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Skills for Conquering Loneliness and Protecting Your Health When Living With HIV

TheBody

7-9 minutes

Loneliness is a threat to the physical and emotional health of every member of our society. The former U.S. surgeon general, Vivek Murthy, reported that, for the general population, [loneliness shortens lifespan as much as smoking 15 cigarettes a day](#). For persons living with HIV, especially those who are aging, such isolation can be catastrophic. Stigma, shame, physical pain, fear of discrimination or violence, and a host of other factors can push someone living with the virus to withdraw from their social circles with devastating health effects.

Multiple factors, including socioeconomic status, physical and emotional status, and even technology, impact how we feel in terms of our connection and support from other people. Yet, a sense of isolation isn't always a direct reflection of reality. Feeling lonely is a subjective experience that can be influenced by one's perception, so it is just as easy to feel lonely in a crowd as when isolated at home.

Research Shows Loneliness Is a Problem for

People With HIV

Rates of loneliness among people living with HIV are staggering: A cross-sectional study of clients at a San Francisco HIV health clinic found that [58% experienced loneliness](#) (compared with an estimated [30% of the general population](#)), 55% experienced depression, and 12% experienced post-traumatic stress disorder. The health impact of these conditions is significant. One recent study, for example, found that [older persons living with HIV who reported being lonely experienced increased rates of depression and use of alcohol and tobacco](#). Another study of persons living with HIV found that [loneliness, frequently caused by internalized stigma, impacted the quality of sleep](#), which itself had negative health consequences. And isolation creates more than emotional discomfort. Because the area of [the brain that processes social exclusion is the same that processes physical pain](#), loneliness can have a real-world effect by amplifying the experience of body ache and [increasing inflammation](#), which is particularly dangerous for someone living with HIV.

A great deal remains unknown about the effects of loneliness on various populations living with HIV. In one study, for example, [older black adults with HIV reported less loneliness than did white adults](#), but isolation created a greater negative impact on cognitive function among blacks compared with whites. Older women living with HIV remain an understudied population in which the effects of aging, stigma, and sexism may combine to heighten both loneliness and its emotional and physical effects.

Related: [Social Connectedness and HIV: Strategies for Better Health](#)

How to Conquer Loneliness

A number of interventions are being investigated to impact loneliness and its consequences. Data suggest, for example, that [efforts to reduce HIV-related stigma and loneliness may have lasting effects in reducing major depressive symptoms](#) and improving perceived health. And [one trial intervention focusing on sexual health counseling among gay and bisexual men](#) not only decreased rates of condomless sex but also had the unexpected outcome of creating significant reductions in two psychosocial outcomes, loneliness and sexual compulsivity.

Large-scale social phenomena like stigma and discrimination certainly impact an individual's sense of loneliness, but there are tools people can utilize not only to improve their perception of isolation but, in many cases, to actually increase their level of social involvement.

Employ Mindfulness

The technique of being consciously mindful of what one is observing, thinking and feeling has multiple benefits and, in particular, can be useful in altering the perception of isolation. When one is feeling lonely, the mind begins to ruminate, triggering negative feelings and, frequently, generating a sense of powerlessness and hopelessness. Memories of prior experiences of hurt and rejection can be triggered. While such negative thoughts are part of the human experience, a mindful approach encourages observing them, avoiding judgment, and letting them go. When one is being mindfully present (and not "lost" in the past

or future), there is a sense of flow that is both engaging and empowering.

Connect With Community

The ability to create community by finding like-minded people can reduce the sense of loneliness and isolation. Sharing one's experiences with other persons living with HIV has the benefit of reducing the belief that one's feelings are unique and that no one could understand. There is no doubt that shame, stigma, and physical limitations impact one's ability to connect with community, but even home-bound individuals can improve their social networks through the use of technology. Persons living with HIV should take particular pride in our history of taking care of each other when few others would or could. It is important that we maintain this tradition and actively reach out to those who might be suffering in isolation.

Volunteer

The act of service to others is widely acknowledged to benefit not only the recipient but also the person carrying out such activities. Stigma and the emotional and physical consequences of HIV, especially for those with other stigmatized identities, such as aging or mental health concerns, can easily create a trap of isolation. Actively engaging with others and their needs can reset negative emotions and even soothe (or at least distract from) physical pain. In short, placing an emphasis on the well-being of others, if only for a brief period, can be a healing experience.