



# HEALTHQUEST

A QUARTERLY NEWSLETTER FOCUSING ON  
MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES AND CONCERNS.

## DEALING WITH LONELINESS

It can come as a sense of emptiness: of feeling disconnected, alone even in a crowd. Often, it's accompanied by sadness, resentment or anxiety. "There are many emotions linked to loneliness. Ironically, it rarely travels alone," observes Warren Shepell counsellor Peter Crawford-Smith.

New situations trigger loneliness: the loss of a partner, a move to a new community, a job promotion or transfer. On the other hand, loneliness can creep in when relationships and situations become repetitive or routine. Boredom and loneliness frequently go hand in hand.

Given the importance that some people attach to being popular or successful, it's not surprising that many find it hard to admit they're lonely, even to themselves. "Loneliness is a part of being human; no one is immune," reminds Smith.

"In many ways, loneliness is a healthy signal. It can stir us to make changes; to begin a process that may increase social contacts; improve relationships and explore activities that offer learning and growth," he explains. "These activities needn't always involve others. We can feel content or connected even when we are alone."

One thing is certain: we cannot wish our way out of loneliness. Nor can we escape it by wishing others would change - either by gossiping about them, or by sedating ourselves with alcohol, frantic activity, and other excesses. Here are some constructive ways to begin deal with loneliness:

- ▲ Slow down to be more attentive to yourself and your surroundings. This can begin by eating more conscientiously, making healthier choices and take time to enjoy your food. It might also mean scheduling regular walks or bike rides and stopping to notice some

interesting shop or garden along the way.

- ▲ Ask yourself: "Am I falling into the trap of all work and no play?" If so, Smith suggests setting goals in the following areas:
  - ▲ Personal well-being (physical/intellectual/spiritual)
  - ▲ Relationships (enhancing existing ones/forming new ones)
  - ▲ Community activities

Some activities may encompass more than one area (such as getting involved in a baseball team with the youth in your community). Smith adds: "The key is to set realistic goals, and time limits (i.e. three months). Don't bit off more that you can chew."

## STIMULATE YOUR SENSE OF CURIOSITY

Pick up a newspaper and look for an interesting event or function. Consider attending as a curious observer rather than with the expectation that it must be fun or the perfect activity for you. See what you can get out of it. Perhaps, rekindle an old hobby by exploring what the new developments are. For example, the hobby of model building has come a long way! Curiosity engages the mind. It encourages us to make connections, and seek answers. Certainly, it can help us strike up interesting conversations!

## SEND THE RIGHT SIGNALS TO PEOPLE

Too often, we send people mixed social messages. How many of us really mean, "Let's get together some time." We make dates, then cancel - "something came up." Sending no messages will present yet another problem - when we wait for others to call us and when they don't, we write them off. "If you want to spend time with people, make the first move," Smith says. Ask someone to join you for lunch or coffee. Then schedule a time and stick to it."

## CONSIDER HONING YOUR SOCIAL SKILLS

For some people, loneliness stems from not knowing the "appropriate" things to do or say socially. If you are concerned about this, check out the local bookstore or library for guides on etiquette, interpersonal relationships, and communicating. One way to perfect your speaking skills is by joining Toastmasters International (a self-help organization with branches in most major Canadian cities).

## FOLLOW YOUR INTERESTS

Enroll in an adult education course, attend antique shows or science fairs or organize an after-work event (such as a car rally or softball game) among your co-workers. Some of the best friendships have been established through contact with other people that you share a common interest.

## REACH OUT AS A VOLUNTEER

Few activities bring such a sense of personal satisfaction and the feeling of being connected, than by providing a useful service for those needing it. There are many possibilities - hospitals, animal shelters, recreation centres or a senior's facility, just to name a few.

## TRY 'RECONNECTING' WITH PEOPLE

This could mean calling, writing or tracking down old friends, former colleagues, and others you have lost touch with. A relationship might flourish on having a meal together once a month, a letter or card several times a year, or a real gab session when one or both of you truly need it!

Carry your connections when you travel. If frequent travel is a source of your loneliness, try turning "Heartbreak Hotel" into a home away from home. "Take a couple of photographs or comforting mementos with you," suggests Smith, "or ask someone to call you at your hotel at an agreed-upon time."

## HOW TO FEEL CONNECTED WHEN YOU'RE ALONE

- ▲ Listen to music or read an uplifting book
- ▲ Take a walk in a park, field or forest
- ▲ Attend a country fair or community event
- ▲ Play with a pet
- ▲ Give your plants some tender loving care
- ▲ Visit a place of worship
- ▲ Browse through a museum, zoo or art gallery
- ▲ Study the night sky or visit a planetarium
- ▲ Trace your family tree

- ▲ Chart your horoscope
- ▲ Call a phone-in radio show; tap into a computer chat line
- ▲ Write a letter to the editor
- ▲ Take a bubble bath
- ▲ Cook your favourite meal

Doing things that get you to feel more "connected" can make all the difference in the world when it comes to dealing with loneliness. You've just read some very good suggestions - many are planned social activities that involve others, like signing up for classes or community events. Some of the suggestions do help with learning how to deal with the time you spend by yourself, as in finding enjoyment pursuing hobbies and interests.

It is difficult to experience loneliness, and all the emotions it comes with. Sometimes, no matter how much a person tries to cope, there is the need to speak with a professional. An EAP counsellor can help you manage and overcome negative emotions that seem to be a part and parcel of loneliness. If it is a matter looking in to what is available, choosing one of the suggestions above or coming up with something more suitable to your tastes, feel free to discuss any and all of these issues with the counsellor.

If you have any questions about this topic, or if you wish to discuss a personal situation you may be experiencing, we invite you to contact your EAP counsellors to arrange a telephone or in-person counselling session.

All contact between you and your counsellor is completely confidential.

**English Service: 1-800-387-4765**  
**French Service: 1-800-361-5676**  
**General Information: 1-888-814-1328**