

Relationships in an I-world

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While it is important to look after yourself, at times it is easy to get a little too self-absorbed.

Initially, we focus on having our own needs met and see our caregivers as merely an extension of our self. With time, we learn that there is a world outside of our self and with this comes the formation of relationships with others – parents, friends, a partner, our children and other family members. Sadly there can be ruptures in these relationships through divorce or death, leaving one alone and lonely. In one's waning years, a person may again turn inward and focus almost exclusively on him/herself.

As infants, we form our first crucial attachments to our caregivers very early on. This relationship, this empathic bond of mutual attunement, is critical in ensuring our sense of safety, security and emotional connectedness as we navigate the world. Still, many people describe the lack of warm, compassionate and loving relationships in their lives, feeling very much alone and lonely in their world. While it was once thought that only the elderly suffer from loneliness and depression, therapists have become aware of the importance of the formation of these secure childhood attachments and their impact on later relationships and one's sense of connectedness in what so often seems to be a paired world. In this current era of working hard to empower people as individuals, there seems to be far more emphasis on helping one become their "personal best" rather than on teaching them how to engage and be present and there for others, in relationships that go beyond collecting Facebook friends. There's so much more to life than the selfie.

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What is more important in life than the relationships that we form? We know that an authentically satisfying relationship makes you feel good and a bad relationship can be very draining and take its toll both physically and emotionally. Feeling understood by, and connecting with, another human being, and having them "get" you or you "get" them sends our levels of oxytocin (the love or feel-good hormone that moms experience when nursing or couples enjoy during peak intimacy) soaring. So in 2019, when everyone seems connected, it is sad that loneliness and depression appear to be at an all-time high across all age groups. While being able to "talk" is now literally at everyone's fingertips almost all the time, many people are not interacting with others in any meaningful "feel good" way. Instead, people opt not to leave their houses to be with others, preferring the safety of computer conversations – maintaining "I contact" but not eye contact. Eye contact involves looking into and learning to read another person's face in a way that helps them feel noticed, valued, attended to and actually cared for and loved, and in a way that brings appreciation and meaning into your life. It means truly being there for someone else and feeling that in return.

In my work with couples – be they partners, family members, roommates or simply friends – I frequently teach people how to work on connecting by actually looking at each other. Once that is accomplished, one can then ask, "What can I do that would be helpful for



(Pexels)

you?" or encourage them to share what would be helpful for them. This compassionate base for good communication helps one express a sincere wish to be there for, and be interested in, the other person, even when they may not understand their issues or their pain. This in itself helps stave off loneliness.

In this day when independence is somehow seen as a strength and connectedness as a sign of weakness, dependency or neediness, we may inadvertently be raising our children to be self-centered rather than other-focused. What a tragedy this is.

HERE ARE a few suggestions for feeling less lonely:

1. Put routine into your day so that you have a reason to get up and get going. Keep active and busy. A morning walk and sunshine are not only great ways to boost your vitamin D but also release endorphins and decrease

fatigue.

2. Ask yourself what puts meaning into your life and go after it to enable each day to have purpose.

3. Be grateful. It is so easy to see the negative and actually miss the positive all around you. The more you notice the good in your life, the more good you'll notice; the more you focus on the negative, the more negative you'll see. Studies have shown that positive experiences can significantly alter our neural pathways. It is your job to slow down, notice and actually appreciate what's going right in your life at this moment and let go of the negativity, which is more easily and unhealthily embraced.

4. Volunteer. Give to others and you will be amazed at what you receive in return. I know of one lovely lady in her 80s who formed a support group of seniors to see how as a group they can help each other. Offer to help others, get involved in a meaningful way.

5. Join a group of like-minded people – be it the gym, a book club or singing in a choir; meeting people with mutual interests can help reduce boredom and decrease your sense of disconnect.

6. Re-examine your current relationships. Look at what feels good and what you're doing right and find ways to recreate this with others. Take the initiative. Ask someone to join you. Reach out to others and take the first step. Don't just wait for others to call you. Remember, to be a friend is to have a friend.

7. Be kind and nurture yourself. Self-care involves eating right, sleeping well, exercising and the like.

8. Spend time with, and form relationships with, people you care about. Increase your levels of oxytocin by doing things that enable you to feel good. Perform acts of kindness, cuddle a baby, pet an animal and learn to decrease stress and increase your sense of calm.

9. Learn to be your own best friend. If you are lonely and depressed, you may feel anxious, insecure and that you are not good enough, not loveable within a relationship, unworthy or irrelevant. You may be carrying baggage from previous relationships that you are not even aware of. Psychotherapy can help you gain both perspective and purpose, and restore a sense of calm and happiness in your life.

While taking the first step is often the hardest, it can also be transformative. There is no better time than today to begin that journey. ■

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