

Why Social Connection is Important for Mental Health

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Partners for Healthy Lives

Great Lakes Mental Health
Technology Transfer Center
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January 2021

MHTTC Words Matter

The MHTTC Network uses affirming, respectful and recovery-oriented language in all activities. That language is:

STRENGTHS-BASED
AND HOPEFUL

INCLUSIVE AND
ACCEPTING OF
DIVERSE CULTURES,
GENDERS,
PERSPECTIVES,
AND EXPERIENCES

HEALING-CENTERED/
TRAUMA-RESPONSIVE

INVITING TO INDIVIDUALS
PARTICIPATING IN THEIR
OWN JOURNEYS

PERSON-FIRST AND
FREE OF LABELS

NON-JUDGMENTAL AND
AVOIDING ASSUMPTIONS

RESPECTFUL, CLEAR
AND UNDERSTANDABLE

CONSISTENT WITH
OUR ACTIONS,
POLICIES, AND PRODUCTS

Adapted from: https://mhcc.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/Recovery-Oriented-Language-Guida_2019ed_v1_20190809-Web.pdf



Thank You for Joining Us!


A few housekeeping items:

- 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 assist you.
- If you have questions for the speaker, please put them in the Q&A section at the bottom of your screen.
- A copy of the power point slides, as well as the recording and handout will be available on the MHTTC website within a week.

Thank You for Joining Us!

A few more housekeeping items:

- You will be directed to a link at the end of the presentation to a very short survey – we would really appreciate it if you could fill it out. It takes about 3 minutes.
- We will be using automated captioning during the presentation today
- Certificates of attendance will be sent out to all who attended the full session. They will be sent via email.

A close-up photograph of several social media icons on white, 3D keyboard keys. The icons include Pinterest (red circle with white 'P'), Snapchat (yellow square with white ghost), Instagram (purple and pink gradient camera icon), Facebook (blue square with white 'f'), and Twitter (blue bird). The keys are arranged in a grid, and the background is a dark, textured surface.

Follow Us On Social Media!

Facebook and Twitter:

- @GreatLakesATTC
- @GMhttc
- @GLPTTC

Presenters

- **Angela Begres** is a licensed clinical social worker who did her training at the University of Chicago, where she obtained her MSW.



Why Social Connection is Important for Mental Health

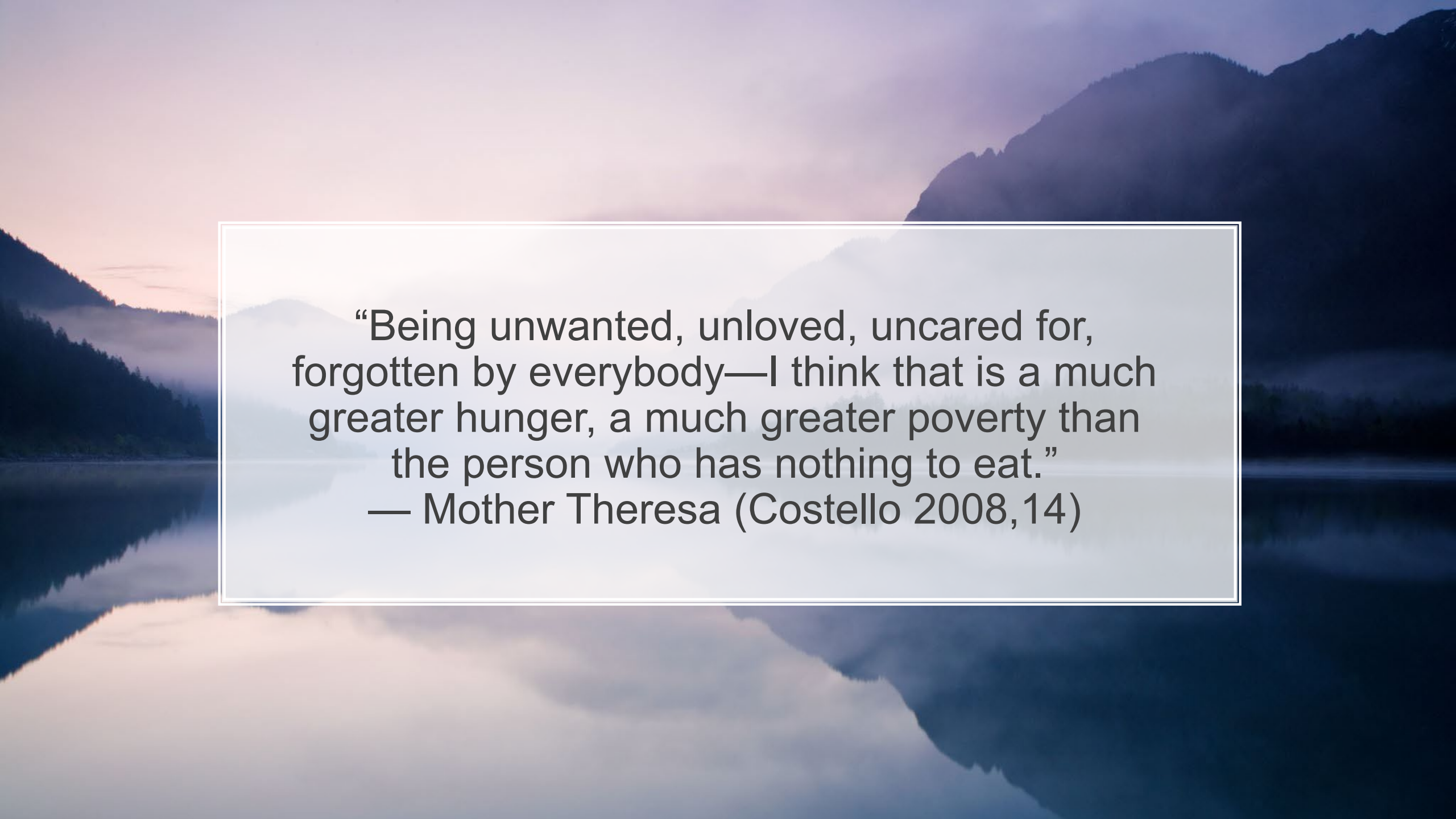
Angela Begres, LCSW




Partners for Healthy Lives

Learning Objectives

- Overview the impact of social distancing to our mental health
- Discuss the risk of social isolation and loneliness
- Provide strategies to maintain meaningful connections

A serene landscape featuring a calm lake reflecting the sky and surrounding mountains. The sky is a mix of soft pinks, purples, and blues, suggesting a sunset or sunrise. The mountains are dark and silhouetted against the lighter sky. The water is still, creating a clear reflection of the sky and mountains.

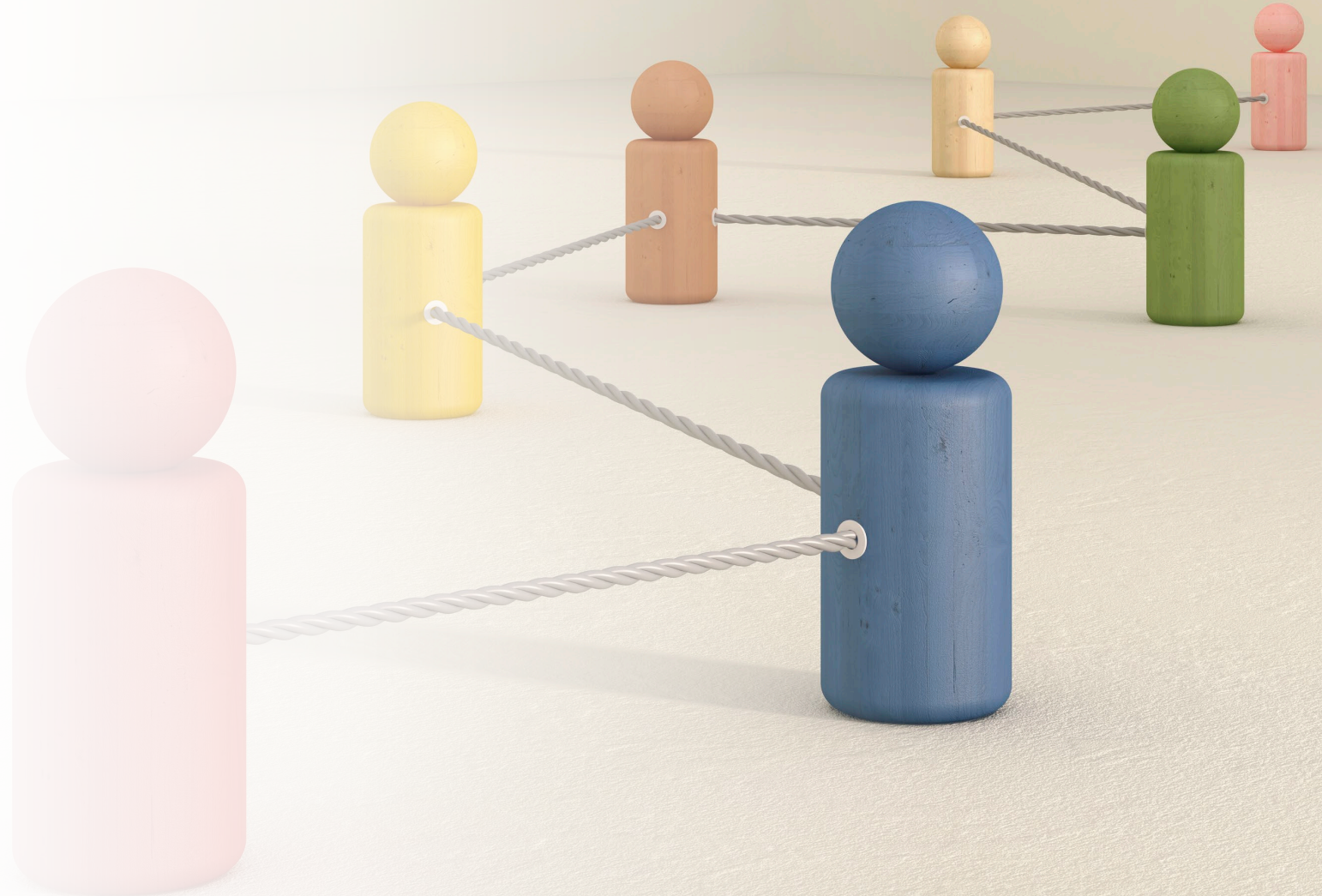
“Being unwanted, unloved, uncared for,
forgotten by everybody—I think that is a much
greater hunger, a much greater poverty than
the person who has nothing to eat.”
— Mother Theresa (Costello 2008,14)



Humans have a natural
need for social
connection and like
feeling valued, cared for,
and supported by others.

Social connection

- Social connection improves physical health and mental/emotional well being.
- One study showed that lack of social connection is a greater detriment to health than obesity, smoking and high blood pressure.⁴





Poll

Cigna Study

Study Findings:

- Most Americans are considered lonely.
- Generation Z (adults ages 18-22) and Millennials (adults ages 23-37) are lonelier and claim to be in worse health than older generations. Social media use alone is not a predictor of loneliness.
- Students have higher loneliness scores than retirees.
- There was no major difference between men and women and no major difference between races when it came to average loneliness scores.

The loneliness epidemic⁶

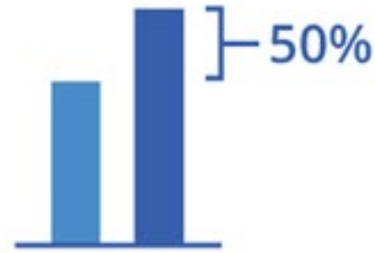
- In 2019, the Health Resource and Services Administration described a “loneliness epidemic” as an increase societal concern
- The Cigna survey revealed nearly half of of Americans always or sometimes feel alone (46%) or left out (47%)
- Close to 50% of the responses stated loneliness plagued their daily lives, however, this number was reported prior to social isolation caused by COVID-19

The impact of low social connection⁴

- Worse for health than smoking, high blood pressure, and obesity
- High susceptibility to depression and anxiety
- Slower recovery from disease
- Increased antisocial behaviors and aggression
- Suicide

The benefits of high social connection

THE BENEFITS OF HIGH SOCIAL CONNECTION:



50% increased
chance of longevity



stronger gene expression
for immunity (research by
Steve Cole, UCLA)



lower rates of anxiety
and depression



higher self-esteem
and empathy



better emotion
regulation skills



Social connection creates
a positive feedback loop
of social, emotional, and
physical well being.

Consequences of social isolation during COVID-19 outbreak⁵

The restrictions imposed by COVID- 19, while preventative and necessary, have social consequences and have created many subsequent stressors. This includes:

- Job loss
- Uncertainty about the future
- Increased risk of conflicts and domestic violence
- Increased risk of depression, anxiety, and suicide


“The number one reason
why people seek therapy
today is loneliness”²

What is 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 you have
- Studies have suggested that obesity, smoking, and happiness are contagious³
- Lonely people don't trust their connections and foster that mistrust in others.

What is chronic loneliness?

Chronic loneliness occurs when feelings of loneliness and uncomfortable social isolation 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.



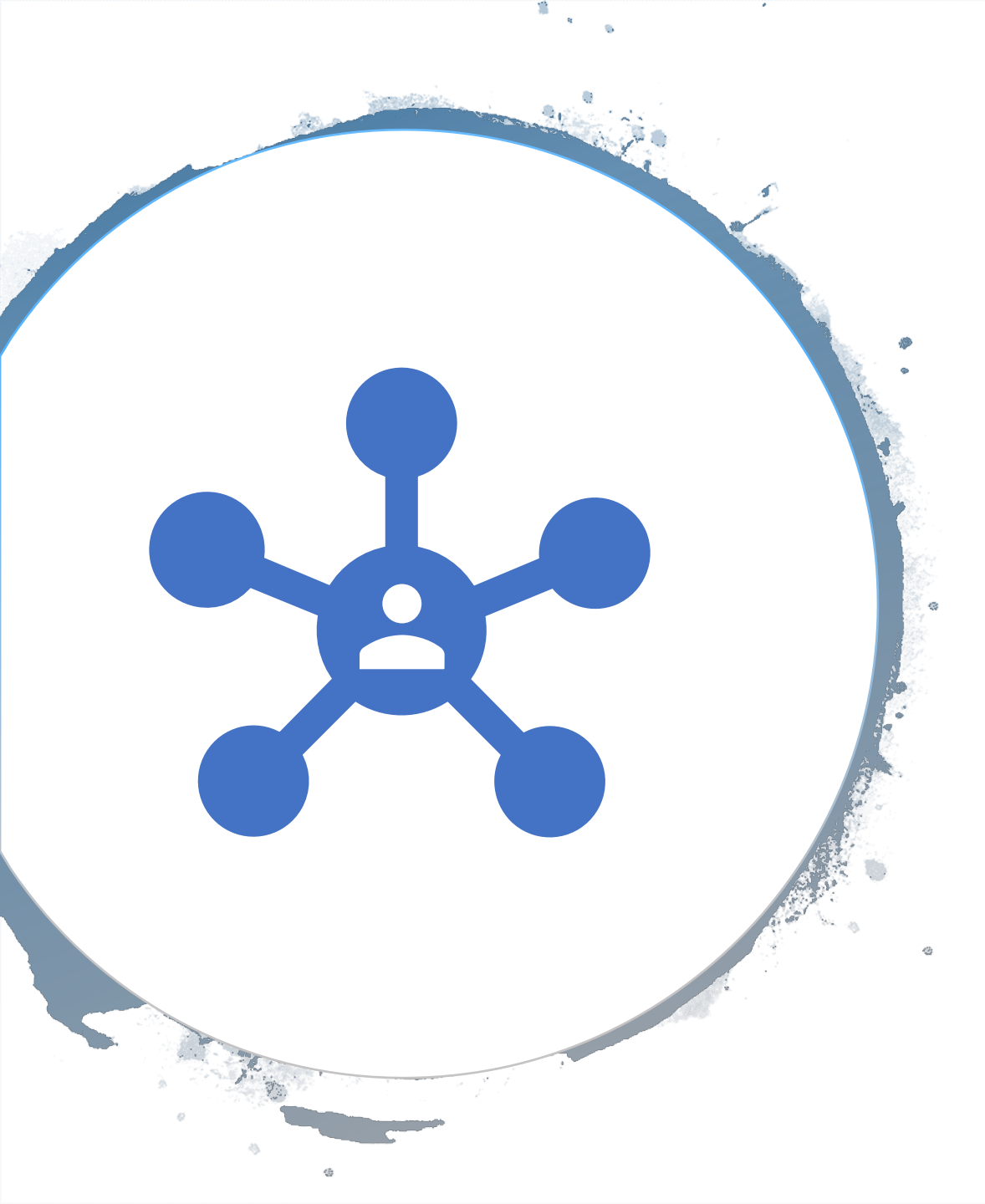
It can also be accompanied by deeply rooted feelings of inadequacy, poor self-esteem, and self-loathing.

Signs & Symptoms of chronic loneliness:

- Inability to connect with others on a deeper, more intimate level
- Many acquaintances but no “best” or “close” friend
- Feelings that no one “gets” you
- 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

Loneliness is deeply connected to depression

- “Chicken or the egg”?
 - Does loneliness lead to depression, or depression lead to loneliness?
 - It’s likely both
- One recent study has found that loneliness is a stronger predictor of mental health than mental health is a predictor of loneliness¹¹
- Studies have also shown a link to problems with attention, executive function, cognitive function, and even the risk for Alzheimer’s disease¹¹



How much social connection do we need?

- Social connection has more to do with your internal and subjective feeling of connection rather than your number of friends.
- You could have 1000 friends and still feel low connection (thus the expression loneliness in a crowd), but you could also have no close friends or relatives but still feel very connected.
- Research shows that compassion and self-compassion has a huge health benefit and creates a sense of connection and purpose²

Compassion increases social connection

- Compassion is a mixture 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 contributed to the formation of bonds and profound social connections between humans.
- Several interventions have been developed to increase compassion and thereby increase social connection.



An internal sense of connection can be nurtured and build

- Give, share, support, and do acts of kindness for others:
 - Research has demonstrated that compassion and volunteering has a huge health benefit and creates a sense of connection and purpose.²
- Take care of oneself:
 - Stress is linked to high self-focus and therefore a lower sense of connection. If you are happy from within, you are also more likely to feel connected and to reach out to others.
- As for help:
 - People are generally willing to help us, but if we don't ask, they assume we don't need help.

Benefits of healthy social connections

- Higher self esteem
- Better emotional regulation
- Increased empathy
- Healthier romantic relationships
- Stronger immune system and quicker recovery from colds, flu, and other illnesses
- Increased longevity
- Decreased incidence of anxiety and depression
- Decreased suicidal thoughts and attempts
- Less physical pain

Social connection increases resilience

- Resilience, the ability to bounce back after stressful situations, is strengthened when you give and receive support. Building positive relationships with people can make a difference in how resilient you are.



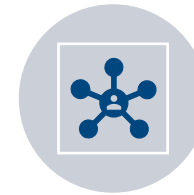
How to deepen your social connections



Say hello to strangers or clerks in stores (in other words, look up from your phone!)



Spend time doing things you enjoy and invite others to join you



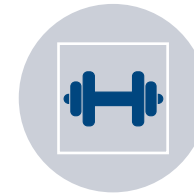
Don't count the number of friends you have, but look at the quality of your connections



Ask questions and show interest in others to form a connection



Volunteer with a social service agency, museum, theater, school, or community group



Work out in a gym or join an exercise group



Seek therapy to resolve underlying emotional issues regarding socializing



Creative ways to manage isolation and loneliness

1

Check in with loved ones

- Call a neighbor or friend to check in on how they are doing.

2

Schedule a virtual hangout

- Spend time in a virtual setting with friends and loved ones.

3

Go outside

- Simply getting outside for some fresh air and waving or greeting others from a safe distance can make a huge difference.

4

Lend a helping hand

- If you are healthy, offer to run an errand for a neighbor who may need a little extra help.

5

Use social media wisely

- Social media can help maintain connections to family and friends who live far away. Too much exposure, however, can make anxiety or depression worse.

Maintaining connections during COVID-19

Ensure basic needs are met: Pay attention to needs such as food, medication, and accessibility to masks

Manage emotions and mood: Conscious breathing, meditation, and other relaxation techniques are helpful for the mind and body and decrease one's level of anxiety and depression.

Check in with your mental health: The pandemic is stressful for everyone and significant stress can precipitate the occurrence of mental disorders in some people, especially vulnerable populations.

Maintain physical and mental activity: Although we may not be able to exercise together as before, we should maintain physical activities at the individual level.

Pursue outdoor activities: While following the guidance of social distancing, outdoor activities are usually still possible and beneficial to health. One can feel much better as a result of sunlight exposure and the ability to see other people while still maintaining physical distancing.

Embracing loneliness



Give the emotion full expression: Let the emotion take center stage. This exercise may feel uncomfortable, especially if you are used to distracting yourself from your feelings, but if you let yourself feel the emotion 100% it can move through you more quickly. Observe the sensations of the emotion, notice the thoughts that it triggers, cry if tears come. Be with the discomfort fully.



Sit in silence: Set yourself a time limit for the silence such as half an hour. If you wish, you can take a walk during that time or engage in a relaxed form of exercise like swimming. Ensure the activity is not one that becomes a distraction. Choose to do something that simply allows you to be in silence. Be as present as you can with everything around you.



Engage in mindful meditation: Though meditation is very simple, it also can require great courage. Simply be with the sensations, thoughts, and emotions that arise without trying to control or change them. Observe them with the kindness of a mother watching her child at play. Be patient. If the emotions become uncomfortable, muster up your valor, strength, tenacity, and patience. Set yourself a time limit and do not get up until the time is over. You can start small and eventually work up

Strategies to cultivate inner & outer connection

- **Take care of your body:**
 - When we take care of our bodies, we feel better and our mental outlook changes.
- **Serve:**
 - “Be kind, for everyone you meet is fighting a hard battle” is a quote that resonates with us all. We can be of service to people, animals, or even nature. Whatever you are drawn to, your act of service is an act of connection that will help lift your loneliness.
- **Connect with nature:**
 - If connecting with people is a challenge, connect with nature. A recent study shows that taking walks in nature can increase our well-being even in the case of depression.² Another study showed that exposure to nature increases our value of connectedness and closeness and even make us more caring and ready to share with others.²
- **Fall in love with yourself:**
 - Being alone can be a great source of replenishment and even bliss.

Resources

- **Findtreatment.gov**
- **Michigan peer-run warmline**
 - (888) PEER-753 ((888) 733-7753).
 - It's available every day from 10 a.m. to 2 a.m.
- **National Helpline:** Treatment, referral, and information 24/7
 - <https://www.samhsa.gov/find-help/national-helpline/>
 - 1800-662-Help (4357)
- **National Institute of Health**
 - Social wellness toolkit
 - <https://www.nih.gov/health-information/social-wellness-toolkit>
- **National Suicide Prevention Lifeline**
 - www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org
 - 1-800-273-TALK (8255)
- **Crisis Text Line**
 - www.crisistextline.org
 - Text "START" to 741-741
- **National Alliance on Mental Illness**
 - <https://www.nami.org>

Stay in touch:

Angela Begres, LCSW

Email:

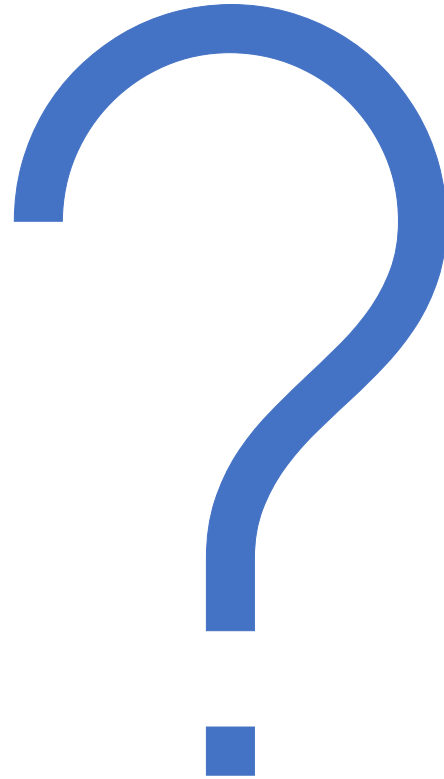
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[Why Social Connection is Important Handout](#)

Questions



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