Loneliness and the holidays



The holiday season can be a lonely time – especially for people who live far away or are estranged from their families, going through a relationship breakup, grieving or living alone. For those who don't celebrate the holidays, the barrage of music, images, television programs and traditions can make them feel isolated and excluded. The increased intensity of loneliness and social isolation at this time can have a negative effect on both our physical and mental health.

Loneliness and well-being

Lonely or socially isolated people are at a greater risk for depression, anxiety and, when older, dementia. Loneliness can also affect the immune system, making us more susceptible to illness and contributing to the development of chronic diseases such as cardiovascular disease, arthritis, type 2 diabetes, and some cancers.

Unfortunately, when we're sad or lonely, we often withdraw and avoid social interactions and that can make us feel even more disconnected from the world. We need to combat loneliness head-on. That's not always easy but here are some ideas to help change the holiday season and the rest of your year.

- **Be realistic.** It's hard for anyone to not be affected by the holiday hype. Television, movies, magazines, and social media are full of images of people having fun. It's easy to feel left out and let down. Realize that no-one's life is perfect, most families face challenges, and that people usually only share the best moments of their lives on social media. Shift your focus to the great things you *do* have in your life – a true friend, a loving family member or supportive co-workers.
- **Take a break from social media.** Studies have shown that heavy social media over time results in lower psychological well-being and feelings of loneliness, rather than vice versa. Unplug for a while.
- **Be proactive.** Loneliness causes us to underestimate how much our friends and family care. Instead of waiting for people to invite you somewhere, be the one to suggest activities or be the host. Take the plunge and reach out to friends, family and acquaintances and ask them what they're doing for the holidays. When asked about your plans say you have nothing scheduled yet – you'll likely receive a few invitations!
- **Join in**. There's always lots to do during the holiday season that's not centered on faith or beliefs. Find ways to join in: an office potluck, baking treats for the neighbours, or community events.
- **Volunteer.** Many people are alone or need help during the holidays. Lend a hand at a shelter, nursing home or food bank. Volunteering not only benefits others, but it's also a great way to connect with your community and meet like-minded people.
- **Become involved in your faith community**. Churches, synagogues, temples, and mosques hold many social events throughout the year that are great opportunities to forge new relationships.
- **Expand your social circle**. Making friends takes time and effort. Sign up for an exercise class or team sport. If you're musical, join a band or choir. Investigate local meetups – groups of individuals with shared interests who plan events.
- **Take a trip**. There are many singles groups that arrange trips during the holidays. If you can, get away for a few days.

For more ideas or help on how to survive the holidays, contact your Employee Assistance and Family Program. If your feelings of isolation continue or you feel sad for a long period of time, talk to your family doctor.