

Dealing with loneliness during Covid-19

With the Covid-19 pandemic taking control over our lives, society has been forced to adapt. People are required to socially distance themselves from their extended family and friends, work from home and avoid being in public unless absolutely critical. This can create an aura of discomfort and fear among us. People will experience heightened paranoia, anxiety, stress, and loneliness among other factors.

However, for some of us, including myself, who struggle with severe mental illness, the lockdown hasn't changed much. I have suffered with severe loneliness since 2012 (when I went to sixth form/college). Looking back over my life, I realised I have always felt different from the crowd. In my early teenage years, this transformed into committing unpleasant behaviour such as cyber bullying, but in recent years, I have been the complete opposite. I rarely project my pain and insecurities onto other people, instead absorbing and managing it myself. I have been blessed to have a few amazing therapists (and friends) that have helped and supported me, but the overarching feeling of being lonely has stuck. Since 2014, loneliness has played a major role in several aspects of my life. It was a main factor in me dropping out of university (before returning to another university closer to home), developing Anorexia Nervosa in my final year of my Psychology undergraduate degree and causing severe depression and anxiety.

Along with the negatives that have arisen from these situations, there are positives: moments of revelations. I have realised how much I prefer to be alone (*which is different from being lonely*), in control over what I do and how I behave. Yes, life can get incredibly long and boring when you are stuck inside all day. Days can drag. There is a lack of motivation that may arise. However, there are positives too. We all have the ability to support ourselves when struggling, even if our minds do not allow ourselves to believe it.

Having dealt with these lonely and depressive episodes, I have identified through therapy and self-reflection key behaviours that I've incorporated to improve my situation:

- 1) One of the main important universal factors is that of keeping a **good healthy routine**. In the differing mental health professionals I have seen, this one is constant among all of the varying advice. This is due to the overwhelmingly negative effect that loneliness can have on our sleep and motivation. For me, personally, I have noticed my sleep patterns worsen whenever I am feeling depressed and lonely. I lose any resemblance of a structure or productivity which contributes to the vicious cycle.

For this reason, it is critical that we sleep for approximately 8 hours a night. Over and under sleeping can have a negative impact on our mental health. Along with this, setting ourselves time in the day to relax and chill out, as well as working and being productive is essential. Don't give yourself a packed schedule which you are unlikely to follow. This can create negative thoughts and feelings from failing to achieve your schedule.

- 2) Similar to the one above, **keep your mind active**. Do not allow yourself to sit around bored, contemplating about what you should do. By doing this, you are allowing negativity to enter your mind, which then becomes harder to remove. Ensure the activity is stimulating and challenging as this will keep you focused and busy. This could be learning a language, reading a book, doing a quiz/crossword puzzle, starting a new house project or anything you can do from the confines of being inside.

In the past, I have spent many of my depressive episodes spending the days and nights bingeing Netflix, Amazon Prime and watching documentaries. What I found was that I start feeling guilty about being unproductive (this still happens) and this worsens my state. Of course, the same cannot be said for everyone. If you have found that this works in keeping your mind occupied, then just be aware of any changes in your mental state or an increase of negative thoughts.

- 3) The third point is **taking physical breaks** whenever possible. If you ever feel your mind wandering or becoming increasingly negative, take a walk to the kitchen for some water or food, spend some time sitting in another room, or message someone. Akin to number 2, changing your environment keeps your mind alert and stops you from getting bogged down in the same room.

When feeling lonely, doing something simple like this can become extremely difficult. But that is the reason it is necessary. I have learnt from my past. I remember getting completely stuck when I first moved out for university. I was in an accommodation where the other students loved partying and drinking (as is expected with freshers) and although I challenged myself and went a couple of times, it was not enjoyable. It's not my scene. After this, I became more depressed about not settling into university well and very rarely left my room. Not for food, not for a walk, not for anything. At first, the room feels comfortable and safe, but that transitions into feeling like a prison cell. Your mind becomes the guard in control of your space, and you are at its mercy. If I managed to go for a walk every day during that time, smell the fresh air, see different colours, maybe things would have ended differently.

Nowadays, I am more self-aware of whenever I am feeling lonely and make an effort to move from my room. Sometimes you may not feel any difference in your mental state but stick with it. After a while, it will become a habit.

- 4) Search for your **Cathartic activity**. This is anything that helps you release tension from your mind, body, and soul, reducing the anxiety you are experiencing by transitioning it into something else. For me, this is writing. Whenever my mind is on fire and I am feeling trapped, depressed, lonely, or struggling with the activities in life, I write it down. This writing is personal and is not shown to others. I treat my journal as a silent friend who is ALWAYS there for me, no matter the situation.

With the current guidelines from the government and the severity of the virus, people may not be able to engage in their usual cathartic activity. Therefore, along with the changes and increased fear and paranoia from this situation, it is vital to find an activity which will release your emotions from home. Otherwise you are holding all of this negativity in your head and when you reach your boiling point, it will still come out. Just not in a controlled manner.

- 5) As we are all practicing social-distancing and many people are isolated on their own, the internet has become even more important for many people in staying **connected with others**. As much as I hate to admit it, we are social animals. Connection with other humans is critical for maintaining positive mental health as well as for development and survival. Make an effort to contact those you know who are living on their own, old friends and anyone else that may be in need.

The blessing of the internet is the never-ending options available. You can find a group connected to a hobby of yours, experience virtual dating if that suits you or join a forum such as reddit which allows you to converse with others about all areas of life. Even if you are not looking for verbal connection, the internet has many lectures, documentaries, videos, and articles which can be helpful in reducing your anxiety and fears during this time.

- 6) This last behaviour is difficult, but also of the most importance - **practice gratitude and self-compassion**. When we are feeling low, we tend to focus on the negatives in our life and the society around us. I start eating away at the low self-esteem I have whenever I am struggling, always projecting the troubles as my fault. The negative rumination of past events enters the forefront of my mind, reminding myself of my failures and shortcomings. However, there are always positives to focus on. We are all grateful for different opportunities, family members, pets, anything that has helped us in the past and present.

Whenever you are feeling lonely, upset, negatively reflecting over the past and experiencing the lack of control you have over your minds, remember to fight back. This could be by writing a gratitude list or focusing on allowing yourself to be more self-compassionate – by practicing mindfulness meditation, spending time focusing on your strengths (yes, we all have strengths!), acknowledging you are not alone, and we all make mistakes.

I use a gratitude app. It prompts me twice a day (at noon and 6pm) with questions relating to this. I will admit, I don't answer them on my phone every day, but they provide me with food for thought. It allows me to focus, for a few minutes, on the positives in my life.

Along with the behaviours shown above, there are others such as exercise (an hour walk is permitted by the government) and having a healthy diet which are incredibly important for maintaining physical and mental health.

Most of all, stay safe and follow the government guidelines. Together, we are stronger and can pull through these troubling times!

By Shyam