

MY VIEW



Founder Wayne Fortin



LONELINESS

“Loneliness is more fatal than a poor diet or lack of exercise, as corrosive as smoking fifteen cigarettes a day. Friendship literally saves our lives.”

The Economist

“Loneliness is the number #1 public health concern.”

Vivick Murthy MD, Surgeon General

“Loneliness is the leprosy of the 21st century.”

Marisa Franco

“45 million Americans over 50 suffer from loneliness.”

AARP

As a mental health professional, I like to think I've been aware of the major public health issues of our time. But I am embarrassed to say I have been mostly unaware of the most serious public health crisis... “the loneliness pandemic.” Why?

Perhaps it's because loneliness is invisible; perhaps it's because those who are lonely are ashamed and don't want to talk about it; or perhaps it's because there is no organized advocacy group focused on the lonely.

Thankfully, my awareness of loneliness has increased over the last few years. A number of books have been written and national media coverage has focused on the subject. And of course, the Covid pandemic has made loneliness “real” for many of us, including me.

I have spent the last few months reading everything I could about loneliness. Here are the key points I would like to share...

- Loneliness can be fatal emotionally and physically.
- Supporting those who are lonely is challenging because it is invisible. We can't see loneliness like we can see broken bones.

- The cure for loneliness is friendship.
- The way to establish friendships is to find ways to give to others.
- Lonely people themselves are responsible for establishing friendships and escaping loneliness. They need to take the initiative and have a plan to connect with others.
- It's difficult establishing genuine friends in 21st century America. We establish shallow friends on social media, but we don't establish deep friendships.

"In 21st century America work, family and self all rank above friends." (Franco).

The question I've asked myself throughout my research on loneliness is: **How can TIP respond to this loneliness crisis?**

Although we don't see our mission as "serving the lonely" we are a nonprofit dedicated to the emotional wellness of those in our communities. We can and should address the loneliness pandemic.

In many some ways we are already addressing loneliness. My question is **"Is there more we can do?"**

A. What we are already doing.

Here are 3 ways we are and have been helping those who are lonely...

- TIP volunteers provide a caring presence at probably the loneliest time in a person's life. ("You are not alone.") Often a TIP volunteer is the only one there after a tragedy. The volunteer can keep a onetime loneliness experience from becoming a lifelong "second injury" ... *"Everyone left and I was all alone."*
- Many residents come to TIP looking for a connection to others. TIP provides TIP volunteers with an excellent opportunity for connection with like-minded people.
- TIP teaches volunteers communication skills which they can (and do) use outside of TIP to connect with others.

B. Going forward: What else can we do to address the loneliness pandemic?

- **Include the fact we are helping lonely citizens in our messaging** to community members, to funders and internally to our volunteers and board members. We should let our constituents know that we are aware of the major pandemic of our time, and we are addressing it. Our messaging should include...

"We are with survivors at the LONELIEST time in their lives."

“TIP is a place where you can not only support survivors but where you will be part of a group of like-minded people.”

- **Educate our own TIP volunteers** about the problem of loneliness and encourage them to reach out beyond TIP to connect with others in their lives.
- **Provide community presentations** which provide participants suggestions of ways of **connecting with others** (TIP’s Listening Course, for example.)
- **Ensure we are doing everything we can to welcome residents** into our organization and provide TIP volunteers with many ways of connecting with each other... social activities, team building, working on community projects together, responding to TIP calls in twos.
- **Follow-up with clients who are at risk of facing loneliness.** For example, we respond to many clients whose spouses have died. They are clearly at risk of becoming isolated and lonely. We should consider starting or resurrecting follow-up programs targeting our at-risk clients which attempt to connect them with community organizations which can help.
- **Write grants.** Grantmakers know that loneliness is a serious public health crisis which has deadly consequences They are receptive to grant proposals which address this problem.

The loneliness pandemic is both a responsibility and an opportunity for TIP. As a nonprofit which already helps residents in emotional pain we have a responsibility to use our experience and resources to address the “leprosy of the 21st century.” For TIP as an organization this pandemic is an opportunity to stay relevant, to meet the current needs of our residents and to grow and innovate.