**Loneliness can be Lethal**

**Connection Connoisseur episode 3**

Since we live in this global socially connected world, how is it possible for anyone to be lonely?  Lonesomeness does not necessitate that a person be socially isolated.  Being lonely means feeling detached from others, yet having the desire for a connection or a relationship.

Medically speaking, the feeling of isolation raises levels of stress hormones in the bloodstream and may play a role in firing up chronic inflammation, a risk factor in heart disease, diabetes, and even some forms of cancer. It has been studied and documented that loneliness has the same impact on mortality as smoking 15 cigarettes a day making it even more dangerous than obesity.  There is massive research to be found that proves relationships can affect your health both for the good and bad.  However, solitude can make you sick!

These symptoms such as exhaustion, weight gain, brain fog, depression, stress and insomnia, as well as disease and premature death, can be the result of too few friendships.   For the most part, we are not lonely because we don’t know people.  We are lonely because the greater part of those ‘friends’ lack depth and the ease and intimacy we crave.

Stay tuned, at the end I will share 6 ideas to help you identify and tackle social isolation and start connecting. Please take a moment now to subscribe to this channel!

The millennial generation has been called the loneliness generation because of tech-savvy communication habits and their lack of physical connection.  A 2018 nationwide survey reported by Texas A&M Health found that nearly half of Americans report feeling alone or left out, and one in four Americans rarely feel as though there are people who really understand them.  Now consider for a moment what those loneliness numbers would look like today, post the 2020 pandemic.  I believe we would be dismayed, if not surprised, that individually we are more isolated as a nation than ever before.

For weeks or sometimes months we were directed to quarantine from anyone outside of our household.  For more than a year we were encouraged to ‘socially distance’ and keep 6 feet away from others.  Many of us were furloughed from work losing our routine of water cooler chit chat and after-work happy hours.  Others were sent home to work remotely for the first time.   We were required to wear masks that made communicating difficult.  The masks, in my observation, also created a disconnection from who we really are.

We would go about our day in *stealth mode* as I like to call it.  What is stealth mode you ask?  Well on occasion when I go into a grocery store without hair and makeup done, let's call it the *natural look* most likely on a laid back Saturday, I pretend no one can see me and I dart in and out without engaging anyone.  We basically have lived more than a year in this stealth mode limiting social interactions, and with that often our good manners.  It is my opinion that many people behave differently when they wear a mask.

Although you cannot see a covered smile, you still can recognize in one’s eyes a warm greeting.  You can still share a hello and nod of acknowledgment when socially distancing and/or wearing a mask.  However, for many of us, stealth mode disconnected us from our normal societal etiquette and upbringing.  I hope that you are faring better than 50% or more of the United States who are lonely.  I also hope that you reserve your stealth mode for occasional use only!

Loneliness has been linked to many different health issues.  It has been associated with depression, and depression has corresponding risks of high blood pressure, obesity as well as alcohol and drug abuse.  Meredith Williamson, PhD, clinical assistant professor at the Texas A&M College of Medicine believes there are three different types of relationships that someone experiencing loneliness could be lacking: intimate, relational, and collective.

1. Intimate relationships are usually in reference to a spouse or significant other.
2. Relational relationships refer to ones’ network of close friends and relatives.
3. Collective relationships are those that involve a group that one is affiliated with and one’s general connection to society.

“Intimate relationships, such as marriages, are a source of intimate connection and those who are in intimate relationships - where they feel supported - are less likely to experience high levels of loneliness,” Williamson said. **“*But the biggest predictor of loneliness is relational connections.  Having strong relationships with several close friends or family members has been shown to have tremendous benefits for social needs.”***

The issue is so relevant that prominent public health specialists agree:  loneliness should be targeted in public health campaigns like those designed to combat smoking, boost immunizations, and combat obesity.

Why is loneliness so lethal?  As human beings, one of our greatest needs is to be seen, acknowledged, and cared for.  We want to belong and be a part of something larger than ourselves.  Research is clear.  Close friendships are necessary for optimal health and well-being.  A longitudinal study of aging found strong social networks lengthen survival among older people.  Dr. Amir Leving suggests that social connections are the most powerful way for us to regulate our emotional distress, and that proximity to someone you are securely attached to is the most effective way to calm yourself.

Loneliness can become a chronic condition that occurs when feelings of loneliness and uncomfortable social isolation go on for a long period of time.  It is characterized by a constant and unrelenting feeling of being alone, separated or divided from others, and an inability to connect on a deeper level.  It can also be accompanied by deeply rooted feelings of inadequacy, poor self-esteem, and self-loathing.

Symptoms and indications will differ from person to person.  If you regularly feel some or all of the following signs, you may be dealing with chronic loneliness:

* Your relationships with family and friends are primarily superficial.  You have difficulty connecting with others on a deeper, more intimate level.
* You have no close or “best” friends.  You don’t feel like you have anyone in your life that really “gets you”.
* You are overwhelmed with feelings of isolation.  At work you feel estranged and alone.  Even when in public or at social gatherings you feel alienated and disengaged.
* You have negative feelings of self-doubt and low self-worth.  You often feel like you are not enough.
* When you do try to reach out, you don’t feel reciprocation.  You don’t feel seen or heard.
* When you try to engage socially, you leave feeling exhausted and burned out.

If you or someone you love is experiencing loneliness, there are several things you can do to identify the problem and begin the process of re-connecting and establishing new friendships.  Here are six thoughts and ideas to get you started:

1. Recognize how your loneliness is showing up for you.  It can affect everything from your body temperature to cholesterol and blood pressure.  You could be gaining weight.  It may be disrupting your sleep.  It can influence you to pick up some bad habits like drug and alcohol abuse or gambling. You may be experiencing ‘brain fog’, an inability to concentrate, problem solve and make decisions.  It can also provoke thoughts of suicide.
2. Move your body.  Get your blood pumping!  Regular exercise can have a profoundly positive impact on depression.  It can help relieve stress, improve that brain fog, help you sleep better and boost your overall mood.  Better yet, join a gym.  You can be comfortable ‘going solo’ in this environment yet still have the opportunity to meet people and interact.
3. Sign up for a class.  Been awhile since you were in art, music or PE class?  Maybe you would like to learn something new or expand your knowledge in an area.  Community colleges, recreation centers, the YMCA and many more organizations have classroom opportunities for you!  Joining a class automatically exposes you to a group of people who share at least one of your interests.
4. Re-connect with existing relationships.  The habit of being alone can cause us to pull away from people in our lives.  When you have been out of touch with friends and loved ones for some time, they can feel distant and it can be hard to take the first step to get reacquainted.
5. Volunteer.  Enjoy the rewarding act of service!  Helping a good cause while putting yourself in places where you can meet new people is a win-win.  Focusing on a task or purpose will make meeting new people feel less awkward.
6. Seek professional help.  If none of the above sparks movement in the direction of re-connecting, a therapist can be very helpful in identifying underlying issues that may be causing your loneliness.  Mental health professionals can help you explore why you are feeling this way and support you through the healing process.

Finding ways to break out of our “busy life” cycle and intentionally seek new connections is the first step to get back on track with relationships.  Investing time in just a few of these will build deeper bonds so you can really see them... and be seen... by these friendships you are creating.  Who knew going out with your girlfriends could be as beneficial as eating right and going to the gym.  Sign me up!

Thanks for being here today! Please subscribe for a new episode each week and share it with a friend! Join me next week when I discuss friends - the Good, the Fad and the Ugly! See you then!

When three or more gather, we are Tribe.

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