



Transcript:

Staying Connected with Students and Youth during COVID-19 Part 1: Why Social Connection is Important for Mental health

Presenter: Angela Begres
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ANN SCHENSKY: Good afternoon, everyone. We're just going to get started. And we know there are still some people filtering in. But we'll just start on time so we can make sure that we get all of this good information in.

Again, welcome. This is the first of four Staying Connected with Students and Youth During COVID-19 webinars. The other webinars are on April 5, April 19, and May 3. And you are able to register for those on the Great Lakes MHTTC website. And we will put the link to the website in the chat at some point.

So today's webinar is Why Social Connection is Important for Mental Health. And again, we are lucky enough to have Angela Begres from Partners for Healthy Lives as our speaker today. This webinar is brought to you both by the Great Lakes MHTTC and SAMHSA.

The Great Lakes ATTC, MHTTC, and PTTC are funded by SAMHSA with the following cooperative agreements. The opinions expressed in this webinar today are the views of the speaker and do not necessarily reflect the official position of DHHS and SAMHSA. The MHTTC believes that words matter. The MHTTC Network uses affirming, respectful, and recovery-oriented language in all activities.

I have a couple housekeeping details. If you are having technical issues, please individually message Kristina Spannbauer in the chat section at the bottom of your screen, and she will be happy to help you. If you have questions for the speaker today, please put them in the Q&A section also at the bottom of your screen. And we will address them during the presentation. A copy of the PowerPoint slides as well as the recording and the handout will be available on the MHTTC website in about a week.

You will also be directed to a link at the end of this presentation for a very short survey. We would really appreciate it if you could fill it out. It probably takes about three minutes. And it's how we report back to SAMHSA on our activities.

And again, certificates of attendance will be sent out to all of those who attend the full session. They will also be sent via email, and they take about a week. If you're interested in seeing what else we're doing, feel free to follow us on social media.

Again, today's speaker today is Angela Begres. Angela is a licensed clinical social worker who did her training at the University of Chicago where she obtained her MSW. She's an experienced trainer and presenter contracted both independently and through various nonprofits in the Chicago area,



Michigan, and other areas. She has experience integrating mental health education programs into the curriculum for students and within the-- students and staff, I'm sorry, within the Chicago and West Cook County Public Schools. Again, welcome, and we are happy to have you, Angela.

ANGELA BEGRES: Thank you so much. Welcome, everyone. It's so nice to see so many people joining us today.

So like Ann said, this is one out of four presentations we'll be having this series. And it's going to be all about social connection and how important it is for our mental health and our physical health. And today, I'm going to be talking about why social connection is important for our mental health. So I'm happy to be here with all of you. And like we said, if you guys have any questions, I would be happy to answer them throughout the presentation or at the end of the presentation as well.

So a little bit about our learning objectives for today. We're going to talk about the impact of social distancing to our mental health. We're going to discuss the risk of social isolation and loneliness. And then at the end, I'll provide different strategies that we can utilize to maintain meaningful connections. As we all know, we have all been impacted by COVID-19, which has really put into perspective the importance of building connections, maintaining connections as we've had to social distance throughout the last year. And a lot of the information I got for our presentation today is really to help us recognize how important it is for us to build connections with others, and also, how do we maintain connections within ourselves?

So to get us started, I wanted us to read this quote from Mother Teresa. And she said, "Being unwanted, unloved, uncared for, forgotten by everyone, I think that is a much greater hunger, a much greater poverty than the person who has nothing at all-- nothing to eat." So this goes on to explain to us that, as human beings, we have this internal need to be loved, to be cared, and to be noticed. And I think that's really powerful. So I hope all of you can relate a little bit to this quote, especially as we have been experiencing some level of isolation throughout the past year.

So what is social connection? Social connection is the subjective experience of feeling close to and a sense of belonging with others. We are wired to connect and make social connections to others. So in general, we have this need to be part of something, to connect, and to have meaningful connections with people.

Humans have a natural need for social connection, like feeling valued, cared for, and supported by others. Mental Health America found that 71% of people turn to family or friends when they feel stressed. We are profoundly social creatures. At the root of all of our desires is a need to be loved and to belong. A sense of social connection is one of our fundamental human needs. And it impacts our mental health, our physical health, and our longevity. And so this is just to show us how impactful having a social connection is to our life.

So more information about social connection, I already talked about how important it is to our physical and our mental health. But studies have also shown that a lack of social connection is greater detriment to our health than obesity, smoking, and high blood pressure. So not only is social connection important for our mental and well-being, but it's also important for our physical



well-being. And there has been a lot of studies out there to prove the impact of connections to our physical health and also to our mental health.

And for the past years, we have noticed that there is a lack of connection amongst Americans. And there was this survey that was taken to assess how connected, or how often do Americans feel alone? And the survey asked 20 million Americans via email to rate how often they felt alone. And they were able to choose always, sometimes, rarely, and never.

And I'm going to give you the results. But before I talk a little bit more in-depth about that survey, I want all of us here to take that survey. And so if we can please launch a poll to really assess, how often do you feel lonely? And so your answers are always, sometimes, rarely, and never. And if you can all please vote, we would really appreciate it.

AUDIENCE: Looks like we have about 75%. So I'll give it another few seconds for those who might still be wanting to vote, and then I'll close it.

ANGELA BEGRES: Thank you. All right, so here are some of the results. So this is a great example, right?

We have 60% of people said sometimes, and 38% of people put rarely. And that's really good because that's close to the results that the poll, the study found. I'm going to talk a bit more about that in a minute.

So in partnership with Ipsos, Cigna conducted an online survey of more than 20,000 US adults 18 years and older using the UCLA Loneliness Scale to further examine loneliness in America. And this is what they found. Most Americans are considerably lonely. The Cigna survey revealed that nearly half of all Americans always or sometimes feel alone at 46% or left out at 47%.

Some of the things that I found more interesting, though, is that generation Z adults, ages 18 to 22, and Millennials, adults ages 23 to 27, are lonelier and claimed to be in worse health than older generations. And one thing that was surprising is that social media use alone is not a predictor of loneliness. So there's a lot of other things happening for Gen Z and Millennials that is leading to loneliness, that it's not only what we used to tend to use as social media as an excuse. We always say, the young people these days are lonelier because they're spending more time in social media. But what this research found is that that alone is not a good predictor.

They also found the students within this age group between 18 to 22 have higher loneliness scores than retirees. And there was no major difference between men and women and no major difference between races when it came to the average loneliness scores. So what we notice here is that the feeling of loneliness is kind of affecting most of us, regardless of gender and regardless of race. But I do want to highlight here that we have to understand that the resources available for race are different. So that's something that we have to keep in mind as well.

So what we're noticing-- and this data was collected before COVID-19. So what we're realizing is that, even before this epidemic, we have been kind of experiencing loneliness in a higher scale than people have actually noticed or have been able to discuss. And in 2019, the Health Resource and Service Administration described a "loneliness epidemic" as an increase societal concern. So back in 2019, we have been seeing a highly increase in those



feelings of loneliness. And these numbers were prior to social isolations caused by COVID-19.

So the impact of low social connection. So now we have noticed that it's something that is crucial. We've noticed that it's really impacting us more than we have noticed. I think now that COVID-19 has come through, we're starting to open our eyes a little bit more into the impact of social connection and social isolation, but there is a high impact of low social connection. So low social connection, it's worse than smoking, high blood pressure, and obesity, high susceptibility to depression and anxiety, slow recovery from disease, increased antisocial behavior and aggression, and can lead to suicide.

But there are also some serious benefits to high social connection. So when we think about high social connection, it leads to 50% increased chance of longevity, strengthens your immune system, helps you recover from disease faster, may even lengthen your life. People who feel more connected to others have lower levels of anxiety and depression. And studies have also shown that we have higher self-esteem, greater empathy for others, and more trusting and cooperative. And as a consequence, others are more open and trusting of ourselves.

So what they have noticed with high social connection is that it's contagious. If we feel that we are connected, then we then pass that connection to others. And other people also feel connected.

The interesting thing is that the same happens in the other way. If we feel that we are lonely, then we experience that from others. And then we also kind of pass that along to others. So there is this level of this being contagious, that it's a little concerning.

There's definitely some consequences of social isolation during COVID-19.

So that is the restrictions imposed by COVID-19 have had some serious consequences and increased many stressors when it comes to isolation. So it led to job loss which led to financial distress and food insecurity, both of which have disproportionately affected people of color.

It also brought uncertainty about the future. And this can cause feelings of anxiety, depression, isolation as well as suicide. And being in such close proximity together for a long period of time has also increased the risk of conflict and domestic violence. So definitely some other things we have noticed with COVID-19 is that it definitely has increased different risks when it comes to social isolation for individuals.

And the number one reason why people seek therapy today is loneliness. So I found this to be really shocking when I was doing my research, but then it made sense to me as a therapist. It is true that a lot of individuals do find themselves being lonely and that lack of-- and the feeling of loneliness sometimes impairs people from reaching out and connecting with others, because they feel like no one wants to connect with them.

And so it is really hard to get out of the cycle of loneliness. But the good news is that loneliness is reversible. And research has also found that the main treatment for loneliness is finding meaningful social connections.

And I want to highlight the word "meaningful," because it's different. It's very different from having a meaningful connection than trying to have a whole



bunch of new friends. And I'm going to talk a little bit more about what that means. What is it to have meaningful connections?

So let's start by really defining, what is loneliness? So when we think about loneliness, loneliness is a common condition affecting one in three adults.

Loneliness refers to the discrepancy between the number and quality of the relationships that you desire and those that you have. And again, I think it's important to remember and highlight quality of relationships, because we can have a lot of contacts in our phones, and we can have a lot of followers on social media. But that does not equal feeling connecting.

Loneliness has also increased over the past few decades. Compared to the 1980s, the number of people living alone in the US has increased by about one third. When Americans were asked about the number of people that they can confide in, that number dropped from three in 1985 to two in 2004.

So again, we are seeing here kind of that the process of how in America we have become lonelier over time. And a lot of that is families have started to separate. People have started to move. We've started to have smaller families. Communities have started to kind of break apart.

And so people are starting to have to live alone or live in smaller groups. And so that can lead to those feelings of loneliness. We no longer have the same amount of people we can connect face to face that we used to have maybe between the 1980s and 1985.

And, like I said before, loneliness can be contagious. So when we become lonely, we start to act and see the world differently. You begin to notice the threats in your environment more readily. You expect to be rejected more often and become more judgmental of the people you interact with. People that you talk to can feel this and as a result start moving away from you, which perpetrates your cycle of loneliness.

So again, we often times-- when we start feeling lonely, we often times start to see the world differently. And in seeing the world differently, people start to react to us differently. And this can lead to what is known as chronic loneliness.

So when we think about chronic loneliness, it occurs when feelings of loneliness and uncomfortable social isolation can go on for a long period of time. It's characterized by constant and unrelenting feelings of being alone, separated, or divided from others and an inability to connect on a deeper level. Again, this goes back, I think, to kind of the time in society that we're living in today.

We're separated oftentimes by family. We live in smaller units. We might not even know who our neighbors are. So we tend to feel that separation from others.

It can also be accompanied by deeply rooted feelings of inadequacy, poor self-esteem, and self-loathing. So part of chronic loneliness is not having connections with others, but also how we view ourselves and how we feel connected with ourselves. And I think that's more important because if we feel connected with ourselves, then it's easier to see the world in a way that we can be connected with others. And so that's something to keep in mind is, how do we feel internally? And that can be then passed on to how we feel outwardly.



So here are some signs and symptoms of chronic loneliness. Inability to connect with others on a deeper, more intimate level. We may have many acquaintances but no best or close friend, feelings that no one gets you or gets us, overwhelming feelings of isolation, even if you're at a party surrounded by dozens of people, negative feelings of self-doubt and self-worth, feeling exhausted when trying to engage in social activities.

Now, I'm wondering, in the past year, how often did you feel any of these signs and symptoms? So if you can all kind of share in the chat with me, in the past year did you feel any of this? Maybe one, two, maybe three, maybe none, because I would dare to say that in the past year, many of us felt lonely or felt disconnected from our family, our friends, or even within ourselves. So I'll be happy to see what you guys all share in the chat.

All right, so we-- I see some people starting to write in there. Yeah, two to three. No, really, that's good. I feel at least two of those symptoms. I can think of four a few times. Yeah.

I think that we are all trying to connect with what loneliness feels like. And for some of us, it might be a feeling that has lasted only through COVID. For others of us, it can be a feeling that has started way before COVID. Someone talked about elderly, and I think that's a good point to bring on-- every person that has cancer and dementia. Yeah, some people-- thank you for sharing that then, about elderly parents and dad has cancer and dementia in lockdown [INAUDIBLE] several times.

Oftentimes, when I did my research around loneliness, it started with a lot of the elderly feeling that loneliness because they are maybe sent into nursing houses, because they're getting lonelier, their children are gone, so on and so forth. But as I continue to do my research, I've started realizing and noticing the data was showing that it wasn't only the elderly that have been affected by loneliness, but it was also younger people. And as the data shows, Gen Z and Millennials are also getting the same effect actually than the elderly have had experienced or are experiencing.

So what I was trying to say is I know that many of us maybe feel some of the symptoms throughout COVID. But I'm curious and would want to ask all of you, did you feel this even before COVID? Or are we noticing this with the people around us, our friends, our kids, our children?

We're noticing that they're kind of showing some of the symptoms as well, because we know that it's impacting Americans, and it's impacting people around us. So just being mindful of how loneliness impacts us and also the effect that it has on us so that then we can start taking action. And that's oftentimes how I look at things like this. And when I do a presentation, I want to show, what is the impact? And then how do we take action to be able to alleviate some of those symptoms?

So loneliness is deeply connected to depression. But the funny thing is that we don't know if it's the chicken or the egg. Does loneliness lead to depression, or does depression lead to loneliness? And what we found is that it's likely both.

So one study has found that loneliness is a stronger predictor of mental health, and mental health is a predictor of loneliness. And another study also has shown that there is a link to-- with loneliness to executive function,



cognitive function, and even the risk of Alzheimer's disease. So again, I like to just make this connection to how we feel, there was a straight line into how we act and how we behave. And also, sometimes those feelings can impact our physical health in ways that sometimes are indescribable. And what we're noticing here with this epidemic of loneliness is that there has been some really clear research on how loneliness has had some severe impact with some physical symptoms as well.

So how much social connection do we need? And in that, I kind of wanted to ask you all first. And when we think about social connection, I want to ask you all, how many of you-- how many people do you have in your life that you feel comfortable enough to share a personal problem with? So think about it. How many people do you have right now in your life that you would be willing to call at any time to share a personal problem with?

Oh, Julie, you have five. That's amazing. At least five. Couple of friends, four, six. You guys are very socially connected.

Two, less than 10. Good. This is awesome! Maybe 10. Wow! This is awesome.

I'm glad to hear this. OK, you guys all-- according to research, you all are in good shape. So in 2005, the mean number is two. So that means that most people have at least two individuals that they can call to share a personal problem with.

Someone said, "7 to 12 including family." That's awesome, right? And that's important. And for me, I think that one thing that increased my social connection was COVID-19 because it made me creative on how I was able to connect with people even if they didn't live in my same city or even if they didn't live in a driving distance from me. And so I'm happy to see that all of you have some people you can connect with.

Social connection has more to do with your internal and subjective feelings of connection rather than your number of friends. So when we think about internal and subjective feelings of connection, it's really how you feel, how you feel the people that you can connect with, how you feel comfortable talking to others rather than the actual number of friends you have. So that's why I asked someone that you would feel comfortable sharing a problem with, because that's letting someone into your intimate self. And that's what it means to be connected.

You could have 1,000 friends and still feel lonely. There's the expression "lonely in a crowd." But you can also have no close friends or relatives but still feel very connected.

And when we think about this, it's that it really comes within us. Being connected is a sense that we feel, whether we feel connected to ourselves, to nature, to the people around us. And then we get to express that outwardly to others. And research shows that compassion and self-compassion has a huge health benefit and creates a sense of connection and purpose.

And I will be talking about compassion a lot today. And I will talk about compassion in the next series that I'll be presenting. But I think compassion is a really important skill to have and to share with others, and not just compassion but self-compassion, so treating ourselves with the same care



and love that we would treat those around us, because that in itself helps us feel connected.

So what is compassion? So let's talk a little bit more about compassion.

Compassion is a mix of love and sadness. It blends the recognition of suffering and the desire to help one who is suffering.

It's a trait that evolved over many years, and it contributes to that formation of bonds and profound social connections between humans. Several interventions have been developed to increase compassion and thereby increase social connection. So research has found that real being compassion also increases social connection. And the thing is that one act of compassion generates compassion within us.

Compassion, again, is another thing that can be incredibly contagious. Think about the feelings it generates in you. We can all think of a time that someone did something that was compassionate. And it could have even moved us to tears.

I've noticed even recently, people who grow their hair and then donate it. And then we see kind of the cycle of other people seeing the act of compassion and then joining that same trend of donating their hair. And so oftentimes, compassion can be contagious. If you notice someone doing something kind, we tend to do the same kind thing towards other people.

Some of you may have heard the phrase "paying it forward." And in some ways, a lot of us experience compassion. In other ways we, see a lack of compassion in many different places.

And so I think that the idea is we need to start thinking about, how can we build self-compassion? How can we treat ourselves positively when we are maybe having times of difficulty? How can we provide ourselves grace and love ourselves? And then, how can we also provide that for others? How can we be compassionate towards others, and understanding, and forgiving, and help them pass that compassion forward?

And the thing is that is how culture is created, when we can move people to do things that are helpful and kind. And wouldn't it be nice to see a culture where most people are compassionate towards each other? So compassion, it has immense amount of power.

So other things that we can do to create connection, like I said before, there is an internal sense of connection that can be nurtured and built. So it's really important to have those people around you that you can trust, those people around you that you can connect with. But it's important to build that connection within yourself as well. And in some ways, we probably have tried to do this in the last 12 months. And in other ways, I would want us all to continue to build this kind of sense of connection within us moving forward and being able to share some of these resources with other people who maybe need to hear them as well.

So how do we increase connection? How do we build that within ourselves? Well, there's some ways that we can do that. We can give, share, support, and do acts of kindness for others. So research has demonstrated that compassion and volunteering has a huge health benefit and creates a sense of connection and purpose.



We can develop these ourselves. We can find ways in which we can start giving things to people who maybe need them. How do we share information, share things with individuals?

Like I said, I have a young girl who grew her hair. And she was very, very passionate-- six years old-- very passionate about donating her hair. And she put this video on TikTok, which apparently is the new thing now. And now she had another connection.

Her uncle decided that they were going to do the same thing. So an act of kindness is also something that we can put the same impact on others to do the same thing again. And so I think that it is a way that we can all be contagious around doing kind things.

So give. Look around your house. Maybe we can start donating clothes that we don't need.

Maybe we can start a Facebook page of sharing resources. Maybe we can figure out how we can support each other in our community, or maybe get to know your neighbors. Being able to connect with others is really important. Taking care of ourselves. Stress is linked to high self-focus and therefore a lower sense of connection. If you're happy from within, you're also more likely to feel connected and to reach out to others.

So I agree with this concept of stress is linked to high self-focus. Oftentimes, when we feel stress or we're feeling anxious, we tend to become self-focused. So we start thinking very internally.

No one likes me. People don't find me interesting. I have nothing to add to this conversation. So all of that obviously is not going to ignite in you the need to connect with others. So we want to make sure that we start connecting with ourselves and taking care of ourselves.

So that might mean seeking therapy to kind of work through some of that. That might be using things like mindfulness and meditation. So looking within ourselves to see, what are some things that I need to do to feel more connected to myself?

And ask for help. People are generally willing to help us. But if we don't ask, they assume we don't need help.

And when I wrote this, when I saw this, I was like that is right. I feel like oftentimes, we are afraid to ask for help, or we don't know how to ask for help. Or sometimes, because we are kind, we assume that people have a lot going on. And so maybe they don't have time to help us.

But it is OK to ask for help. And like I said, most people are willing to help. We just have to ask for help.

And so I highly encourage this thing of if you need help with-- I don't know-- things around your house, moving, like talking, you need help maybe taking care of a child so you can go take care of yourself, don't be afraid to reach out and ask for help. And if one person says no, maybe try asking another person.

Use those social connections that you have, because we're all there for each other. And we all are willing to do it. But sometimes we're just too afraid to ask for help.



Yeah. Someone wrote, "I think it's very difficult to ask for help." And I agree. I think we have become a society where asking for help is just not allowed. And I think that's part of the social connection.

We have pushed our connections further, further apart. We have started to connect only electronically. We started to connect only virtually. And that makes that tangible part difficult, the tangible part of asking for someone to come and take care of you or be there for you.

And this kind of reminds me of when I gave birth. It was a really lonely process because I was the first of my friends, and I felt so lonely. But if I didn't ask for help, I was just kind of going to jump into depression.

And I had a friend who came, and she would come once a week. And we would put a dance video and exercise together. And just that level of connection once a week made such a high impact.

And it took me just calling a friend and saying, hey, I really need help. I am oftentimes here alone. I need to connect with someone.

And she was like, sure. Here's what we're going to do. I'll bring this video. We'll exercise, and we will look silly as we dance in your living room.

And for an hour, we did that. And it was honestly such a-- it was a need, and it really helped me feel connected. It's OK to ask for help, and people are willing to help. If you take anything out of this presentation, that would be a good thing to take away.

So the benefits of healthy social connections. So we've talked a lot about how social isolation impacts us physically and mentally. Well, there's also really good benefits of feeling socially connected.

High self-esteem, better emotional regulation. If we feel connected to others, then we're able to manage our feelings more appropriately. We also become more empathetic. We're able to connect with others in a more empathetic way.

Having healthier romantic relationships. And I want to highlight "healthier" because sometimes when we actually have low social connections, we build unhealthy romantic relationships. We want to depend on the person for everything. And that's oftentimes unhealthy. So feeling socially connected helps us build those healthier romantic relationships.

Stronger immune system and quicker recovery from cold, flu, and other illnesses, increased longevity, decreased incidence of anxiety and depression, decreased suicidal thoughts and attempts, and less physical pain. So we're seeing that having some level of high social connections can be very beneficial for ourselves, our emotions, our mental capacity as well as our physical health.

Another thing about social connections is that it increases resilience. And I don't know about you all, but I've heard the word "resilience" a lot during throughout COVID-19. But I think this is really important. The social connection makes us more resilient.

We think about resilience is the ability to bounce back after stressful situations, is strengthened when you build and receive support-- when you give and receive support. Building positive relationships with people can make a difference in how resilient you are. So the support you get from your social connections can add to your feelings of meaning and purpose in life. This in



turn add to your resilience. Happy, resilient people tend to be more connected to people around them.

Remember that giving support is just as important as gaining support. You count on your social connection for support, but they also count on you. Ask others about their families, jobs, and interest, and help them when you can. Don't always focus on your challenges or talk about yourself. Know when it's time to listen or just enjoy your friend's company. Giving support to others builds the social bond that helps make you resilient.

So in some ways, we definitely want to use our social connections to kind of vent and build resilience. But don't forget to also be there for your friends. And ask questions, and get to know them because that's how we increase those bonds with our friends. And that's crucial for our social connection, is continuing to improve our bonds with those friends.

So other ways that we can deepen our social connections, some ways are saying hello to strangers or clerks in stores. In other ways, look up from your phone. How many of us-- and I think this is harder today because we wear masks, and it kind of builds a barrier in connecting with others because of our facial expressions. But we oftentimes are rushing. We oftentimes are disconnected with our surroundings because we are too caught up in our own lives, that we forget to just kind of be present and look at people and say hi to them.

And as I was preparing for this presentation, I started thinking about a place where I used to work. And there was this man. He was the manager of systems. And people-- his reputation was he was mean, he was angry all the time, and he was just a very difficult person.

And to me, that was like a challenge. I was like, awesome. I'm going to be super nice to this person to the point where I'm just going to win him over so that it doesn't become a challenge to get my system fixed whenever I need it. And whenever I saw him, I would be like, hey, how are you? How's your day going? Even if I was walking through the hallways, even if I was rushing to see a client, I always made it a point to stop and just notice him.

And he would do anything I would ask him. He was super kind to me. I learned about his family. He would come to my office and talk to me.

And I never, ever saw this mean, grumpy person that people referred to him as. And so I don't know what it was. Maybe it was that I decided that I was going to be kind and compassionate to him or maybe that other people just never really took the time to get to know him. But one thing I do know is that I never experienced what people told me about him, because I wanted to show him that people can be kind. And I just made a point to just be there and be present and just notice him.

And so think about that in your places of work. Think about that in your commute. How do we connect to others? How do we say hi to strangers? How do we forgive a driver who cut us off? And we get really angry, because those things trigger our disconnection to people. If we get really angry and start cursing or fighting with the person driving in front of us, that triggers disconnection. That triggers insecurity. And so being kind and compassionate kind of enhances our connection and our social connection.



So saying hi to strangers, noticing people. This is a beautiful day. So if you go to the grocery store, notice those people. Maybe talk about the weather. So being able to notice individuals can help build our social connection.

Spend time doing things you enjoy, and invite others to join you. So that might mean if you enjoy dancing-- I'm just going to use my example. If you enjoy dancing, maybe invite someone to come over and do a dance exercise with you.

Or if you enjoy drawing, just invite your connections. Nowadays, we can even do it virtually, right? Maybe if you like reading, join a book club. All of those things can help us feel socially connected. And at the same time, we can start building new connections, which deepens our social connection.

Don't count on the number of friends you have, but look at the quality of your connections. And I would add to this focus on maintaining those connections. So instead of saying, I need more friends, maybe saying, how do I continue to deepen my connections with my current friends? Maybe that means every so often just checking, hey, how is your kids doing? Or, hey, can I come over and pay you a visit?

One thing I learned after having my first kid is that I am just the kindest person to new mothers. I will drive to them. I will make it a plan to go see them.

I will go hold their kid because for me, that was a really difficult time. And so it just has made me more compassionate to all of the people around me. And so think about that with your connections and with your friends.

Ask questions and show interest in others to form a connection. You probably have heard that oftentimes in America, we tend to always ask, what do you do for a living? And I would encourage you to ask, what are some of your interests? What do you do for fun? I think that can enhance our connection much more than learning what someone does for a living.

Volunteer with social services agencies, museums, theaters, schools, or community groups. And I know volunteering probably is not a thing we can do at the moment. But in the future, think about, how can we volunteer? Where are some places that we can get involved?

Not only does this help our social connections, but it's helping communities. It's giving back to our communities. So it also brings a sense of reward.

And you may all know that working out and moving our bodies is crucial. It also makes us-- it releases a chemical in our brain that helps us feel better about ourselves, in return helps us feel better about our future. And so any level of exercise that you can do can be really helpful.

I'm naturally a social connections person. I like to connect with others. So for me, group exercises are really successful. So think about for yourself, what is successful for me when it comes to deepening your social connections? What do I need?

Some of us are more social. Other of us are more introverted. And none of those impact that sense of social connection, because remember, most of it is internal. So all of these are some examples of social connections that we can build. In a minute, I'm going to give you some more internal things that we can do to enhance our social connection.

Lastly, don't be afraid to seek therapy. Oftentimes what we saw that-- we saw the statistics. Loneliness is the number one reason why people seek therapy.



So sometimes it can be really helpful to talk to a professional and kind of find or resolve some underlying emotional issues regarding our socialization. Sometimes we have different ways that we view the world. And, in fact, how we can connect and think in therapy can be a good source in trying to solve some of those challenges.

So here are some creative ways to manage isolation and loneliness. I said this already, check in. Check in with your loved ones.

Call a neighbor or friend. Check in on how they're doing. Really important just making sure that your friends and your neighbors and the people around you are there, and that they know you love them.

Schedule a virtual hangout. Spend time in a virtual setting with friends and loved ones. I'm betting-- oftentimes I ask in my webinars, how are people getting-- staying connected? And all the time, I get virtually.

And so it sounds like we're all-- we've all become really connected in utilizing the internet and the virtual hangouts as a form of being connected. And that's amazing. Now we're able to participate in birthdays virtually. Now we're able to participate in weddings virtually. So it's probably not ideal, but it's still a way that we can engage virtually and still feel connected.

Go outside. Simply getting outside for some fresh air and waving or greeting others is a form of-- from a safe distance can make a huge difference. Again, make it a point. I'm going to go for a walk. And I'm going to wave and say hi, or I'm going to smile at every person I see.

And you'll notice that you feel internally better. And I will bet you that the people that you wave to also feel better at the moment that you wave at them, because you're noticing them. We have the need to be noticed.

Lend a helping hand. And use social media wisely. Social media can help maintain connections for family and friends who live far away. Too much exposure, however, can make anxiety or depression worse.

So we have to still be mindful of how we're using social media, how our loved ones are using social media, because that can make a huge impact as well. And it can definitely make it worse if we're using it inappropriately or spending way too much time in it. We kind of need that space and the fresh air to really engage with others.

And then, how do we maintain connections during COVID-19? Well, I'm going to start from the very top. Ensure basic needs are met.

So in order for us to really build on connections, we want to make sure that our basic needs have been met. Otherwise, we can't even get to the feelings of social connections in the hierarchy. So make sure that you, or your loved ones, or any of your friends and families have their basic needs met.

They're able to pay their rent. They have food. They have access to medication. And now making sure that we have accessibility to masks because it's almost a requirement. It is a requirement.

Manage emotions and mood. Check in with your emotions. Check in with your mood. And it can be helpful to have conscious breathing, to practice meditation, to use other relaxation techniques that are helpful for you.

If any of you have an iWatch, your iWatch reminds you to breathe. Take use of those things. They are so helpful. They help you feel connected to yourself. And those things really build on our need to be connected.



Check in with your mental health. The pandemic is stressful for everyone. And significant stress can predict the occurrence of mental disorders in some people, especially vulnerable populations. So again, I want to highlight here that social connections have had an impact on our health, but the highest impact has been on people of color. And we want to be mindful of that.

Maintain physical and mental activity. We've talked already about that, going out for a walk, maybe exercising with your partner finding ways that you can maintain physical activity. And pursue other activities. While following the guidance of social distancing, outdoor activities are usually still possible and beneficial to health. So if you have any place that you can go for a walk, if you have any place where you can enjoy sunlight, try to do that a couple of times a week as your schedule allows.

Also, it's important to remember to embrace loneliness. Oftentimes when we feel lonely, our instinct is to push it away. Our instinct is let's distract ourselves so this feeling of loneliness goes away. But research shows that resisting or distracting ourselves does not solve the core problem. It does not get to the root of the problem.

So instead of distracting or resisting the feeling of loneliness, sit with them. Give the emotions full expression. Let them take center stage.

Allow yourself sometimes to feel lonely, to see where you feel it in your body, to see how it makes you feel, to see how it impacts your breathing, to think about, what are the thoughts that can mean when you feel lonely? What are you telling yourself when you're feeling lonely? Notice what triggers your feelings of lonely.

Crying-- if your tears come, crying could be a healthy process. We sometimes need to cry. And be with that discomfort fully. So allow those feelings to really sink in. You can learn so much about yourself by giving your feelings the full time to sink in.

Sit in silence. We recommend to set yourself a time limit for silence, such as half an hour. And doing that time, again, just notice yourself.

Notice your feeling. Notice your body. Notice what you're feeling when you're sitting in silence. You can also do some activities, like try to swim on your own. But the goal is to sit in silence and be fully present with that.

I grew up in a family of eight, so sitting in silence wasn't a thing that I was comfortable with. And it's oftentimes really hard for me to sit in silence. And you will learn a lot from that process.

And lastly, engage in mindful meditation. Meditation can be really helpful for us. And you don't have to do it for too long. Start with five minutes, and then move on maybe as long as you can.

When we include these practices in our daily lives, they kind of kick in when we start to feel lonely. We start kind of learning how our body feels, and we start recognizing what we need to do. And it's a way of healing ourselves in those times. So I highly encourage you to practice this.

And lastly, here are some strategies to cultivate inner and outer connection. I think this is nothing new that we've already talked about, but take care of your body. When we take care of our bodies, we feel better, and our mental outlooks change. So think about, how can we eat healthier? And it's not about dieting, but changing your eating habits, eating healthier.



How can we serve? How can we be kind? "For everyone you meet is fighting a harder battle."

This is kind of a quote we hear often. "Be kind, for everyone you meet is fighting a harder battle." And these always resonate with me. I feel like I always walk with this quote.

And I tend to try to be kind to people because I understand that we all kind of struggle at different times. And maybe I'm not showing it at the moment. But the person who was rude and cut me off in the drive home apparently was struggling with something. And that thought process changes my anger to kindness.

Connect with nature. Go on walks. Notice the change in the weather and the seasons.

We're going into spring. So many beautiful things grow in spring. So it's a great time to really go out and connect with nature.

And then fall in love with yourself. I would say put yourself first. Figure out what makes you happy, what makes you feel connected.

When do you need to sit with loneliness? How much connection do you need because we all need deeper levels of connection? And so we want to make sure that we start with ourselves. And then that's going to make us a way better person for everyone around us.

So if you do need any resources, I would say here are some helpful resources for you if you need to find a therapist. Michigan has this new Peer-run Warmline, which is peer support specialists attend this Warmline to support individuals who are struggling with their mental health. It's a beautiful idea. It's available every day from 10:00 to 2:00 AM. And I think it's a great resource for anyone in the spectrum, everything, just kind of struggling with their mental health to really maybe living with a mental illness. So if you live in Michigan, I would say use this resource, and pass this resource on to anyone else that you know.

The National Helpline, the National Institute of Health. There is a Social Wellness Tool in the National Institutes of Health that puts out some pictures on how you can connect with others and the importance of connecting. The National Suicide Prevention Lifeline. There's also the Text Line.

And my information is here. We do have a handout that gives you some of these resources I have talked about so far. And you all will have access to this PowerPoint as well. So you'll be able to kind of go through all of that information that I just shared with all of you thus far. And I'm open for any questions that you all might have.

ANN SCHENSKY: Thank you, Angela. That was great. Really good information.

We do have a couple of questions in the Q&A. When you were talking about asking for help, someone said, "Instead of saying do you need help, just ask-- making sure that their needs are met. Is there something that you need? Because they may not want to ask for help." But they also believe it is important to ask for help if we need it.

ANGELA BEGRES: Yeah, I think that's great. That's a good way to also approach individuals. Are your needs met? Is there anything I can do to help your needs to be met? Absolutely.



And maybe some of us have some resources. If we know someone that's needs haven't been met, we have some resources we can share. And two minds think better than one. So connecting with others, even with some of our problems, can be really helpful.

ANN SCHENSKY: Great. The other question is, "How does loneliness correlate with being a natural introvert?"

ANGELA BEGRES: I would say those are two very different things because loneliness comes within you. So if you're a natural introvert, and you feel connected, and you are not impacted by those feelings of loneliness, then you're doing fine. And there's no really concept of loneliness because you're feeling connected within yourself. And that's OK, too.

ANN SCHENSKY: Great. Thank you. We don't have any other questions right now. I wanted to, again, thank you very much for this great information, remind everyone that the PowerPoints, the recording, and the handouts will be available on our website. It takes us about a week or so to get those up there.

If you have any other questions, you can let us know. But again, thank everyone for their time, especially you, Angela. And don't forget to sign up for the next three sessions that we will be presenting.

ANGELA BEGRES: Sounds good. Thank you.