? Yes. Anything can be considered a form of trauma, dependent on the perspective of the person experiencing it. If you experience loneliness now and don't allow yourself to process through what that loneliness means for you (in other words, if you don't allow yourself to feel the loneliness), it is possible that your current experience could become traumatic to you in the future. On the other side of the coin, if you experienced chronic loneliness or a lack of security as a child, it is possible that today's current events are triggering that traumatic memory. You might see this as "symptoms" such as anxiety, depression, trouble sleeping, change in appetite, behavioral changes, etc.

Do you think that the coronaviruses' affects on social gatherings could pose a unique challenge to some people's emotional health? Why? Yes. As humans, we are wired for connection. As babies, we are literally dependent on our caregivers for our survival, and that need for social connection stays hard wired into our physiology as we grow up. Therefore, if social connections are taken away, it will have an effect on people's emotional well being. It is important to recognize this, and to find some way to maintain some sort of social interaction during this time.

If individuals are unable to connect in person, what are some ways we can fill the emotional void? So far, I have seen a lot of clever ways of staying in contact with others. Many doctors and mental health providers are offering telehealth sessions. I have seen yoga studios offering live streaming of yoga classes. I have heard of virtual book clubs, virtual happy hours, virtual play dates, virtual game nights, virtual TV show watching. We are lucky to have the technology to make it possible to connect with others in many of our typical activities, with just a bit of extra creativity required. However, this time also presents a rare and beautiful opportunity to slow down and quiet down, something we often don't give ourselves the chance to do. It might be interesting to spend a little more time alone, journaling, meditating, or just doing nothing, and allow your nervous system the chance to calm down and restore.

Have you been practicing social distancing? If so how have you dealt with the abrupt end of normal social life? I have. I just transitioned all of my clients to telehealth sessions, and I have limited any tasks outside of my home to grocery shopping, necessary errands, and taking my dog to the dog park. I am a more introverted person, so, so far, this transition has not been that difficult for me. I am sure that will change with time. The biggest challenge for me has been losing a few services that I am dependent on for helping me to reach some longer term goals I have. I am practicing the acceptance around the fact that this is the reality, this reality is out of my control, and my stressing about it does nothing to help my situation or my mental, emotional, and physical health.

How important is exercising in dealing with mental health? I ask this because the closures of gyms has taken away a stress relief outlet for many people – In my opinion, exercise is hugely important in managing mental health. It teaches us so many valuable lessons, including how to prioritize ourselves, how to show up for ourselves, how to ground ourselves, how to listen to our bodies, how to breathe, how to relax with discomfort, etc. On a strictly physical level, it is also a fantastic way to move energy for stress relief. I have seen a lot of gyms and fitness studios offering online classes or structured workouts, renting out equipment, or presenting clients with some creative way to exercise at home. There are also online business and apps that provide clients with workouts right to their homes.