Coping With Loneliness (Part 4): Support Others Who Experience Loneliness

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It is natural to want to offer help and support when someone we love or care about is experiencing loneliness. Paradoxically, this is one of the best ways to reduce our own loneliness. In response, Utah State University (USU) Extension faculty developed three fact sheets to describe some of the most effective ways to reduce loneliness. This fourth fact sheet suggests ways to ensure our efforts to support others who are experiencing loneliness are helpful and supportive.

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

Identify Who May Be Experiencing Loneliness

Loneliness can influence people to expect negative social experiences. The brains of those experiencing loneliness cause them to view social settings as threatening. It is important to understand that in our brains, the sensory fibers that register physical and emotional pain overlap causing our brains to process both types of pain in a similar way (Murthy, 2020). Those experiencing loneliness are also more likely to see social slights where none were intended and to think of others and their behavior in a more pessimistic way. When someone does or says something that reinforces these thoughts, it further reinforces behaviors that prevent the lonely person from creating and having the social support they desire. This is why it is important to be aware of those in our life who may be lonely and identify the best ways to support them (Cacioppo & Hawkley, 2009).

Speaking in general, those who are more at risk of experiencing loneliness are those who are aging, young adults, immigrants, LGBTQ+, those who live alone, live in rural areas, and those who have disabilities, chronic diseases, or lower income (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2023).

When trying to support others who are experiencing loneliness, it is also helpful to understand there are different types of loneliness (Murthy 2020):

- **Intimate**: the lack of a close confidant or someone who knows you deeply.
- **Relational**: absence of friendships.
- **Collective**: missing identity as part of a larger group.

Increasing our understanding of these factors contributing to loneliness can help us identify those in our lives who might be experiencing loneliness, recognize the signs of loneliness, and know best how to support someone who is experiencing loneliness.

Practice Active Listening and Express Empathy

One important way to help ease the loneliness of others is by listening. As a listener, it's crucial to listen attentively, not merely to formulate a response to the words of another. Attentively listening allows us to observe both verbal and nonverbal responses of another. As we understand what the other person is trying to communicate to us, we are enabled to share experiences that might offer support without judgment or unintentional harm through our comments. Listening to understand encourages us to hear with an open heart and respond with compassion, fostering genuine connections.


The dictionary defines empathy as being able to understand, be aware of, sensitive to, and share in the feelings, thoughts, and experiences of people around us (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). A lack of empathy can disrupt our ability to connect with others. According to the Community for Education Foundation (2021), here are some ways to increase your empathy:

1. **Limit social media and screen time.** Technology shields us from having to look someone in the face when we communicate with them and deal with their reactions (Clark et al., 2018).
2. **Practice paying attention when interacting with others.** Be aware of their body language and tone of voice as well as what they are saying.
3. **Think about how you would feel in others' situations.** Think about times you have felt the same way when someone expresses their feelings to you (i.e., when someone says they are feeling betrayed, think about a time you have felt betrayed).
4. **Ask meaningful questions.**
5. **Show that you care about someone.** Use words and actions.

Cultivate Meaningful Connections

Practicing active listening and expressing empathy can lead to more meaningful connections. Meaningful connections involve more than just eye contact and genuine conversation; they also encompass empathy, understanding, open communication, and mutual respect. Foster positive interactions by prioritizing face-to-face communication when possible and making your connections genuine during quality time with your loved ones by minimizing distractions from movies, phones, or screens (Murthy 2020). By offering distraction-free, quality time to loved ones and friends, we communicate our commitment to the relationship and create a strong connection (Abrams 2023). This, in turn, sets the stage for open, honest, and supportive conversations, making it easier to offer help and receive it graciously when needed. Additionally, when you have existing healthy relationships with someone, it is more comfortable to turn to that person during challenging times. When you turn to someone you have a healthy relationship with in times of need, you further foster an environment of mutual understanding and support, creating an increased sense of connection with that person.

Facilitate Community Involvement
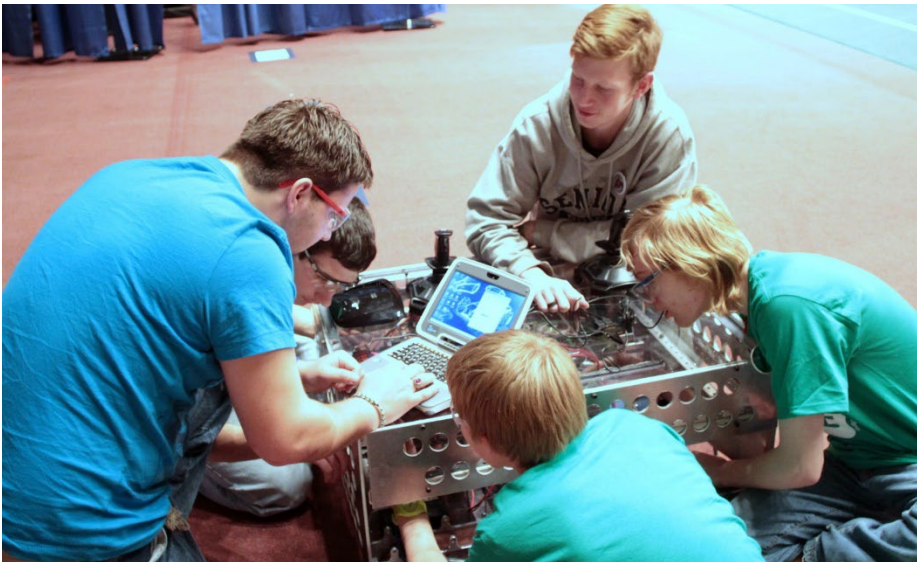
Supporting a loved one or friend in community involvement requires identifying shared interests and might include actively participating in community events together (Jetten et al., 2017). If you are unable to find an established group that is engaging to you and your loved one, consider starting a group. Begin with common hobbies or passions, and then you can align activities with mutual interests to foster connection and meaningful engagement (Murthy 2020). If event planning isn't your forte but you still want to help your loved one engage with their community, consider exploring online and social media platforms for existing events that both of you might enjoy attending (Clark et al., 2018).

Reaching out to someone you love can be a form of service that fosters connection (Thoreson, 2023). A simple way to begin serving others experiencing loneliness is by extending an invitation to participate in a group or individual activity. A kind invitation can help others to feel seen and diminish their fear of negative outcomes from engaging socially. If uncertainty on how to connect with someone exists, focus on common interests, such as a hobby, that both parties may enjoy. Another simple form of service is offering your time to help someone. This can increase feelings of connectedness, thus diminishing loneliness.

Encourage Strategies to Cope With Loneliness

When supporting a friend or loved one dealing with loneliness, it's crucial to grasp their preferred form of support. Sensitivity is key; avoid being pushy while navigating the situation. Respectful understanding and empathy can go a long way in offering meaningful support.

To create an atmosphere of support, employ open-ended questions to encourage friendly and meaningful conversations. Try using some of the following questions to start a discussion with a loved one or friend about their social connections and how you can support them (Murthy, 2020).

- How have you been feeling lately when it comes to your level of social connections?
- Are there any patterns or triggers you've noticed that impact your sense of social connections?
- How would you describe your ideal social interaction or support when you're feeling lonely?
- How can those around you best provide support or companionship during times when you're feeling lonely?

You have the power to enhance the connections of a loved one or friend by organizing gatherings or extending invitations for shared activities. Your proactive approach can significantly contribute to their social well-being and strengthen the bonds between you (Overcoming Obstacles, 2021).

Expressing empathy and encouraging and facilitating strategies to cope with loneliness can help ensure that our efforts to support a loved one who is experiencing loneliness are helpful and effective. To learn more about strategies to cope with loneliness, see other fact sheets in the Coping With Loneliness series, such as Part 1: Look Inward, Part 2: Look Outward, and Part 3: Focus on What You Can Change.

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