

“Loneliness”

In past Health Tips, we have discussed health conditions such as obesity, heart disease and high blood pressure.. One thing that has been on my heart for quite some time is a problem that appears to greatly contribute to a lack of success in treating many of our chronic health conditions. It is the problem of isolation and loneliness.

For many years, I have pondered the things that often keep a person from following their doctor’s advice when it comes to their health care. Why does one not show up for a test, a referral to a specialist, the dietitian, the therapist or the pharmacy to pick up their medications? Why does one not take their medications as they are instructed? Why does the diabetic fail to check their blood sugars or others fail to get out and walk regularly or lose weight to better control their diabetes, blood pressure, high cholesterol or heart disease? There are many people in our society that feel all we need is just more “education”. I feel that is important. But, what I am seeing is a problem that goes beyond the need for information. What is it in the hearts of you and me that block our willingness to do what is good for our health?

One important thing that keeps us from making healthy choices is a belief that there is no real sense of purpose or hope. Many just want to get through the day by avoiding the pain of yesterday and seeking a little pleasure, something like a soothing ointment on a chronic sore. Do you believe that you are here for a reason and that there is hope? I believe that we are created for relationships with others and, most importantly, with the One who created us. Some are forced into isolation due to physical or social circumstances, such as becoming incarcerated, having to remain inside the home or move into a nursing facility due to an illness or injury, or have emotional conditions such as depression. The effects can be very serious. We must address the need for healthy loving relationships, especially with God.

Loneliness can occur in a room filled with people, a stuffed elevator, a congested apartment complex, a crowded household or even in a marriage. There is a big difference between being alone and loneliness. We may feel “relationally” isolated when we are not “physically” isolated. This can occur between loved ones, marriage partners, parents and children and people that were once good friends.

A Time magazine article of Sept. 5, 1977 cited health studies showing people who are widowed or unmarried are much more susceptible to sickness than married people. James J. Lynch who was a specialist in psychosomatic medicine at the University of Maryland Medical School, now the Director of the Life Care Foundation, and author of “The Broken Heart: Medical Consequences of Loneliness” states that many conditions are significantly influenced by the lack of human companionship such as suicide, cancer, accidents, and heart disease. Single older men with health problems are at particular risk for depression and suicide. On the subject of loneliness, Norman Wright, a psychologist, quotes one woman who said, “I hurt deep down in the pit of my stomach, my arms and my shoulders ache to be held tight...to be told that I am really loved for what I am.” He goes on to say that we all have a hunger for contact, acceptance, belonging, intimate exchange, responsiveness, support, love, and the touch of tenderness. We experience loneliness because these hungers are not always fed.

The elderly are more at risk for loneliness and isolation as their friends and family members have passed away. Families are more and more disengaged and do not remain in the same community. Family members are many miles apart. There is often fear of rejection, fear of failure, or fear of losing a friend that keep us from building new relationships. Some people have been abused or neglected with a fear that it may be repeated again if they get close to anyone again. We avoid the very thing we crave. Getting close to someone requires vulnerability; taking a chance of getting hurt again.

We can not live without human contact. God designed us that way. Dr. Lynch states, “If we fail to form loving human relationships, our mental and physical health is in peril.”

Besides one’s family, there is no better place to find love and a sense of belonging than in a good church where godly love, acceptance, and friendship are expressed. One must be careful as many of us have experienced others who are more interested in judging us than loving us. By the way, love may involve someone speaking to me truthfully for my own good. The difference is that it is done out of love and not with a condemning spirit.

Let’s move on to some practical tips that may help you to move beyond loneliness and onto the road to building healthy warm relationships with God and with others. I remind you that all of this directly impacts your physical and mental health. You will be more inclined to take care of yourself according to what God’s Word teaches and what your health care providers have advised, while reducing your risk of many medical and mental health complications:

- First, if you have not done so, seek and establish a relationship with the most important Person in the universe. Believe that God loves you and sent His only Son to die for you as He took your sins and nailed them to the cross. Then accept His Son, Jesus Christ, as your Lord and Savior and place Him first in your life. You and He will then walk through this life together with an indescribable peace and sense of joy, belonging and purpose. He did not die for you to grant you an eternal relationship with Him only, though that alone is reason to celebrate. He also died to bring you life and freedom at this present time. (see John 14:6)
- Attend a good Bible believing, Christ centered church. (Hebrews 10:24-25)
- Be in God’s Word regularly. Buy a Bible that is easy to read and understand. Attend Bible studies weekly if possible. (Psalms 119:11 and 2 Timothy 3:15-17)
- Pray regularly with a loved one or friend. (1 Thessalonians 5:16-18)
- Determine if you presently suffer from loneliness and isolation from others. Talk about it with a trusted loved one, friend, church pastor or your doctor. (2 Corinthians 1:3-5)
- Remember that many others around you have similar feelings.
- List things that interest you or used to interest you, such as certain hobbies, and find others who share that interest.
- Avoid sexual relationships outside of marriage. (Hebrews 13:4)
- Do not expect your friend or spouse to meet all of your emotional needs. One needs healthy relationships outside of marriage. These should be of the same sex in order to respect your mate and avoid temptation.
- Avoid living through the imaginary relationships on TV or in books.
- Reach out and initiate with someone. Don’t wait for a phone call.
- Do not self-medicate! This means, do not try to cover the pain of loneliness by drinking or taking drugs. This only compounds the problem greatly.
- Get in touch with the things that have kept you from connecting with others; times when you have been hurt or rejected. Then FORGIVE, so that YOU can heal. Our past is meant to be a “guide post” NOT a “hitching post”. Forgiveness is not the same as trust. Trust must be earned. Forgiveness is baring the cost and cancelling the debt incurred by another. (Ephesians 4:32; Matthew 18:21-22).
- Confess where you went wrong and ask for forgiveness from God and others you have hurt. (1 John 1:9)

I believe this has a direct impact on your physical health, your mental health, your spiritual health and your ability to make a difference in this world knowing you are loved and have great value. Each day is a wonderful new gift from God. What we do with it is our gift to Him.