

February is National Heart Month



- Help people get the practical and personal support, including transportation, to participate in low- or no-cost social opportunities.
- Consider individual needs and interests—there is no one-size fits all approach
- Encourage volunteering for events or programs that help others and/or contribute in some way to the local community, providing a sense of meaning, purpose, and accomplishment, as well as connecting with others
- Smile and say hello—either in person or by phone, text, email, or even a letter!



Compeer by George H. Brice, Jr.

Loneliness is complex and can be felt even when surrounded by other people. Loneliness has now become an important public health concern, since it leads to pain, injury/loss, grief, fear, fatigue, and exhaustion. Not only does loneliness make a person sick, it can interfere with daily tasks, responsibilities, and recovery. The causes of loneliness are varied and include negative impacts on social, mental, spiritual, emotional, and physical aspects of wellness. Many people with mental health challenges encounter loneliness. Traditional behavioral health services are not equipped to deal with loneliness, but there are resources available, like Compeer. Founded in the early 1970s in upstate New York, Compeer offers community-based programs that serve adults, veterans and their families, youth at risk, children of prisoners, and people who are elderly with volunteer mentoring and supportive friendship programs.

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Loneliness

Some experts suggest that there is a loneliness epidemic in the US. This is a problem because research shows that isolation and loneliness are associated with poor health outcomes and higher health care costs, as well as a shorter life span.

Stephanie Cacioppo and her colleagues have studied what works to address loneliness, finding that just being with other people is not enough. Some people who struggle with loneliness have thought patterns that contribute to how they feel, suggesting that cognitive behavior therapy (CBT) can help. But being alone and having negative thought patterns are only part of the picture.

Although limited research exists, experts include the following ideas for reducing loneliness:

- Participation in groups, especially groups focused on a common interest area or hobby
- Physical activity groups and classes provide multiple benefits, including social contact

Compeer, continued

Compeer's goal is to provide friendship relationships to children and adults being treated for mental illness or emotional concerns. These one-to-one relationships between volunteers and people being supported, called intentional friendships, can take more than a year to develop.

Program evaluation research has found benefits for both (volunteer mentor and supported person) who are in the relationships, with the people being supported becoming more outgoing, sociable and active, with increased self-esteem, self-worth and self-confidence.

Although some states, like New Jersey, don't have a Compeer program, various opportunities exist to meet the challenges of emotional despair. Face-to-face connection with others is often the best remedy, whether through support groups, civic activities, adult education classes, social groups, volunteering, faith-based activities, political activism, or book clubs.

Sometimes people read books around other people to help with loneliness, not to discuss a book topic. All can be useful ways to combat loneliness and isolation.

Furthermore, there are supports and opportunities to address loneliness, including attending 12 step programs, alcoholic anonymous, narcotics anonymous, or support groups for opiate addiction. Many other formal and informal support groups are available for a range of health and wellness needs including emotions anonymous.

I have found a few wellness strategies helpful, as well as other common supports, to address my own feelings of loneliness. I have a busy schedule as a full-time caregiver for my sister, working part-time, addressing my physical health needs, and maintaining a place to live. My physical health is important to me, so I incorporate a health strategy to help with not feeling lonely. I regularly

attend yoga, a place for socialization for me as well. Occasionally, I meet up with friends and family in person and connect with others through texting and social media. Over time, I have even grown a better appreciation of my alone time, just being with me. I am finding it easier to be alone and I try to schedule time with family and friends. There is a lot we can do for ourselves and to connect with others. I encourage you to reach out and connect with others this month.

Life Lessons by *Jacquese Armstrong*

Sometimes a book, movie, or play teaches us about ourselves and about life. In December, I went to see the movie *Cats*. Jennifer Hudson's portrayal of Grizabella the Glamour Cat blew me away in a tantrum of tears. She touched me. I knew her. I had compassion for her. Grizabella was ostracized, hissed at, stigmatized, and very lonely. She existed in the shadows and she knew it. She didn't even try to be like others anymore.

Enter Victoria. An abandoned cat who has no place to call home; she just wants to be wanted. She feels compassion for Grizabella and in the end—well, I don't want to give it away, her compassion makes a difference.

The movie got me thinking about compassion, loneliness, honesty, and recovery states, and how we address loneliness as a part of our dimensions of wellness.

Compassion is a funny word. It literally means to "suffer together." An article on compassion by the [Greater Good Science Center](#), defines compassion as the feeling that arises when you are confronted with another's suffering and feel motivated to relieve that suffering. Victoria acted on her compassion to relieve Grizabella's suffering.



Life Lessons, continued

Loneliness is something we all have dealt with, whether we want to admit it or not. Anyone who wrestles with mental health challenges and traverses the path of recovery and wellness must encounter loneliness at some point. But no one wants to talk about it. I think we need to, or it will haunt us and convince us that there is nothing more. Negative feelings like loneliness, no matter where else they fall on the eight-dimension wheel, are part of the spiritual dimension of wellness—loneliness robs us of meaning and purpose.

Compassion from another person helps. In *Cats*, Victoria had her own issues but, instead of wrapping herself in bad feelings and me-ness, she chose you-ness and reached out to Grizabella. Of course, this is fiction, but it got me thinking of ways to use its logic along with recovery common sense.

The first thing to do, I think, would be to turn the loneliness feeling into a fact: aloneness. I can suggest two ways of doing this. First, when confronted with the feeling of loneliness, , instead of drowning in me-ness, reach out to someone with some small kind deed. Shifting your focus to the needs of someone else's you-ness instead of staying wrapped up in bad feelings, would go a long way toward reducing loneliness to aloneness. Negative feelings like loneliness feed on themselves.

A second option is to take a gratitude break. Take a finite amount of time and, for that period, write down as many things that you are grateful for as you can. When the time is up, review them, dwell on them and count them as blessings.

I realized, after watching *Cats*, that compassion from others helps, but also that practicing self-compassion needs to be a priority. Remember, you'll always feel less lonely if you love you.

High Blood Pressure by Heather Simms

Controlling high blood pressure is an important part of heart health and stroke prevention. Heather shares her story here.

For many years, I struggled with taking prescribed medication. Side effects of some medications made it hard to fulfill my valued life roles as a mother and peer provider. I needed to work to provide for my two children as a single parent and feel a sense of purpose in my life again. One day on my way to the office, I started to experience what I had thought was one of my episodes of extreme anxiety. My heart was palpating. I could not focus on anything. Someone took my blood pressure and urged me to get medical help. I was diagnosed with high blood pressure and prescribed medication, which caused unpleasant side effects, so I didn't take it as I should, afraid that I might lose the most important things in my life—my children and my work.

After struggling to manage the side effects, I realized I needed to find other ways to reduce my blood pressure. At the time, I was enrolled in a Wellness Coaching training program which gave me access to information and resources. I learned that I had options to make lifestyle choices that could have a positive impact on my blood pressure. I had gained weight and was now aware of how this affected my blood pressure. This gave me hope that changing my diet and educating myself could make a difference. Since I was working, I had income enough give me choices in the food I purchased. I also benefitted from practicing how to actively work on wellness goals. I did this with the support of my colleagues, friends and family to help hold me accountable to my self-identified goals and celebrate successes in the process.

I began researching backpacks that could keep packed lunches cool for working on the road as well as containers to store food in. I then devised a plan to make changes with one meal at a time.

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High blood pressure, continued

I had access to research on recommended nutritional intake to reduce blood pressure and weight as well as tailor to food I enjoyed. I also identified supporters that could help hold me accountable and help encourage me in challenging times.

After one year I was able to reduce my weight and blood pressure. This enabled me to stop medication that had lessened my ability to be a parent and peer provider, the most valued roles in my life. The confidence this provided me in having a choice about my wellness empowered me to set goals that led to me increasing my physical activity and following up on wellness screenings. I am now active, healthy, and successful in the things that are most important to me!



The greatest disease in the West today is not TB or leprosy; it is being unwanted, unloved, and uncared for. We can cure physical diseases with medicine, but the only cure for loneliness, despair, and hopelessness is love.

—Mother Teresa

References and Resources

Thanks to Jacquese Armstrong, Heather Simms, and George Brice, Jr. their contributions this month!

- Illustrations are listed online as free for reuse without attribution from pixabay.com
- You can get a copy of “25 ways to take part in Heart Month” from the National, Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute <https://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health-topics/all-publications-and-resources/25-ways-take-part-heart-month>
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- You can find 14 conversations starters at http://www.oprah.com/spirit/conversation-starters-how-to-break-the-ice_1 (part of the “Just Say Hello” campaign)
- Greater Good Science Center (UC Berkeley) on compassion: <https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/topic/compassion/definition>
- For more about Compeer, go to <https://compeer.org/>
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