



## **Addressing Loneliness Through Social Connections**

The topic for this presentation is, "Addressing Loneliness through Social Connections." We will begin this presentation by giving you a bit of an overview that describes the focus of this presentation. We will begin by exploring how you as caregivers may lose sight of yourselves and how you may lose focus on what is happening inside you. We will discuss how losing your focus on yourself results in losing touch with the vital connections that keep you resilient and strong. We will use a brief meditation exercise to restore the focus of attention back on you and then look at the many potential avenues you might explore to reconnect to the sources that restore you. Our hope is that you consider the many avenues you might pursue on a daily basis, to maintain your balance and strength. So again, we will look at how you may lose sight of yourself, how to bring your attention back to yourself, and then how you might reconnect every day in order to feel better.

Let's begin. How does it happen that you lose sight of yourselves? How do you maintain your sense of wellbeing, your balance, and your joy for living when you are confronted with life challenges?

Are you running from one demand to the next, racing to keep up with all the strains on your time and energy? Have you been emotionally drained from caring for others, caring for your home, keeping up with the bills, or trying to meet work expectations? Are you wondering, "How much longer can I keep this up? How can I keep going at this pace?"

You certainly are not alone. Caregivers in particular, are at risk of being depleted by the demands of caregiving. Focusing attention on others, often at the exclusion of focusing on yourself, can place you at higher risk of medical and emotional burnout and illness. Truly it's no wonder that you have neglected your own needs when you are so focused on reacting to the demands coming at you, and so focused on attending to others.

How do you begin to realistically care for yourself in this demanding, fast paced world? How do you make the time, or find the energy, to pay attention to you?

When you are in survival mode and focusing on every demand coming at you, when you are reacting, constantly reacting, to what is coming at you, you naturally lose sight of yourself. It is just an unintended consequence.

Restoring balance then requires shifting gears, stopping, getting back in the driver seat, and bringing your attention back to you.



Your participation in this group today is exactly what I am talking about. You decided to stop for a time. You decided to just think about yourself, look for relief, and change gears.

In our time together today, we hope you will slow down, refocus your attention, and begin to explore all the many ways you can reconnect to the people, places, and activities that support your health, restore your energy, and bring some joy back into your day. We will look at some of the many, what we may call, "vital connections," that you can turn to on a daily basis, that will get you back on the road to feeling good.

Today, we will start with a brief exercise in doing just that, refocusing your attention. We will practice shifting gears, slowing down, stopping the merry-go-round, and focusing on you. We will do this by bringing your focused attention to your breath via a short meditation practice.

I am going to now walk you through a brief refocusing meditation. Just for a few moments, there are no expectations. Simply find a comfortable position and do your best to focus.

If you are sitting, place your feet on the floor and your hands rested in your lap.

Breathe through your nose if you are able and gently place your tongue to the roof of your mouth.

You may close your eyes if you wish.

Let's begin by just taking a deep cleansing breath, in and out.

Let your belly rise with your breath.

Take another deep cleansing, restful breath.

Now, simply follow your breathing.

There is nothing to do but pay attention to the natural rhythm of your own breath.

You don't have to do anything special, just observe the natural rhythm of your breathing.



If there are feelings that rise up, that's okay. Just observe them with kindness and allow them to pass naturally.

There may be thoughts that float through your mind, maybe your worries or nagging thoughts about your next chore; just let them pass like a wave.

Let them go and return your attention to the healing calm in your breath.

Let yourself just rest in the rise and fall of your breathing.

Simply settle into the quiet, following the natural rhythm.

This quiet place is always here for you.

You will find comfort here; simply bringing your attention back to your breath.

You can return and find solace whenever you wish.

Now, when you are ready, you may slowly bring your attention back to your surroundings.

If your eyes were closed, begin to open them, and take a moment to recognize the benefits of slowing down.

Now that you have gotten the feel for slowing down and getting out of reaction and survival mode, your attention has been returned to your own center, and with this, you are bringing your whole self, back to the present moment.

It is the ability to be in your own center, in the present moment, that is critical to restoring yourself and the many connections that keep you in balance. From this centered place, now you might begin to explore the potential avenues you might engage to reconnect to yourself and to what matters to you.

It appears that the more people become disconnected from themselves, from their feelings, from others, and from what matters, the more they are prone to despair. What keeps us all resilient and engaged in living are the many connections that we maintain.



Social supports are a powerful and important source of nurturance, support, and connection. How many times has your burden been lifted by sharing it with another?

How often has your mood been made lighter by the gift of connecting with another? You can make and benefit from these connections in even the most limited way. Small acts of connection can make a big difference. It doesn't have to mean spending all day

with someone or being in groups of people. You can make social connections in all kinds of ways. Try greeting someone as you pass them, write a letter, making a phone call, even sitting in a coffee shop and looking at others, sharing a friendly word, or recognizing eye contact can help you to feel connected and less alone.

Social connection is defined as the feeling that you belong to a group and generally feel close to other people. As humans, we are profoundly social beings. Our drive to connect with others is embedded in our biology and evolutionary history beginning at birth.

When we are socially connected with others we have a feeling of belonging, being loved, cared for, and valued. These connections are important to both our mental and physical well-being. Research shows that being connected with others helps to protect us against illness and disease, as well as increases our lifespan and promotes a healthier life. According to the Centers For Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), high quality relationships help to reduce the risk of heart disease, stroke, dementia, depression, and anxiety. Social connections also lend to our ability to manage stress effectively, engage in physical activities, improve our sleep, and have healthier eating patterns.

Social connection, like many things, is on a continuum. It can change over time. There will be times in our lives where we feel more socially connected to others and times when we feel less socially connected to others. We all land somewhere on this social continuum and it is going to continue to change throughout our lives. Even day to day!

Now that we have explored what social connection is, what is social disconnection? In order to explore social disconnection, we must look at loneliness and social isolation. Loneliness is a subjective feeling. It is based on how we perceive our attachments and connections to others. When we feel lonely, we often experience an internal state of distress. It can be hard for others around us to recognize when we are lonely because it is a feeling that we experience inside ourselves. It is the emotional experience of feeling alone.

Social isolation on the other hand, is objective. This is when we are lacking social relationships and the ability to form these relationships. Social isolation is when we are



physically separated from other. As Caregivers, you are highly prone to experiencing social isolation. It is important to keep in mind that both lead to one another. Social

isolation can lead to loneliness and loneliness can lead to social isolation, both resulting in social disconnection.

There are several different factors that can contribute to someone's risk of loneliness. Some of these factors include living alone, inability to leave the home or being homebound, major life changes, grief, financial struggles, caregiving, limited social supports, and mental or emotional health challenges. As a caregiver, you already have one risk factor for social disconnection. It is important for us to take stock in these risk factors to evaluate how we may be experiencing social disconnection.

The good news is, there are ways to help increase social connection. We are going to review several things that you can do to help increase your social connection.

Practicing self-awareness is important to reconnecting with ourselves and others. It can be easy to lose sight of who you are as a person when you immersed in caregiving. Self-awareness can help us to reconnect with ourselves by identifying our values and purpose. Understanding that we are more than the labels we identify with and society gives us, such as "caregiver", "wife", "husband", "mother", "father", etc. can help us to understand ourselves more holistically. To begin this process, you may want to ask yourself, "what is your purpose in this life?" or "What am I good at? How can I incorporate this into my everyday life?"

Another skill that can be helpful to increase our social connection is self-compassion. As humans, we tend to be harder on ourselves than others. I would encourage you, when dealing with a difficult or frustrating situation, to explore how you would help a friend in the same situation. Likely, we would treat them with kindness and compassion for what they are experiencing. Often it is easier to be gentler with friends and those we care about than ourselves. I would challenge you to begin treating yourself like a friend.

Sometimes we need to be reminded of what matters to us and how we matter to others. Maybe it's remembering and recognizing how you contribute to your family, your friends, your community, or your work. Maybe you have a special skill or gift that needs to be appreciated or shared. You may find meaning in your rituals, your celebrations, and in your memories. These sequence of events within the ritual are meant to symbolize and connect us.

Caregivers of Veterans are in particular need of daily or weekly moments of comfort and restoration, that is regularly built into your day. You are busy meeting many demands and especially need those bright spots and glimmers in your day to help you recover



from the demands on you. Your daily care of your loved ones may become isolating, monotonous, or emotionally depleting. You are especially in need of daily moments,

holiday events, or seasonal activities you can look forward to, that connects you to others and those you love, restores your beliefs, highlight appreciation of nature and your surroundings, or celebrates the passing of time. We often have these rituals as a part of our daily routine and everyday lives that can often bring comfort or normalcy.

You may have many time-honored family traditions and rituals based on your spiritual beliefs, celebrations of your cultural heritage, or practices that were instilled since your early childhood. Or, you may not have many traditions that you can point to that were a part of your upbringing or family life. Maybe the rituals or practices of your upbringing no longer currently hold much meaning for you anymore. Rituals can change over time, they can be altered, or you can invest in new ones that suit you.

You can honor how you hold yourself up in the face of life's difficulties and the potential you always have to contribute to the world, however limited you may be by life circumstances. Ask yourself, "What might I do to remember, to honor, and to practice my values and beliefs?" I would encourage you to think about how to incorporate some fulfilling rituals into your life and finding a rhythm that would work for you and those that you care about. This could look like setting up a weekly call with a friend, grabbing lunch at your favorite diner with a group, or simply having some down time once a week to sit in your favorite chair reading a book.

Military families, Veterans, caregivers, and your families, are often confronted with adversity, and often so much uncertainty. Having practices in place that give you and your family a feeling of stability, and calm, is important. Whether it is celebrating a holiday together or always having a special Sunday morning breakfast, it can provide a feeling of security and structure to your life. These practices or events can invite connection with others whether you are sharing Sunday football with friends or Thanksgiving dinner with your extended family. Rituals strengthen bonds of family and friendship such as when you recognize birthdays, anniversaries, or losses with those who are important to you.

Daily rituals of thanks or appreciation can be simply giving thanks for a meal, sending your family members out with a goodbye hug or kiss each morning or counting your blessings and being grateful before sleep at night. Appreciation for those you love may be a gift given every day by noticing and appreciating others with a kind word, noticing their strengths, and letting them know how much they mean to you. You can make a point each day to share a word of appreciation to your spouse, family members, co-worker, and neighbors, and see how much this practice enriches your life. Giving



thanks for your prosperity by giving to others if able or sharing what you don't need with those that do, make you a part of the larger community and enlarges your connections to others.

Appreciation and thanks can be an intentional daily practice of noticing nature, paying attention to and appreciating the changing seasons, the sunlight flooding your living room, the sound of birds chirping, the awesome beauty of the night sky. There is an opportunity each day to bring a healing ritual of thanks into the day, maybe many times a day, and to have this ritual improve your connections and your outlook.

Given this, where can we find social connections, increase our social connections, or strengthen our social connections? Many times, we can find support within our communities. This may be within our neighborhood, schools, places of worship, workplaces, parks, or recreation centers. As a Caregiver, another place to look for social connections is through your local Caregiver Support Program. It can be helpful to explore what community and VA resources they may be able to offer to support you, the Caregiver.

We encourage you to do as you did today. You took the time to pay attention to yourself by joining us in this group. You deserve to give this continued commitment to yourself. We hope that you consider bringing your attention back each day, many times a day, to the vital connections that are at your fingertips. Reconnecting and connecting with yourself and others helps us to understand our values, purpose, and needs. It helps us to identify where we are on the continuum of social disconnection in the present moment. By noticing these things, we can further identify what we need for ourselves or from others. Notice these connections. Enjoy them and see how it helps build your resilience even in the most challenging times!