

Living Alone, Physical Distancing and Loneliness

If you are feeling isolated, here are 7 strategies to help you cope

By [Jackson Rainer](#) April 9, 2020

I am a 65-year-old widower, living alone between two communities — during the week in a big city high-rise and on the weekends in a small condo in the rural western North Carolina mountains. My intimate, social and professional networks are broad, solid, and full.

So, the call and directives for physical distancing and sheltering-in-place to stop the spread of the coronavirus, even though as a psychotherapist I am classified as an essential worker and can move through the world more than most, is a big problem. Effectively meeting the tension of this surreal time is taking more effort than expected.

For a lack of better descriptors, I am now “vibrating” to the odd, anxious and invisible energy so pervasively felt throughout the day. I bounce like a pinball between working and wandering, with little productive output.

I am experiencing information overload, yet stay confused about what can be trusted because there is so much unknown about the virus and its impact. This is a unique and remarkably challenging time, as we are told to socially isolate while remaining deeply connected to each other by the biothreat of the virus.

The Critical Importance of Soul-Restoring Connections

The coronavirus pandemic has intensified factors already isolating people from each other. I am lonesome without my day-to-day ordinary connections to friends, associates and the larger community. The phenomenon of loneliness is defined by the subjective feeling that arises from a lack of needed social connections.

The feelings of closeness, trust and affection of genuine friends, loved ones and community are known to counter the physical problems and risks associated with social isolation.

As a species, we thrive on human connection and cooperation. When we are not fed and watered through social connections, we are diminished.

It is a well-known truth that adults who live alone have about an 80% higher chance of a depressive episode than those who live with others. Last year, the National Academies of

Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine reported that social isolation increases significant risks for dementia, heart disease and stroke. As a species, we thrive on human connection and cooperation. When we are not fed and watered through social connections, we are diminished.

I practice what I preach in my work as a psychotherapist. I recognize that social distancing, physically disconnecting us from each other, is the only vital, real intervention available to meet the crisis caused by the virus. At the same time, as longer restrictions on personal freedom and cultural, physical and emotional venues are enacted, we can expect a larger communal price to be exacted while the world is placed on hold.

Over the next immediate period of time, the critical importance of soul-restoring connections will become more relevant for everyone, particularly for those living alone.

The Difference Between Solitude and Isolation

Loneliness is more than simply being alone. It is a potent, mysterious sensation and emotion. It holds two trajectories: solitude and isolation. Solitude is good for creativity, contemplation, relaxation, spirituality and personal growth (think of Thoreau and his hikes around Walden Pond).

It is a significantly different experience from isolation, which is characterized by social pain, emptiness and sadness (think of the Unabomber and his psychotic manifesto).

Both solitude and isolation touch personal vulnerability. Solitude is sought out and welcomed, while isolation is cold, prickly and aversive.

So, what do people do when they tip into the distress of isolation? Social psychologists provide an esoteric answer, collectively saying “seek contentment and relationship” without putting personal physical health (and that of others) at risk.

7 Strategies to Help You Cope

In this epidemic that has necessarily redefined community, new and practically applied “solo” strategies are needed to maintain and enhance mental health. Here are seven:

1. Keep a routine. Maintain your daily rhythms. Sleep on schedule, attend to personal hygiene and eat as healthily as you are able (even though my office manager is complaining that no one working with us is a “stress baker” and has yet to deliver a pound cake). If your home seems too quiet, play background music. Be cautious about using TV for this; it draws, rather than distracts, attention and makes the brain sort out different sounds and images, which increases stress.

2. Stretch, move and practice diaphragmatic breathing. While physical fitness routines are disrupted, every little bit of activity encourages health. There is a connection between physical and psychological flexibility. When you experience heightened anxiety, lie on your back and put

your hands on your stomach. Breathe in and make your belly rise. Breathe out and watch your stomach fall. Do in repetitions of 10.

3. Get organized and finish what you start. Many are complaining with a concern like my own experience: Nothing seems to satisfy, so we bounce from one thing to another, without any sense of the satisfaction gained from task completion. Once you've initiated a task, see it through to its logical end. Putting the metaphorical period on the end of the sentence gives definition and meaning to the day.

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4. Take a step back. As noted, we are in a period of information overload. The [amount of information, accurate or not](#), takes its toll. Without social channels to help navigate this incredibly complex time, we have difficulty knowing what to reliably believe. Slowing down and looking at the bigger picture allows for psychological breathing room, which lowers anxiety.

5. Make a conscious decision about where you are in charge and where you have less control. Making such a thoughtful decision will neutralize the feeling of helplessness. You might not like your choices, but having choice is preferable to feeling trapped.

6. Reach out and touch. Social media and contemporary methods of [technology give us new ways for being connected](#) to others. Zoom, Blue Jeans and Skype are all video-conferencing platforms which offer us innovative means of inviting people over. Facebook and Instagram are not enough. Talking with others is warmer than just a text or a post on social media. [Reach out to the friends who need you](#). We are collectively amid a crisis and some people are more resilient than others. For those who are more frightened and alarmed, a call or virtual visit will provide companionable moments which are good for everyone.

7. Know that it's OK to reach out for professional help. If loneliness give rise to symptoms of depression for more than a few days, give your local mental health professional a call. Mental health practitioners have been deemed essential during the coronavirus epidemic and are available for consultation.



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