

Combating Loneliness in the Wintertime

A Q&A with Johns Hopkins Psychiatrist, Matthew Peters, M.D.



The winter season can bring out many feelings, some positive and some negative. While some may enjoy the snow, holiday celebrations and more time with family, others may struggle with strained family relationships, colder weather and shorter days, leading to feelings of isolation and loneliness.

We recently sat down with Matthew Peters, M.D., associate professor of psychiatry and behavioral sciences at Johns Hopkins Medicine, to discuss loneliness, and ways you can combat it this winter season.

Q What is loneliness?

A

*"Loneliness is the subjective feeling of having inadequate social connections."
– Vivek Murthy, M.D., U.S. Surgeon General*

Humans are hard-wired to be social creatures. As a species, our survival depended on cooperating and trusting one another – and social connection remains baked into our nervous system today. When we experience loneliness, we also experience an increase in the stress hormone, cortisol.

Everyone can feel lonely from time to time. But prolonged loneliness can have serious consequences for both mental and physical health.

Q What does loneliness look like?

A

Loneliness takes many forms, which psychologists classify into four distinct categories:

1.



Emotional loneliness describes a lack of intimacy or intimate relationships, including affection and closeness.

2.



Situational loneliness can result from circumstances that make developing friendships difficult, like moving to a new city or country.

3.



Social loneliness is typically experienced by those who have difficulty in social situations due to shyness, social anxiety or low self-esteem.

4.



Chronic loneliness is used to describe those who have been lonely or in solitude for so long that it's become a way of life.

Each of these categories of loneliness can be experienced by anyone, regardless of age, gender, occupation or marital status.

Q How does loneliness affect your overall well-being and why is it important to address it?

A The quality of our social relationships plays a direct role in our physical health and overall well-being. And the impacts of poor social relationships can be significant.

Loneliness can contribute to depression and anxiety, and pose an even greater risk to health than obesity and cardiovascular disease. In fact, research shows that loneliness is associated with a reduction in lifespan comparable to smoking 15 cigarettes per day.

Q What are some ways to combat loneliness?

A



Use technology to your advantage. Schedule a regular time to catch up with friends or family. With technology, distance doesn't have to get in the way of connecting with loved ones.



Push yourself to make new connections. Join a local fitness group, start a new hobby, take a cooking class or involve yourself in your community. Get involved with like-minded groups of people to actively foster new friendships.

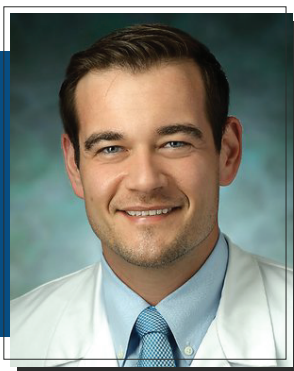


Utilize low-tech methods of communication. Write a letter to a family member or friend, mail small gifts or care packages to loved ones or bring a baked good to a neighbor's doorstep.



Ask for help. Talk to a licensed mental health provider about how you're feeling. There's no shame in seeking help so you can feel better.

Though we have countless ways to connect, many people have found the quality and quantity of their relationships declining. Fortunately, there are many ways you can strengthen your social circle and improve your overall well-being. Should you ever experience loneliness, don't hesitate to seek the support you need.



Dr. Matthew Peters, M.D.

is an associate professor at Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine and the medical director of the **Balance program**, which offers full-family mental health support for employers and health systems. To learn more about Dr. Peters' background, [click here](#).

Sources:

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