

Dealing with Isolation Due to Coronavirus (COVID-19)

In attempts to reduce the spread of infection from Coronavirus (COVID-19), especially for people who are elderly or chronically ill, limiting or avoiding contact with others has been advised. Additionally, many people are choosing to self-isolate, companies are asking employees to work from home and many events are being cancelled, all in an attempt to further limit exposure and spread of the virus. While spending a few days home alone is manageable for most people, extended periods of isolation can have significant effects on mental wellness. Social distancing can quickly lead to feelings of loneliness and possibly depression.

“As human beings, we are not wired to be all by ourselves. We are animals that need contact, so finding ways to connect with people, even if you’re not physically connected with them, is really important,” says Laurie Ferguson, PhD, clinical psychologist and Vice President of Research and Education for the Global Healthy Living Foundation.

Ways to Fight Loneliness from Social Isolation

Tap into your virtual network

Social media often gets a bad rap, but during times when you have to stay put and want to stay connected to the world outside, it can be a great tool. You can use FaceTime, Skype, or other group chat platforms to interact with friends and family too.

Have a friend or two over

Going to large events or crowded places may be too risky for you right now, but getting together with one or two people may be a way to feel connected with others without the anxiety of going out into the world.

Get to know your neighbors

While you shouldn’t go out in crowded public places, you and your neighbors can certainly chat outside where it doesn’t feel quite so closed in. It can be a great opportunity to meet some new people and build your social support network.

Use phone chats to reconnect with longtime friends

It is common to struggle with maintaining regular phone calls with longtime friends or loved ones. Now is a good time to reach out and reconnect with them. A half-hour phone chat with a friend whose voice you haven’t heard in months or years can go a long way to making you feel less isolated.

Ask about digital versions of community events

If you normally attend religious services but need to avoid them for the time being, ask your house of worship if it can make services or sermons available on its website or even

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live-streams services. If you're part of other local groups that meet regularly, such as a parent-teacher organization, ask if meetings can be live-streamed or have a phone dial-in so you can feel like you're in the loop.

The Importance of Self Mental Health Check-Ins

One way to monitor your feelings: Take a few deep breaths and allow yourself to be present in your body. Acknowledge that this is an anxious time and let those feelings wash through you. Be gentle with yourself. Then check in to see whether that practice is helping to ease your feelings or whether it makes them worse.

It is also important to know the symptoms of depression. Hopelessness, an existential feeling of aloneness, which is different than just loneliness, that 'I really am all alone and nobody really knows what I'm going through.' And then with that, a feeling of helplessness, that 'there's really nothing I can do about it.' If you find yourself continually running doomsday scenarios, either for yourself or for the world, those are signs that you are mentally moving in kind of a circular direction.

Other signs of depression include such symptoms as these, lasting most days for more than two weeks:

- Feelings of sadness, tearfulness, emptiness, or hopelessness
- Anger, irritability, or frustration
- Loss of interest or pleasure in most or all normal activities
- Fatigue, tiredness, and lack of energy
- Sleeping too little or too much
- Changes in appetite, including eating too little or too much
- Anxiety, agitation or restlessness
- Trouble concentrating and making decisions
- New physical problems, such as back pain, digestive issues, or headaches
- Suicidal thoughts or attempts

If you or someone you know is exhibiting any of the above depression symptoms, tell your healthcare provider, contact a mental health professional right away, call your local suicide hotline (1-800-273-8255), or go to the emergency room.

Adapted from:

<https://creakyjoints.org/living-with-arthritis/coronavirus-isolation-loneliness-chronic-illness-patients/>