Coping With Loneliness (Part 2):
Look Outward

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The U.S. surgeon general named loneliness a top public health issue in the U.S. (Murthy, 2023). In response, Utah State University (USU) Extension faculty developed four fact sheets to describe some of the most effective ways to reduce loneliness. This second fact sheet suggests simple ways of looking outward to experience greater connectedness. These include increasing social group memberships, connecting through art and laughter, spending time in nature, strengthening friendships, and providing service.

> *This "Coping With Loneliness" fact sheet series addresses the most effective ways to enhance connectedness:*
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> - *Part 1 – Look Inward*
> - ***Part 2 – Look Outward***
> - *Part 3 – Focus on What You Can Change*
> - *Part 4 – Support Others Who Experience Loneliness*

Join and Strengthen Social Groups

Social groups can provide individuals with support, opportunities to connect, and a sense of identity and meaning (Jetten et al., 2017). Unfortunately, membership in in-person groups, such as religious and civic organizations, is at an all-time low (Murthy 2023). Additionally, life transitions, such as moves and job changes, can disrupt social groups and lead to loneliness. Research shows that after major life transitions, well-being is maintained to the extent that individuals maintain their membership with existing groups or join new groups (Haslam et al., 2019; Hawkins et al., 2024).

Whether you have experienced recent changes to your social groups or simply recognize gaps in your desired social groups, strengthening your social group memberships is always worthwhile. You can start by identifying which social groups you already have and in which groups you would like to feel a greater sense of community. You can then make plans to strengthen bonds within that group. For example, if you want to strengthen relationships with immediate or extended family members or friends, you can start by considering how to better connect in common interests or how you might be able to help them in some way. If would like to be a part of a certain type of group, consider finding a local group or starting a group.

Consider the following groups to join or start (Murthy, 2023):

- Spiritual or religious organization (e.g., church, meditation/yoga).
- Recreational group (e.g., hiking, sports team).
- Hobby group (e.g., book club, board game meetup).
- Civic association (e.g., advocacy, school board, neighborhood association).
- Volunteer organization (e.g., local charity/nonprofit, service projects).
- Educational classes (e.g., community classes and workshops).
- Fitness group (e.g., fitness classes, running).
- Support group (e.g., grief, chronic illness, or caregiver support).
- Online community (e.g., social media, virtual meetups).
- Culture-based group (e.g., LGBTQ+, ethnicity-based).

Online resources such as Meetup can help you find or form groups around your interests and hobbies. Your local USU Extension office is also a great resource for community and educational opportunities.

Connect Through Art

When deciding what groups to join or strengthen, consider the powerful effect that art can have on connection. Art offers a unique space where you can hold emotions and express your feelings in a way that words cannot. This hands-on approach, free from verbal constraints, enables individuals to delve into core issues that may otherwise feel overwhelming, facilitating movement past obstacles that can impede progress (Davis, 2015). Studies show that activities in the creative arts help boost self-esteem and perceived social support (Fraser & Keating, 2014). Furthermore, participating in hobby groups that practice creative arts can increase social time. This can foster a sense of belonging, meaning, and purpose (Murthy, 2023).

Connect Through Laughter

Like art, laughter can strengthen social bonds. Robin Dunbar, a professor of evolutionary psychology, stated, "Laughter is one of the most contagious, universal, and instinctive connectors" (Murthy, 2020, p. 225). Laughing naturally makes us feel good by releasing endorphins, which can reduce the distress of loneliness (Yim, 2016). It is also instinctive to laugh when we hear someone else laughing. Humor creates common ground between those who find the same things funny and can serve as an icebreaker connecting us with others. We rarely laugh alone.

Connect With Nature

When feeling lonely, we often only think about connecting with other humans. However, research studies suggest that connection to other forms of life, such as plants and animals, can also significantly benefit our well-being (Aerts et al., 2018; Leavell et al., 2019). For example, spending time with pets has been found to reduce loneliness and isolation (Kretzler et al., 2022). Spending time in nature can reduce stress, anxiety, and depression, improve overall well-being, and increase social connectedness (Frumkin et al., 2017). To increase your time in nature, consider taking a walk or hike, visiting a local park, picnicking, taking pictures, bird watching, or mindfully noticing the beauty of the plants and trees around you. You may also want to consider engaging in outdoor activities, such as fishing, biking, camping, or sports.

Find and Strengthen Friendships

According to the U.S. surgeon general, "Friendship, in essence, is the social glue that keeps couples, families, kindred spirits, and communities together" (Murthy, 2020, p. 211). Friendships can improve psychological well-being, protect against mental health symptoms, buffer against the loss of other relationships, and alleviate loneliness across the lifespan (Abrams, 2023; Hong et al., 2022). How then do you find a friend or strengthen current friendships? First, consider reaching out to old friends with whom you already have a relationship of trust. If you do not feel you can reach out to old friends, establish new friendships by making time for social engagements. Consider the following:

1. Determine what you value in friends to help guide your development of other friendships. This will help you find activities that attract people who share the same values and preferences as you (Ayers, 2023).
2. Understand that friendship takes time. Plan to invest 30 to 300 hours (about 2 weeks) with someone to build and strengthen a relationship of trust (Ayers, 2023).
3. Consider the strengths you have to offer in a friendship. Friendships become more satisfying when friends can offer positive qualities to each other. Follow the adage, "To have a friend, be one." The investment is certainly worth the effort, especially when combating loneliness (Ayers, 2023).
4. Try engaging in quality one-on-one or small group interactions. These smaller interactions can be less stressful and more satisfying than trying to connect with a large group all at once.

Provide Service

Service can help protect against a myriad of mental health difficulties. Research has found that those who actively engage in opportunities to be of use to their community or society report lower levels of stress and increased dopamine production (Thoreson, 2023). Dopamine, often referred to as the "feel-good" neurotransmitter, plays a key role in the brain's reward and pleasure systems. When individuals experience a sense of reward from acts of service, it can lead to feelings of happiness (Dulin et al., 2012). The positive emotions associated with helping others may contribute to a desire for more opportunities to engage in such

activities. Improved mental health and a sense of happiness are not the only benefits of service. As people give of themselves, they find meaning and connection in their lives, especially when they serve in an area of significance to them. In doing so, one can find like-minded people with whom they may share a passion. Service also offers opportunities for connecting to those around us, thus potentially broadening one's social support network (Thoreson, 2023).

Looking outward can help us develop and maintain social connections. For more information about how to increase connectedness, see Coping With Loneliness (Part 3): Focus on What You Can Change.

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