

## CONNECTING FOR TOUGH TIMES

These ongoing difficult times provide us with a reminder to check in with ourselves, and importantly, with others as well.

One sure way to lessen the risk of falling on tough times is to build connections with those around you. Close connections buffer your resilience for the inevitable humps and bumps of life. Not having close connections is actually a health hazard!

## STAY OPEN TO SUPPORT

If you're a little like me, when you're feeling stressed or down, you might tend to shut yourself away, which only makes me feel more isolated and alone, and this becomes a habit! And while isolation doesn't help much in the moment, it really doesn't help over the longer term, and withdrawing from the world can turn into loneliness. Research shows loneliness increases the likelihood of death by 26%. In fact, the effect of loneliness and isolation on mortality is comparable to other well-known risk factors such as obesity, and cigarette smoking. It's responsible for many other negative physical outcomes such as increased blood pressure, heart disease and increased chances of a stroke. Shocking isn't it!

What we can do about it is simple...connect with those around you. Now I don't mean your social media *friends* – as we're all trapped in what's been called, a social connection paradox. This means that while social media has enabled us to become more connected to others than in the past, most of us are feeling more lonely and isolated than at any other time in history. A recent US study showed that nearly half of Americans said that they feel alone, isolated, or left out at least some of the time. The study uncovered another surprising finding, the biggest users of social media, the millennials and Generation Z adults, are lonelier than any other age demographic and report poorer health than older generations. 54% of those surveyed said they feel no one knows them well, and 40% reported they "lack companionship," their "relationships aren't meaningful" and they "are isolated from others." Thus, in a world where many people have thousands of social media connections, it's clear that those type of connections aren't a cure for loneliness.

So while it seems easy to be lonely on social media, it's also possible to feel lonely when you're around real people. I have to remind you that loneliness isn't the same as being alone. Some solitude is good for you. But if you don't feel as though those around you truly understand you, or if you fear that they wouldn't accept you if they knew the 'real' you, being around people won't resolve your lonely feelings. So connect and share!

I encourage you to use this week to connect with others. Ask them, R U OK?, and then let them know how you're going also. Go further, and use this conversation to make a time to see them face-to-face, and even start a regular friend *date night* each week.

Friends and loved ones protect us from feeling all on our own. They provide a fresh perspective, they let us know we're important just the way we are. So even if you don't like showing that you're struggling or feeling fragile, staying open to supports means you'll bounce back faster. Remember, there's no medal for going it alone.

## WAYS TO OVERCOME LONELINESS

Because people have a basic need to feel a sense of *belonging*, face-to-face connection with others is the best treatment - through support groups, meetup groups, community activities, adult education classes, social groups, volunteering, faith-based activities, political activism, book clubs, travel clubs, and even dating websites.

Let's put it to the test – in a month it's Mental health Week, and I want to challenge you to rate out of ten how your feeling, stressed and sadness, and then measure yourself again during mental health week after spending the next month connecting with family and friends.

Why do I make such a big point of it, well loneliness is deadly. Think about it in much earlier times, if you were separated from the group, you had to look after yourself all day and night. You couldn't sleep or rest, or you were dead.

vi. Nowadays, if you're alone, a predator won't necessarily eat you, but loneliness still has life shortening effects, which we can measure. For a start, it reduces your immunity, which can increase your risk of disease, it increases inflammation in the body, which can contribute to heart disease and many other chronic health conditions. You're always in the flight, fight or freeze response, and never in the rest and recuperate mode. That's like driving your car around at 7000 revs all day, everyday.

Achieve right balance: Getting the right amount of sleep, work, socializing with friends, family time, and "me time" is connected to lower loneliness scores.

## HAVE A LAUGH

Humour is the antidote to stress. When we're stressed we take our situation and ourselves far too seriously. Laughter proves there's more to life, and protects us from the terminal condition of overseriousitis! Laughter lowers the production of stress hormones, slows the stress response, and means we can look at things from a new perspective and think our way out.

So take a break for a moment and do something, anything, that makes you laugh.

## PRACTISE GRATITUDE

As we've seen, taking a few moments to note down what we've achieved or what we're grateful for over the past day or week improves our overall well being and helps us cope with stress. No matter what you have or don't have in your life, gratitude is where you can park all your worries and focus on what's good in your life – big or small. When we do, we feel better about our lives and more optimistic about the coming week.