TIP SHEET: COPING WITH LONELINESS WHILE SOCIAL DISTANCING

Human beings are social creatures. Feeling like we are part of a community helps us thrive. Loneliness, however, is also a common human emotion and has become an important public health concern during the novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. Shelter-in-place requirements and self-isolation are making it more difficult to sustain the relationships that are an important component for your mental, emotional and physical health.

WHAT IS LONELINESS?

Loneliness is not necessarily about being alone physically. It is a state of mind, a feeling of emptiness and separateness. It has been defined in different ways, including:

- A subjective, negative feeling related to the deficient social relations.
- A feeling of disconnectedness or isolation.
- Inability to find meaning in one's life.

It is the perception of being alone and isolated that matters most. People associate loneliness with getting older as many of the more severe side effects impact elderly individuals. But anyone can feel lonely at any age. A recent survey found that young Americans are more likely to feel lonely than older adults. It can be hard for people to talk about loneliness. They may feel like something is wrong with them, even though feeling lonely happens to almost everyone at some point.

The term 'solitude' is often used in discussions of loneliness. However, the two terms have very different meanings. Solitude is something that is enjoyed by people and can lead to creativity or self-realization. It is an approach for developing your own individual space, often considered as an essential component for spirituality and self-growth. An example of solitude could be seen in separating yourself from your office to get some work done in quiet.

LONELINESS AND YOUR HEALTH

Some of the increased risk of disease caused by loneliness may come from changes in behavior. People who feel isolated may not have friends or family encouraging them to eat right, exercise or see a doctor.

New research suggests that loneliness can also directly harm our health and make us more vulnerable to disease. It has been found that loneliness may alter the tendency of cells in the immune system to promote inflammation. Inflammation is necessary to help our bodies heal from injury. But when it goes on too long, it may raise the risk of chronic diseases and other things such as:

- Higher rates of depression
- Heart disease

- Dementia
- Sleep issues
- Excess stress or anxiety
- Substance abuse

FIGHTING LONELINESS

To feel less isolated and combat loneliness, below are suggestions to stay social in non-traditional ways and find new and different distractions, including:

- Keep yourself busy with hobbies, crafts, readings, games, projects or other activities at home.
- Schedule regular phone or video chats with friends and family.
- Follow a regular daily schedule.
- Share your feelings with others.
- Avoid alcohol or drugs.
- Join online groups or take virtual classes related to your self-interests.
- Get outside if you are able.
- Consider adopting a pet. Animals can be a source of comfort and may also lower stress and blood pressure.
- Practice meditation, resilience or other forms of self-care.

Source: National Institutes of Health (www.nia.nih.gov) and the U.S. National Library of Medicine National Institutes of Health