



“serving those who serve us”

Monthly Newsletter

A Disturbing Trend of Loneliness

From quiet nursing homes to vibrant college campuses, from small towns to crowded cities, Americans are confronting a growing ailment with no single cause or cure.

In June, an authoritative study in the American Sociological Review found that the average American had only two close friends in whom they could confide on important matters, down from an average of three in 1985 and four in 1965. The number of people who said that they had no such confidant at all soared from 10% in 1985 to 25% in 2005. An additional 19% said that they had only one confidant. This latter group may be the most “at risk” according to Dr. Lynn Smith-Lovin, co-author of the study, who observes that “If you lose that one person in your life, either because the relationship declines or the person dies, you have no one left to support you.”

This trend toward isolation is borne out in the latest U.S. census figures which show that one-fourth of the nation’s households – 27.2 million of them – consist of just one person compared with 10% in 1950.

It seems ironic, even to those who are affected, that this loneliness epidemic is happening at the present time. The nation has never been more populous, soon to reach the 300 million mark, and we have never been more “connected” by cell phones, pagers, instant messaging and e-mail. Yet so many of us remain alone in the crowd.

“We’ve become a society where we expect things instantly and aren’t willing to spend the time it takes to develop real intimacy with another person,” says Dr. Margaret Gibbs, a psychologist at Fairleigh Dickinson University in New Jersey.

In its most pronounced forms, loneliness is considered a serious, even life-threatening affliction that heightens the risks for heart disease, depression and thoughts of suicide according to the American Psychological Association. A sense of isolation can strike at almost any age or demographic sector: parents struggling to adjust to a suddenly empty nest, divorced individuals unable to rebuild a social life, retired persons who miss their former “team mates” at the workplace.

John Powell, a psychologist at the University of Illinois counseling center, says that it’s common for incoming freshmen to stay in their rooms, chatting by computer with high school friends rather than venturing out on campus to make new acquaintances. “The frequency and volume of contact by electronic means does not necessarily translate into the quality of real human contact,” according to Powell.

The good news is that there are proven cures for loneliness! Many counselors suggest that one develop and pursue an interest, hobby, sport or avocation and follow it. That person will soon be in contact with others who enjoy that same endeavor. Real friendships can germinate from such shared interests. To discuss more strategies for overcoming loneliness, we encourage you to contact us at your Employee Assistance Program to discuss your particular situation in depth.