Mental Health Series Week 2: Loneliness and Worth (Esther)

Story/Quote

Did you know that when we are born, only 20% of our neural activity is online ready to do what it needs to do so we can survive? The other 80% of those neurons in the brain require the interaction with other people in order to turn on and do what they need to do. That interaction typically starts with our mothers, but that process continues throughout our lives which means we continue to need others our entire lives.

There is an African proverb that says if you want to go fast go alone; if you want to go far go together.

Technology allows us to move at the speed of light. But somehow over the last 20 years, busyness has become celebrated because it makes us feel needed, even popular. We know that the speed of life today has caused chronic stress which has compromised both our physical and emotional health. But it has also compromised our relational health. I am not here to bash technology; I am a fan of it and there are definite positives to technology. Yet there can be no argument that technology has in many cases provided a replacement of direct person-to-person contact. So we say that we are more connected than ever, but as a culture we have never been more disconnected from genuine human relationships.

Statistics

In 2018, Cigna conducted a survey of 10,000 adults on the subject of loneliness. As I read some of the statistics, remember that this was before COVID and before any stay-at-home orders were put into place.

In the survey, two out of every five Americans reported their relationships are not meaningful most of the time.

One in five people reported they rarely or never feel close to people.

54% of those surveyed in 2018 reported feeling lonely. When Cigna performed a survey in 2019, that number grew to 61%! That is not a good trend in the year preceding COVID.

Age-wise, Gen-Z ranked highest on the loneliness scale. Now this survey only included adults 18 years old and up, but the Gen Z group, includes ages 10-24. And remember, that is the same age group that also had the highest increase in suicide of all the age groups.

It begs the question, since we are more connected than ever before, why are we more lonely than ever before?

Causes of Loneliness/Low Self-Worth

* Fewer in-person social interactions (comfort & convenience, mandates)
* Dependence on screens and social media
  + When we look down we make less eye contact which inhibits genuine connection
  + Digiphrenia (multiple personas on digital platforms leads to a crisis in identity)
* We/They Culture
  + Tribalism which is a cyclical phenomenon where we will turn off logic, forget how to converse, forget how to be wrong, ignore our conscience, do or say anything, in order to fit into a group. But if you have ever watched the TV show Survivor, despite all of those efforts to be in, when the tribe has spoken, you are out.
  + Bullying (we could spend an entire session on bullying alone)
* Striving for success
  + We base our worth on what we do and how well we do it, rather than who we are.
  + We end up too tired to make genuine connection.
* Poor physical and/or mental health (a cause and also an indicator of loneliness)

It might seem weird to lump loneliness and self-worth together. Yet, those two things often go hand in hand and sometimes it is hard to know which is the cause and which is the effect. But the good news is that helping one helps them both.

Indicators of Loneliness/Low Self-Worth

* Inability or lack of desire to connect with others on a deeper level
* Many acquaintances but no “close” or “best” friend”
* Overwhelming feelings of isolation even when you are surrounded by people
* Backing away from social activities, church, etc
* Chasing success/the need to achieve
  + Trying to prove your worth
* Poor mental health (again that is both a cause and an indicator of loneliness/poor self-worth)

Remember last week I said that 2 contributing factors of suicide are a sense of “thwarted belongingness” (I don’t belong, not connected, nobody cares) which is the loneliness piece, and a sense of “perceived burdensomeness” (I can’t do anything right, I’ll not good enough, I have nothing to bring to the table) which is the worth piece. These things matter!

What to do if it’s you

* Become more balanced
  + Have more in-person interactions
  + Increase eye contact: look up and out at people, not down and past people
  + Reduce screen time (not just social media), do it in increments – it’s empowering
  + Have realistic expectations
* Know who your safe people are and place a higher value on their input
  + Which family members can you turn to?
  + Which friends, teammates, or co-workers are supportive and are a positive influence?
  + Which teachers or coaches are confidence builders?
* Identity statements: You are not your successes/failures, your diagnosis, your well-crafted social media profile, or who others say you are. You are a child of God and you are who God says you are. So have some identity statements at the ready when you need the reminder.
  + You are the son or daughter of a loving heavenly Father (Romans 8:15)
  + You are completely made new and not defined by your old self (2 Corinthians 5:17)
  + You are chosen and dearly loved by God (Colossians 3:12)
  + You are freed and forgiven by God’s never-ending grace (Ephesians 1:7)
  + You are not alone; Jesus is with you always (Matthew 28:20)
  + You are called a friend by Jesus (John 15:15)
  + You are valued and have a purpose in God’s community (1 Corinthians 12:27)

What to do if it’s someone else

* Make eye contact and smile at others
* Invite them to spend time in-person
* Be an encourager and a safe person

How to start a conversation: These are not unlike the questions I mentioned last week.

Is something going on? You don’t seem like yourself lately.

Are you ok? I haven’t seen you at \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ recently.

Hey, let’s schedule a time when we can get together for coffee, a movie,

God created us in community and for community. As Christians we are called to be the bridge to others. Like the starfish story last week, you might not impact everyone, but each one of us can impact someone. If you have any questions or want to talk through anything you can reach out to me at tambra@southwestchurch.org.