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Loneliness during the COVID-19 pandemic

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Your experience during COVID-19: It's the end of 2020, and the pandemic hasn't hit me hard. I don't hate online teaching, and I've learned so much already about delivering a course online that I feel accomplished in a way. I like waking up an hour later than I did pre-pandemic and wearing the same comfortable pants every day. So many people have lost jobs or loved ones to COVID, but I have not. I'm thankful for a cozy home office that I spent the summer remodeling. I'm thankful that I don't have children or roommates home during the day to interrupt my Zoom meetings. I'm thankful that I don't have to worry about not being able to pay the bills.

There are big ugly holes in my satisfaction though. Most of the joy of teaching has been stripped away, and the weight of an unraveling marriage has become much heavier than before. I work hard to cultivate social interactions in-person and remotely on the weekends, even some during the week, but it's not sufficient. I feel lonely and tell myself that lonely is not a problem, lonely is a small complaint in the face of job losses and the death of family. I feel guilty for having pain over loneliness.

I stop doing grocery pick-up orders from Walmart just so I have an excuse to walk through the store, to be out of the house. I'm getting good at teaching online and I earn a special course certification for the quality of my delivery, but it's not fulfilling. I have so little opportunity to engage with students in real time, and that's the thing that I love, the thing that I'm especially good at. I miss hearing about the movie they watched last weekend, or the trick their puppy learned yesterday. All of my colleagues are operating in their own bubble too. We don't meet in the copy room and have spontaneous discussions about how to explain Venn Diagrams to our students in an engaging manner. I didn't know how empty my life would feel without those conversations.

I take calculated, intentional steps to find joy in my small world. I walk my dog every day and take time to notice the cold wind, the clear sky, the cheery red berries growing on a neighbor's tree. I start a new podcast. I think of friends who live alone and take time to call or text them. I read my bible for comfort, and I talk to God. Most days these activities keep me from despairing.

I think of my cousin's suicide a few months ago and my heart hurts with thoughts of the pain she was in and the sad life she was living. I cry for her immediate family, devastated by the loss and trying to get through another day. I think of her abusive husband who left her dead body all alone after he found her like that in the bedroom, and about the neighbor who sat with her until the ambulance arrived.

My spouse comes home late after working another 12-hour day. I should seize the opportunity to have quality interaction with another human, but I don't know what to say to him. What do I have to share that he would care about? All I can think of is the Zoom call I made to the tech support team where they helped me solve a problem with my lecture video. I can't expect him to care about that.

I don't know what to talk about at the dinner table. Nothing interesting has happened in my day. I taught for 50 minutes on Zoom to a screen full of little colorful tiles in the place of student faces. Everyone's mic is turned off and only 2 people have their camera on. Other than my husband, those are the only 2 faces I see today.

Twice each week I pack up my laptop and work from my campus office. Yesterday morning my husband asked “are you going to work today or are you playing hooky?” It was then I realized he thinks “working from home” is code for “stay in my pj’s and do nothing.” Lately I feel like I have little purpose, and now I know he thinks that too. He quickly corrects himself when I challenge him on his comment, but the damage is done. I know he’s not good with words and he didn’t intend to hurt me, but the comment rolls off the tongue so easily that it must be true, I think to myself.

“I can survive this,” I tell myself. “Loneliness doesn’t kill,” I say. But it feels like a lie.