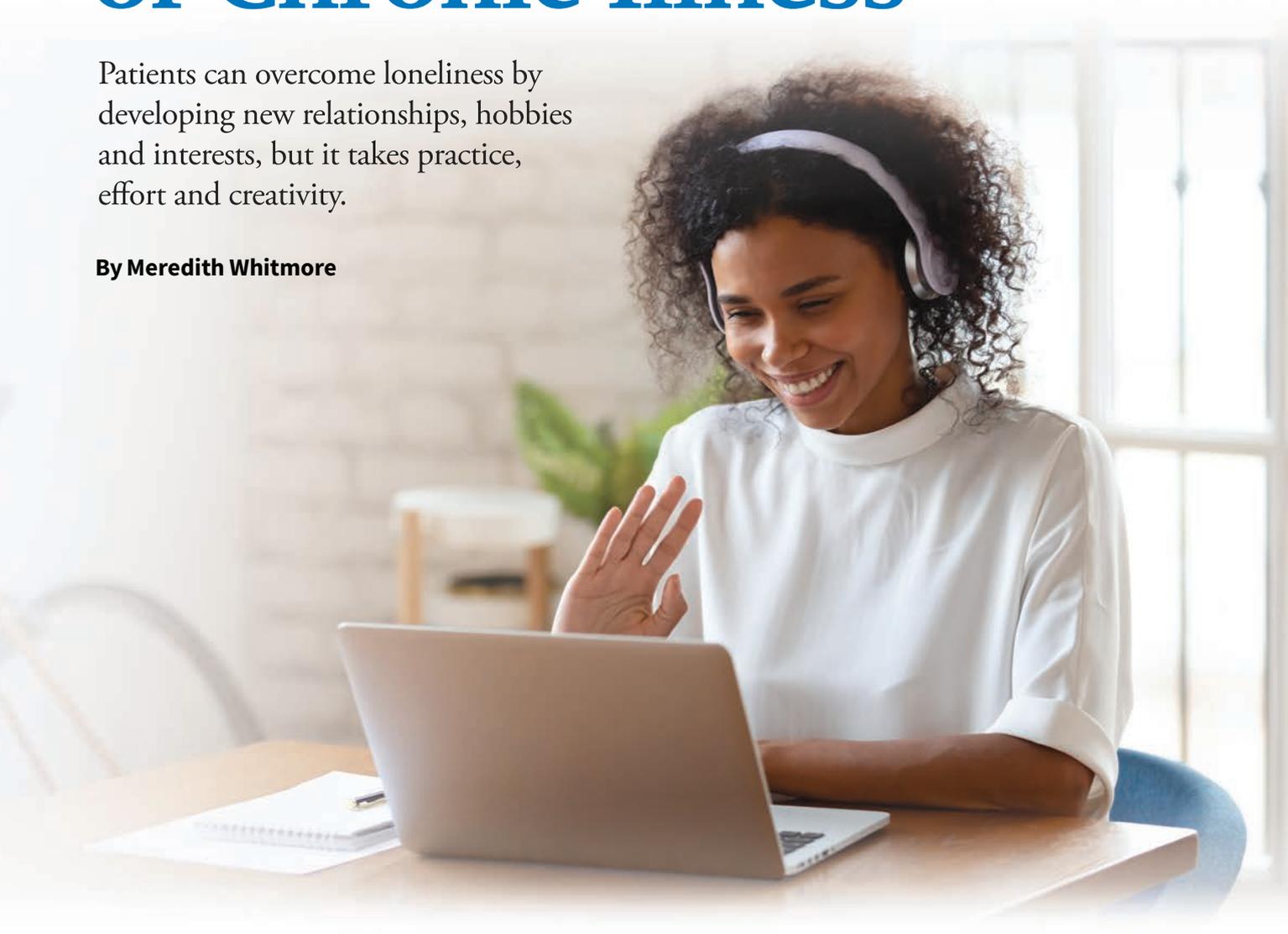


Fighting the Loneliness of Chronic Illness

Patients can overcome loneliness by developing new relationships, hobbies and interests, but it takes practice, effort and creativity.

By Meredith Whitmore



IT IS SAFE to say this past year has been difficult for the entire globe. For many, the pandemic's extended lockdown has resulted in loneliness. The problem is humans are hardwired to be naturally social. And those who suffer from chronic illness that already limits regular social interaction are feeling a deeper sense of loneliness during quarantine.

Loneliness is a health risk. Although unpleasant to hear, a few sobering facts illustrate the problems with loneliness, as well as the importance of tackling them: Loneliness is likely to increase one's risk of death by 26 percent.¹ Loneliness,

living alone and poor social connections are as bad for one's health as smoking 15 cigarettes a day and is more detrimental than obesity.² Loneliness and social isolation are associated with an increased risk of developing coronary heart disease and stroke,³ an increased risk of high blood pressure,⁴ early mortality when coupled with severe depression⁵ and a risk factor for depression in later life.⁶ Loneliness and social isolation also put individuals at greater risk of cognitive decline and dementia.⁷ Studies have shown people who have high levels of chronic illness become lonelier over time, while

those with lower levels of chronic illness do not. Indeed, for older adults, having high levels of chronic illness presents a significant risk factor for becoming lonely.⁸

So, what can be done to help people overcome the loneliness of chronic illness? Actually, quite a bit. Here are some useful tips — many of which are evidenced-based — to help patients better cope with compounded layers of loneliness and illness during this extraordinary time.

Learn Something New

Keep your mind agile and active. Join an online class, or if you have the ability and means, take an in-person class or workshop to learn about something that interests you; you might even make new contacts in the process. There's something for everyone, from cooking, books, movies, school subjects, spirituality, exercise and sports, and many are often free. YouTube, The Great Courses and Khan Academy, among many others, are excellent online educational resources that allow people to learn everything from the tango to trigonometry. MIT OpenCourseWare, as well as countless other universities around the world, also offer free online courses. Most of these courses allow access to a syllabus, course calendar, assignments and study materials (although there may be a fee in some cases). Best of all, you can usually work at your own pace.

Reframe Your Thinking

Create cognitive flexibility and other mental health skills to better cope with illness and the loneliness it can cause. Many different types of therapy can alleviate loneliness and pain, but cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) research backs its ability to alter the way people view their situations to find more balance and positivity. “CBT can change the thoughts, emotions and behaviors related to pain, improve coping strategies and put the discomfort in a better context,” says Joseph Hullett, MD, board certified psychiatrist and senior medical director for OptumHealth Behavioral Solutions in Golden Valley, Minn.⁹

CBT is based on the belief that people can modify their perceptions and responses to everything they experience in their lives, helping them to balance negative thoughts and behaviors with more helpful and realistic ones. By examining and replacing negative thinking patterns, people can change

the way they view pain and loneliness — even if their pain and loneliness remain. “The perception of pain is in your brain,” Dr. Hullett explains, “so you can affect physical pain by addressing thoughts and behaviors that fuel it.” CBT can even alter the body's physical responses, causing neurochemicals such as norepinephrine and serotonin to be released. “CBT reduces the [stressful] arousal that impacts these chemicals,” adds Dr. Hullett. This, in effect, may make the body's natural pain relief response more powerful.

To access CBT's healing tools, contact a therapist who specializes in it and chronic illness. There are also helpful workbooks that can be self-guided journeys toward better thinking about difficult problems such as loneliness and illness. *The CBT Toolbox: A Workbook for Clients and Clinicians* by Jeff Rigenbach and *Feeling Good* by David Burns are two classics. Although these books do not focus specifically on chronic illness, they are a foundation for handling anxiety, depression and other difficult emotions that often accompany loneliness and pain.

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Be Grateful

Feeling and expressing gratitude for what we have is scientifically proven to help the brain cope with pain, loneliness, bad moods and other troubling circumstances. It can also improve sleep, reduce pain, anxiety and depression, and help to regulate stress.¹⁰ The next time you're tempted to complain, feel bitter or see things in an otherwise negative light, try counting your proverbial blessings instead. Doing so can literally help your mind and body.

Heidi Gray, a freelance writer in Northeastern Oregon, suffers from a rare heart condition that often leaves her feeling fragile, tired and cooped up at home. Still, she embodies gratitude and says to all who might be in her boat: “I am serious when I say I think a large part of dealing with the loneliness is attitude. I've always been a glass-half-full person, but if you can find one positive thing to do a day, it really helps. When I get down, I try to get out of my own head,

send an encouraging note to a friend or pray for someone I know who is struggling. And self-care is important, too. I try to get up every morning, make my bed and get dressed. Even if I just lie back down on top of the covers to rest, at least I started well. And if the kids' friends come over, at least I'm dressed to say hi!"

See a Buddy Virtually

In these days of social distancing and global health concerns, a new industry is booming: Zoom. It's not only Zoom, though. Google Meet, Google Hangouts, Marco Polo, Microsoft Teams, FaceTime and other technological tools are designed to bring people together from afar via their electronic devices. And, more and more clubs, groups and classes are using these platforms to connect face-to-face as well.

Pen Pals Aren't Old-Fashioned Anymore

Pen pals are currently in vogue. Why be lonely during times of health problems and isolation when you have the ability to write to new friends and receive their letters as well? Developing a new relationship through writing and other forms of communication — doing so cautiously, of course, since people are not always who they seem from afar — is a savvy, fun way to socially distance and get to know others. Sites such as Compatipal, International Geek Girl Pen Pals Club, Conversation Exchange, PenPal World, Postcrossing, Worldwide Snail Mail Pen Pals and Wonderful all offer a variety of people, cultures, languages and ways to connect with others through hobbies, areas of study and other interests.

Smartphones for Connection

They get a bad rap, but smartphones aren't always alienating when used in relationships. The same goes for laptops and tablets. If you feel lonely and miss family or friends, try sending them an encouraging message through social media, text or a real-time phone call. Follow them on social media while posting your own uplifting entries. Or, join a social media group for support, whether the group focuses on illness or interests. There are all kinds of options for those who are willing to explore resources.

Volunteer

This option might seem unlikely at first, since volunteering sounds like it requires at least some travel and a lot of energy. But these days, it's possible to be involved



with a variety of organizations in the comfort of your own home and still make your region, and even the world, a better place. Organizations such as Project Gutenberg, LibriVox, DoSomething.org, Amnesty International, Crisis Text Line, Translators Without Borders (for the bilingual and polyglots) and Catchafire offer tasks that volunteers can do from home. It's worth your time to look for these or similar places offering work that can help you feel connected and productive. Reaching out to people or doing work that improves someone else's life is the quintessential way to take ourselves out of our own problems and use our skills to meet others' needs.

Take Photos

There's no need for expensive photography equipment because your smartphone, or a frugal digital camera, offers a way to see the everyday world from a new perspective. Try focusing on even the mundane from a different angle. See books, houseplants, pets, flowers, weeds and virtually anything else with an artist's eye. Imagine what your home would look like from an insect's perspective. What would a sunrise or sunset look like from one of your windows? And have you ever looked at your patterned dishes up close in just the perfect light or shadow? Free online photo editing software is available to add some special effects to your fun creations. Share your work with a hobby group or friends if you like.

Online Counseling

Online counseling, whether through an exclusively online service such as BetterHelp or TalkSpace, or a private practice counselor who uses telehealth, can be a lifesaver, quite literally. Even an online peer support group such as 7 Cups of Tea can offer encouragement, virtual companionship and great ideas to help you cope and thrive. Therapists can help with chronic pain while showing people ways to navigate loneliness as well.

Today, a number of sightseeing adventures are available online.

Travel in Your Own Home

Today, a number of sightseeing adventures are available online. Enjoy the northern lights, Israel, the Louvre and other famous museums, Disney World and even the Great Wall of China. Facebook and other social media platforms often offer ads for such “excursions,” or simply search virtual tours online to find what might interest you.

Find a Group, Support or Otherwise

Meetup.com offers something for just about everyone, depending on location, for in-person and virtual activities such as book clubs, hiking, wine tasting, dining and anything else you can imagine. Meetup even has groups for those with chronic illnesses. And, it’s fairly simple to find support through groups such as the National Fibromyalgia & Chronic Pain Association, The Mighty, MyChronicPainTeam and others that can be found with some search engine research. Finding online support that might lead to in-person companionship is only a click or phone call away.

Welcome a Pet

This might sound overwhelming to some, but it doesn’t have to be. Home delivery resources such as Chewy allow pet supplies to arrive at your door, sparing you a tiring trip to the store. And more petite animals such as small dog breeds,

cats and rabbits can be litter box trained fairly easily. A pet offers comfort, humor, companionship and unconditional love that often helps reduce loneliness. There are also online and in-person support and education groups that focus on pet ownership.

No One Is an Island

There are other ways to reduce loneliness as well, but these are a great start. May you find some comfort and new activities and relationships in 2021! No one is an island, including you. The next time you feel the pangs of loneliness, take heart. Others have come through it, even while experiencing chronic illness. Of course, loneliness cannot be sugar-coated, and simply trying something new will not make it magically go away. But, those feelings of loneliness can be better managed and greatly improved with practice, effort and creativity. It can take time to develop new relationships, hobbies or interests depending on the activity, but it can be done — and it can be done very well even during a global pandemic. 

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