

Overcoming Loneliness

Last November an article from Michigan State University (MSU) addressed the devastating impact of rampant loneliness in the United States. It spoke of a recent Cigna study which reported these disturbing statistics:

- Among adults 66 and over, 40% admit they are lonely.
- The national average is even higher, more than 50% of Americans say they experience loneliness.
- Most startling, however, is that Cigna discovered the age group most impacted by loneliness is young adults. Among those who are 18 to 24 years old, a staggering 80% say they feel lonely.

The MSU article reports loneliness to be as bad for our health as “physical inactivity, obesity, air pollution or smoking 15 cigarettes per day.” Another article in the National Library of Medicine suggests our chance of experiencing an early death increases by 20% if we are lonely.

Loneliness has been on the rise for many years and is not unique to our country. Based upon government research which discovered 30% of Britons go at least a day each week without any meaningful conversation, the Oxford Bus Company in Great Britain launched what they called the “Chatty Bus” in 2019. Since then, Chatty Buses have been ridden by volunteers who offer support and have conversations with riders.

How can we combat loneliness? I do not have all the answers, but earlier this year I taught a series on encouragement and am convinced we could make a huge difference if we simply began encouraging others by showing an interest and engaging in conversations.

The Apostle Paul put it this way, “Don’t use foul or abusive language. Let everything you say be good and helpful, so that **your words will be an encouragement** to those who hear them.” (Ephesians 4:29, NLT, my emphasis). I suggested those attending my class should look for and act on opportunities to encourage others.

A short time later one of my students excitedly told me she had begun exploring ways to encourage her teenage grandchildren and was amazed by their response. Previously her grandchildren would often go weeks without talking to her, however, after she began encouraging them, she and her grandchildren were talking several times each week. Perhaps the same thing will happen if you begin encouraging others, never-the-less loneliness is nearly always diminished in us and others when we show an interest in one another. Try it, you may be surprised to discover what a remarkable difference a little conversation and encouragement can make to someone who feels alone.