

EIP

#MentalHealthAwarenessWeek: The true impact of loneliness

All usual disclaimers apply – not a doctor, not a shrink, not remotely qualified, not talking about how I know a lot of this.

Loneliness sucks. This isn't as sharp a revelation as it would have been a few years ago, because (thanks to the pandemic, in case you were in any doubt) the average person has a far more evolved understanding of how it feels to be lonely than they did before. We've all experienced some kind of separation or isolation thanks to COVID-19, and there's been a resulting awareness of just how unpleasant it feels to be cut off from the world around you.

However, the true impact of loneliness, over and above the unpleasant sensation itself, may yet surprise many. We understand that to be lonely is to be unhappy, true – but there is more in this isolation, Horatio, than is dreamt of in our philosophy.

Loneliness is fundamentally contrary to human nature – we are social animals, and depriving us of this facet of existence literally handicaps us. “Loneliness, domestic isolation and social disengagement [are] longitudinally associated with poorer physical performance,” writes Keir Philip. Strength, balance and endurance all suffer as our isolation increases, and loneliness and social isolation are both associated with an increased rate of motor decline as we age. Though I hesitate to draw definitive conclusions from this, it at least seems reasonable to conclude that loneliness will not do you much good physically.

Our intellect suffers too, with loneliness being “associated with worse performance on attention and processing speed, executive function, and verbal memory immediate recall, via bedtime cortisol levels.” (Montoliu). Our brains respond poorly to isolation, it appears,

with Kyröläinen & Kupermann confirming that this effect is especially pronounced with regards to memory – individuals reporting higher levels of loneliness testing markedly poorer in both time- and event-based memory tasks.

In short, loneliness is harsh both in the despair it causes us to feel, and in tangible effects on our body and brain.

It is also, sadly, something that has a myriad of ways to come about. Some experience it because they really have no-one; estranged families, friends moving in different directions, moving somewhere new – all of these and more besides can lead to nobody on the other end of the phone. Some might have it thrust upon them because the people they do have can't handle what is necessary – they have too much of their own to deal with, or they're not used to this kind of responsibility.

Some end up there because of something internal, their own brains signalling that the people around them don't want to hear from them. Our brains say they're not worth helping, are not loved enough to be heard, or that they're being silly and will only be a burden to those they care about, and who care about them. It can even be a result of their brains forcing them into patterns that drive others away. Loneliness is a common thread across a variety of different personality disorders, manifesting differently in each.

Yet loneliness is a comparative rarity in mental health – it is a problem that can be attacked in and of itself. Yes, there may be root causes that need to be addressed, there may be other factors at work, but loneliness can be treated independently. Pushing yourself to talk to people, pushing yourself to be social and seek out that human connection, be it ever so hard, can lift you out of a spiral you didn't even know you were in.

Loneliness is devastating, but it is not insurmountable. Do not let it become so.