

# Haven Herald



## Loneliness

by Joyce Hanson

Loneliness as a human condition has likely been around as long as humans have existed in our present form as homo sapiens. Grief is also a part of the nature of humanity. Once we love, acquire, achieve, there exists the possibility of loss and thus grief. So grief and loneliness are both inevitable and often found together. Loneliness and depression also have a connection. Loneliness can be both a cause and a result of depression with grief as its companion.

Loneliness has become more prominent in our awareness as it has become the subject of studies which have documented its increase and its harmful effects to our physical and mental health. Some studies have shown that loneliness is as harmful as smoking. Some of the harm may result from the lack of encouragement to adopt healthy practices such as exercising, good nutrition, and seeking medical care when needed. This can lead to further deterioration including lack of restful sleep, greater susceptibility to illness, a weakened immune system, cognitive impairment and suicide.

At this moment in the waning weeks of 2020, we all face a new and unprecedented challenge in trying to navigate a more lonely life forced upon us by the global pandemic. Safety demands increased separation from others and with that comes increased loneliness. As we struggle to adapt we do not yet know how lonely or disconnected our lives will be when the pandemic is under control.

Continued on page 2



## Letter from the Executive Director

The season of winter offers us unique challenges as we cope with the uncertainty of the Covid-19 pandemic as well as the darker, colder days of winter.

The normal pace of the season, which includes holidays, will not look the same for most people, and even without the pandemic, winter can be a time of greater isolation and loneliness.

This edition of the newsletter addresses the topic of loneliness. Loneliness is one of the most difficult experiences of grief. A loss can bring an overwhelming emptiness and yearning for the physical presence of the loved one who has died. There is no easy path that alleviates the suffering that loneliness brings. Learning to live with a certain measure of solitude is something most people eventually come to terms with, but it is not easy. The hope is that we can eventually be comfortable with parts of our loneliness and find people and activities that are helpful and supportive. Not every new situation will feel right so it is important to find something that works for you.

Jill Bellacicco

Continued from page 1

However we do know that loneliness can be a devastating result of the grief we feel when someone we cherish dies. We also acknowledge that like grief loneliness does not follow in a standard or set path that will feel the same to everyone. We recognize that the situation and the temperament and characteristics of each individual will play a large part in the way loneliness is experienced and subsequently assuaged.

When loneliness is precipitated by a death, it will be different depending on the relationship with the deceased. The death of a spouse/partner is probably the first relationship that comes to the forefront. Partners often call each other soulmates or best friends. They share the activities of daily life and provide support and comfort to each other. The fracturing of this singular connection creates a crushing loneliness.

Other deaths create a sense of loneliness as well. Death of a parent, the person who has known you from the beginning leaves you with only solitary memories. The death of a sibling means no one with whom to share those family stories that were retold with great delight over the years. The death of a very close friend who has served as confidant or trusted advisor may generate an unexpected loneliness in the absence of this valuable support. Another dimension is added when someone for whom you had been the caregiver dies leaving a nagging sense of emptiness. The death of a coworker whom you saw everyday leaves a big hole in your work life. You may feel an ache when learning of the death of someone whose only recent connection has been the exchange of birthday and holiday greetings.

Other factors apart from grief lead to loneliness. Many aspects of aging play a part. Retirement from the world of work means not being with people regularly even if only to say good morning or to bemoan the nasty weather along with your coffee. Living a long life, you may find many people in your circle drifting into dementia or suffering physical limitations, and you may outlive many friends and relatives. Your own physical changes contribute to isolation such as hearing loss and mobility difficulties and a lack of transportation. In addition dementia leaves one increasingly alone in its dreadful crushing of one's ability to make sense of the world.

Continued on Page 3

---

## Loneliness: What Worked for Me

by Orv Grimes



When I lost my wife nine years ago, I was not prepared for the feelings of isolation, abandonment, and loneliness. After 42 years together, having her close by was as natural as breathing. Being with others didn't help. That made me ache even more for my emotional partner. I couldn't impose on my children; they had their own grief. If I was to make it through this, I had to learn some new skills.

The house felt like a mausoleum. So I would turn the TV on, for some welcome noise. Good thing that Nielsen or someone was not counting me as a viewer of shows I wasn't watching. Beyond these tricks, though, useful as they were, I was making mistakes. The biggest was to fight loneliness. Gradually I realized that loneliness is not freaky or stigmatizing, but part of being human. I needed to accept it, just as I must accept that love is sure to eventually be broken by separation or death. Once that point was reached, my central task became to be comfortable in solitude.

It then became easier to see what remained of my life, to realize not only what I didn't have but also what I did. As the fog of my distorted thinking began to dissipate, I saw that other loved ones and friends were still around. They somehow thought that I had something left. I'll always be grateful to them for that. I began to re-commit myself to them and their needs, to causes my wife and I held dear, and to lifelong learning. Projects became my companions. A project could be anything, from preparing teaching materials to staining the back fence. For the most part, the projects were ones that my wife would recognize as something I would do. It would comfort me to feel her with me as I was involved in them.

Loneliness to the grieving will never go away for good. Fortunately, we can take steps to keep it mostly on the sidelines.



Loneliness also results from a feeling of being different or set apart by some situation or circumstance. Being diagnosed with a fatal or severe chronic or rare condition causes one to face a debilitating or shortened future unlike those who do not share this fate. A person feels alone when surrounded by a culture different in beliefs, values, and customs. The connection to one's own culture has been frayed leaving one feeling lonely and left out. People also feel left out when they feel rejected and unaccepted by others which can happen when relationships fail to live up to one's expectations. The progression of the calendar through the seasons of the year brings situations when loneliness seems to naturally intrude. There are holidays which seem to require togetherness in their celebration and being alone at these times can be especially painful. The natural world's seasonal changes contribute also. The decreasing amount of daylight in the fall causes depression for some which is connected to loneliness. Winter then follows when colder temperatures seem to cry for sharing warmth and coziness with others, and when spring finally displaces winter, the fresh and awakening world may give rise to a longing for companionship.

In addition to recognizing situations that give rise to loneliness, studies have been done describing the ways people feel lonely and to think about the causes behind these feelings. An article in the Washington Post by Judith Graham in her column Navigating Aging describes these.

Emotional loneliness comes from the lack of intimate relationships. Social loneliness is felt when there is insufficient interaction with friends, family, neighbors, work colleagues or others. Collective loneliness leaves one feeling a lack of connection to a community where one can contribute and feel respected and valued. Finally one may experience existential loneliness, floating unmoored with a lack of purpose or meaning in life. Grief can be a component of any of these either as cause or effect. What is behind one's loneliness can guide future steps to ease its pain and help adapt to solitude.

The emotional loneliness of missing intimate relationships is not easy to overcome as it usually requires time to build a connection of sharing a deep understanding of values and ideas. Along with intimacy we also think of the value of the human touch, a very powerful connection the loss of which may be deeply felt after a death. Even though it might not be noticed right away, an unexpected touch or hug can awaken the realization of its loss.

An aura of negativity may surround one who feels socially rejected and this tends to increase the perception of rejection making acceptance and satisfactory connections even less likely. In this case a professional to guide the development of skills addressing this issue may be needed. On the other hand, if the loneliness comes from being different from one's surroundings or the result of a unique condition, the internet is an efficient resource to locate others with whom to make a connection thus easing the loneliness.

Some solutions are easier to suggest such as hearing aids or alternate transportation arrangements. Grief support such as Haven provides is a resource for understanding and processing grief after a death. Other support may be found for dealing with other types of loss. One might develop community connectedness by devoting one's energy and expertise to support the interests or causes one believes are worthwhile.

Of the various situations giving rise to loneliness, some are the direct result of a death and others are exacerbated or triggered by grief. Like grief, feelings of loneliness come and go in frequency and severity with no easy answers. In a sense loneliness is a part of the human experience and is always there even if hidden beneath the surface of everyday life. It never fully disappears. Each individual is his own self and can never become part of another individual. This may be the ultimate existential loneliness.

In a recent book entitled *Our Malady: Lessons in Liberty from a Hospital Diary* the author Timothy Snyder ends with the following: "Solitude is salutary up to a point. We are not free if we do not know how to be ourselves by ourselves. Yet too much solitude makes freedom impossible, first for the lonely and then for everyone else."

*stay safe*



Haven of Northern Virginia  
4606 Ravensworth Road  
Annandale, Virginia 22003

POSTAGE  
NONPROFIT ORG  
U S  
PAID  
MERRIFIELD VA  
PERMIT 2697

---

## **Winter Schedule**

### Virtual Community Workshop

“Your Journey through Grief”  
February, 2021  
Date and time to be determined

Please email us at [havenofnova@verizon.net](mailto:havenofnova@verizon.net)  
A facilitator will contact you regarding your participation.

Zoom Drop-in Suicide Loss Support Group  
1st and 3rd Saturdays of each month  
Please email us for instructions, if you wish to participate.  
11:00 a.m. to 12:30 p.m.

*Haven also offers individual support by phone; please call or email us to schedule an appointment.*

### **Contact Information**

Haven of Northern Virginia  
4606 Ravensworth Road  
Annandale, Virginia 22003  
Phone: (703) 941-7000  
Fax: (703) 941-7003  
E-mail: [havenofnova@verizon.net](mailto:havenofnova@verizon.net)

### **Hours of Operation**

Monday through Friday  
9:30 a.m. – 2:30 p.m.  
[www.havenofnova.org](http://www.havenofnova.org)

Messages may be left on our  
voicemail after hours