

A Therapist's Experience With Quarantine

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“Do not fear, for I Am with you.”
Isaiah 41:10

Over the last few months, we have seen an increase in depression and anxiety related to forced isolation. I've listened to countless others in my personal life as well as professional, describe the effects of confinement. The most heart wrenching tale came from a friend describing how her “always happy” granddaughter began to gradually decline. Rather than smiling and looking forward to each day, the child seemed to grow increasingly moody, more withdrawn, and began experiencing episodes where she would burst into tears and blame herself for being “bad.” Somehow, this child had internalized the withdrawal of all of her friends and her extended family as her fault. Too young to understand what was happening, the isolation from almost everyone she loves was taking a devastating toll.

Since I have been able to work online from my office, I've had the ability to leave my home each day which has prevented the full impact of isolation that others have been experiencing. However, three weeks ago I received notice that I had been exposed to COVID 19. Resigned to spending two weeks without leaving my home did not seem so bad. But when I began to show symptoms, I quarantined myself in my room in order to prevent exposure for my husband and son. The first couple of days were tolerable because I felt well enough to work. Equipped with my computer, I met with clients from my new makeshift office as so many others had been doing for months. And then the day came when I had to spend a whole day without contact with anyone. No clients were scheduled. My husband was working online in another part of the house as was my son. There was no one to talk to. That is when the face of isolation began to show itself to me and whisper in my ear what it had been saying to others for quite a while.

1. Something is wrong here. I spent the morning catching up on paperwork and finalizing some administrative tasks. I shut off my computer as I do every day but while my body wanted to hop out of my chair to go downstairs as it normally would, it was met with an internal stop sign that said I could not. My family was down there, but I could not reach them. Even though I naturally felt something was “off” and not normal, I knew I needed to remain in my quarantine. So I decided to catch up on some reading.

2. This is boring. “What an opportunity!” I told myself. The stack of books I've been wanting to read called my name and I couldn't wait to dive in. Until I tried. As I read, my mind wandered. I pictured in my mind what my husband and son were doing. I looked out of the window. I watched the birds and stared at the pool I could not enter as I struggled to pay attention to pages that would normally suck me right in. I scrolled through social media again and again just to get a look at what was going on with other people. Anything to fight the boredom of being alone all day without opportunity to connect.

3. It's too much effort. As the day dragged on the struggle became more difficult. I tried really hard to get some things done but my motivation was gone. Something like sadness began to creep in. I could identify my feelings and I knew what I needed but since my whole family was occupied elsewhere, I could not ask. My whole body wanted to sigh.

4. Maybe it's me. As I scrolled through social media (yet again) instead of experiencing what I normally do – friends enjoying their lives and me feeling happy for them – I saw friends who were all having fun and were very far away. I began to reminisce about the times we had gotten together in the past, letting our kids play while we laughed and enjoyed the closeness that friendship brings. I wondered where they were, why they weren't here. And my mind began to tell me that my isolation was my fault. Maybe if we hadn't moved. Maybe if I hadn't gone back to work. Maybe if I had done something different, I would not be sitting in my room, bored out of my mind.

5. It's 5:00 somewhere. Finally! Knowing exactly what I needed I waited to hear sounds indicating that my husband was wrapping up for the day. I grabbed my phone, entered his number, and waited. As soon as I could see his face and hear his voice, everything changed. My mood lifted, my energy returned, and after a 10-minute chat, I could concentrate again. Life was good.

This one afternoon highlighted for me what kids, teens, and the elderly are experiencing on a much larger scale. Genesis 2:18 tells us that “it is not good for man to be alone.” Without connection, we begin to decline mentally, emotionally, spiritually, and physically. Eventually, our minds will attempt to make sense of the isolation but without the comfort and assurance of those who love us, our thoughts will often turn toward darker explanations. Youth are ill-equipped to make sense of loneliness. The elderly are exceptionally vulnerable to depression from feeling alone. Imagine the impact for our loved ones if they cannot grasp what is happening or do not have regular access to step 5 – reaching for relationship. Day after day, moving from feelings of disconnection and something “wrong,” to lack of motivation, then to negative self-talk that comes from isolation. Now imagine that the day after day turns into weeks then months. It is no wonder that our vulnerable are moving into deep depression and anxiety.

The cure for isolation is connection. So what can we do for them as they face extended separation from those they care about?

Kids and Teens

- Listen to their feelings without minimizing or judging. Remember what it was like to be a teenager?
- Validate how hard it is not to see friends and loved ones. Although family is important, friends are too.
- With kids and teens, increase intentional family time. Play games, teach them life skills like cooking, balancing a checkbook or changing a tire in a fun way, have picnics in the backyard.
- Organize activities they can share with friends while also practicing social distancing.
- Check in on them throughout the day just to say “hi.” Break up the monotony of their day and give them affection.
- Be silly and laugh together. Watch funny movies, reminisce about times together that make you laugh, let them teach you some dance moves.

Elderly Parents

- Teach them to Facetime or Skype and use it often!
- Meet in their yard or courtyard when weather permits.
- If they are confined to a nursing or rehab facility, stand outside their window and “touch” through the window. Make eye contact.
- Send cards, letters, and kids' artwork. If allowed, send flowers or other reminders that you are there for them even if you can't see them in person.
- Text photos of what you are doing.

As we all band together to help protect ourselves and our neighbors from COVID, let's also protect our loved ones from the devastating effects that isolation can bring.