

## Loneliness - Webinar Transcript

**GEN BEAUPRE:** Okay. Hello, everyone. Welcome to our webinar on loneliness. By viewing this webinar, you are taking a step towards improving your wellness because social connection to others is one of those needs, one of the most basic needs that we have. Social connection not only helps us feel better, but it also helps us thrive, so this is an important topic. Let me introduce myself. My name is Gen Beaupre, and I am one of the counsellors at the Counselling and Student Well-Being Department at George Brown College. And presenting with me is...

**JEREMY JACOB:** And my name is Jeremy Jacob, and I am another counsellor who works in the Counselling and Student Well-Being Department of George Brown. So, thanks for joining us today, folks.

**GEN BEAUPRE:** Okay. So, thank you, Jeremy. So, our goal for today for the webinar will be to, we are going to talk about what loneliness is, how it may impact us, and also some ways to address it. If you are having some, you are experiencing some feelings of loneliness, we will be providing some suggestions, some ideas on how to address it. Our hope is that by the end of the webinar you are going to be feeling inspired to take some steps towards addressing any feelings that you might be having of loneliness and that you will know, you will have some ideas of where to turn if you need help. So first, let's talk about why we feel this topic is so important to talk about.

**GEN BEAUPRE:** So, the webinar on loneliness, it is important because it has unfortunately become a public health concern. There has been a lot of attention on the topic in the last few years, and you know, with all the studies they have done, they realize it is reached epidemic levels and something that is important to address. In fact, in the U.K. it was such an issue that they decided to appoint of Minister of Loneliness whose job it is to look at some programming to help sort of the community and to help people feel less disconnected and lonely. In terms of Canada, surveys have indicated that one in five Canadians report feeling lonely. And with respect to students and specifically George Brown students, there was a survey that was done last year in 2019, and it is a wide, sort of a big survey assessing the health, the physical and mental health, of students. And GBC students reported, 68% of them reported that they were feeling very lonely at any time within the last 12 months. Now, that is not every single day, but certainly at least one or a few times over the last 12 months they felt very lonely. And 68% is quite a large number. Loneliness not only has major impacts on our mental health but also, they found that it has major impacts as well on our physical health, so I will be talking about that a little bit more later. And so, as a community, we really should be concerned about this. We should take care of ourselves in ensuring that we recognize that we might be feeling lonely and that we take some action to improve our wellness.

**GEN BEAUPRE:** So, what do we mean by loneliness? According to Britannica.com, loneliness is a distressing experience that occurs when a person's social relationships are perceived by that person to be less in quantity, and especially in quality, than desired. So, the experience of loneliness is highly subjective. An individual can be alone without feeling lonely or can feel lonely even when with other people. So, the key points to remember here is that loneliness does not mean being alone, but it is about feeling alone. So, someone can be surrounded with people, have a lot of people in their lives, and still feel lonely. So really, it is the disconnect being the current relationships that someone might have and the relationships that they would like to have, the type of relationship, the quality of relationship they would like to have.

**GEN BEAUPRE:** So, let us look at our agenda, what we would like to cover for today. What is the impact? So, we are going to talk a bit about the impact of loneliness on our health and wellness. Jeremy is going to talk to us about loneliness from a neuroscience perspective, just sort of a different angle on it, and then we are going to get into some strategies for reducing feelings of loneliness by increasing and improving social connections in our lives. And then we are going to share some resources at the end for emotional support if you are experiencing feelings of loneliness because they can be quite painful and for connecting online with other folks who may be experiencing similar situations or may be able to offer support.

**GEN BEAUPRE:** Okay. So, let us talk about the impact of loneliness on our health and wellness, and really what I am talking about this part here, it is more about chronic loneliness. We all, from time to time it is normal to experience some feelings of loneliness, but when the loneliness is chronic, that is when the impact can really be negative. And studies have, it is well established in studies and meta-analyses that chronic loneliness has negative impacts on our physical and mental health. In fact, some of the health risks in terms of our physical health are like that of obesity and smoking 15 cigarettes per day so quite significant in terms of our physical health. According to research, when people are connected, feel connected to others -- and again, remember, it is not necessarily a lot of people -- if they feel they have some connection to, a good quality connection with certain people, they tend to, they are less likely to develop mental health concerns such as depression and anxiety. And they tend to be more resilient. Jeremy is going to talk a little bit more about anxiety and loneliness and how it impacts our stress response when he talks about neuroscience. Also, in terms of our physical health, other things they have noticed, people who are more connected to others are less likely to experience cardiovascular disease, inflammation, and they tend to have a stronger immune system as well. So very interesting how being connected to others can impact our immune system and make us more likely to be healthy. In terms of cognitive problems and dementia, there is a study that demonstrated that the lack of connection with others and chronic loneliness can increase our chances of dementia by 40% so quite significant again. And finally, they have shown in studies as well that those people who are connected to others tend to

live longer as well. So, I am going to pass it over to Jeremy now, and he is going to talk to us about neuroscience and loneliness.

**JEREMY JACOB:** Yes. I would love to do that, so thank you very much for that information, Gen. So, we are going to talk a bit about neuroscience and loneliness and what science has sort of discovered is going on with our brains and various chemicals within our brains when we do experience loneliness, both in the short term and a little bit more chronically. There has been quite a bit of research that has been conducted on what happens in our brains when we are experiencing loneliness. Science has determined that prolonged social isolation tends to affect two primary neurotransmitters or chemicals that are in our brain so that being serotonin and dopamine, and you may have heard of both neurotransmitters before. They are known to have an impact, serotonin, and dopamine rather, is known to have an impact on our emotional wellbeing and our sense of emotional health, and the activation of serotonin and dopamine seems to provide motivation for folks to seek out social connections with others. So, feelings of loneliness serve a biological function by pushing us to make connections with other people, and it may be helpful to view loneliness in this way rather than just to see it as a negative emotion that serves no useful purpose other than to make us feel bad. An analogy that might be helpful to understand this concept is that, you know, when we are thirsty, we use this feeling to motivate us to drink. Often, we will drink water. So, in this way, feeling lonely is no different. This emotion can be uncomfortable, just like thirst, which then motivates us to erase or diminish it through finding social connections with other people. It should be noted that feeling lonely is a normal emotional state, so just like anger or sadness or anxiety, most everyone has felt lonely at some point in their lives. It is good to keep in mind that if loneliness is left untreated, just like anxiety, just like depression, it can lead to other emotional disturbances and even some serious mental health conditions as well.

**JEREMY JACOB:** So, we can go to the next slide please. So, loneliness pitfalls. What does the research tell us about the pitfalls that can happen with being in the state of loneliness? Well, the University of Chicago conducted some research on what happens in the brains of people who are experiencing feelings of loneliness, and this is what they discovered. Feeling lonely often can trigger a heightened awareness for social threats in the environment. This leads to an increased surveillance or being aware of the social world in an unconscious focus on trying to protect the self. The result is a bit of a vicious cycle where a person might tend to withdraw, so a lonely person becomes increasingly suspicious of the world around them. They are feeling lonely. They feel like nobody wants to connect with them, and this intensifies their sense of isolation. Researchers have found that lonely people's brains tend to perceive or are more aware of social threats in an automatic way, and they arrive at this level of awareness more quickly than a non-lonely person. So, what this essentially means is that when the brain is primed by feelings of loneliness, there is a greater likelihood that the person will take measures, either conscious or unconscious, to protect themselves, which often results in further withdrawal and isolation. It is a very common reaction. So, we know that that is the

negative aspect of it. So, what is the solution? Or what is something that people can do? And out of this research is an understanding or a belief that to feel less lonely, it can be important to start focusing on the needs and feelings of others. That takes the person out of their immediate sort of like sense of feeling lonely and sort of puts the attention onto another person, essentially distracting. The less attention on your lonely thoughts and feelings, the better, so we would encourage folks to make some effort to reach out to others, to initiate conversations, especially when you do not feel like it. And there's value in face-to-face interaction, and there's value in using online platforms to connect with people as well. The important thing to keep in mind is making connections with other people, whether you are just having an idle conversation, or you are engaged in some kind of helping activity, will help to foster connections and will help to reduce or diminish the sense of loneliness that a person feels.

**JEREMY JACOB:** Next slide please, Gen. So, there has been a really, big study done on loneliness recently. It was published in the Journal of Personality and Individual Differences. So, the sample size was 46,000 people, and this was done across 237 different countries. And it represents the most extensive and varied study on loneliness to date, and the study uncovered three interesting findings. First, there appears to be an impact of a person's age on loneliness. Younger people tend to experience loneliness more than older age groups. The older you are, the less likely you will be to experience loneliness. Another thing that the study teased out was that there is an impact on gender and loneliness as well. Men reported more feelings of loneliness than women did, and this was true across all age groups. So, in this sense, it seems that are men are in a bit of a higher risk category with respect to feeling lonely. The third thing that they discovered was that society, the kind of society that one lives in also has an impact on loneliness. People living in individualistic societies reported more loneliness than those living in collectivist societies, so just to break that down a little bit, an individualistic society such as the United States and Canada are societies where there is more of an emphasis on individual success. Collectivist societies, the ones that we tend to see in countries such as Guatemala or Spain, the needs, and the goals of the larger group such as families or communities are seen to be more important than individual needs or individual successes. And because this was the largest study that was done to date, my guess is that it is going to probably motivate or inspire future largescale studies so we can start to understand like why the age differences exist, why is there a gender difference as well as a societal difference. We do not have those answers yet, but our hope is that the answers are coming.

**JEREMY JACOB:** Next slide please, Gen. All right. So, we talked a lot about what loneliness is, how we define it, the health impacts on loneliness, and we explored a little bit about the neuroscience or the neurobiology behind it. So, what about, what can we do about it? And it is important to have some strategies to help foster a sense of social connection, so this is what we are hoping to explore right now. Couple of things that I am going to say just before we go into the slides. Prior to COVID-19, I think most of us can agree that there were way more opportunities for social connection to happen

because we just had more options that just are not currently available to us. The times that we are living in right now, it is important that we make an extra effort to connect to others to maintain those connections for all of us and to protect our sense of health and wellness. Waiting for physical distancing to end is not a healthy option because we do not know when it is going to end, and our health and wellness matters right now. So, I am not going to go through this line by line, but there's a couple of things I want to highlight. Staying connect with friends and family is very, very important. You know, the folks that are in your closest circle, your friends, your family are the folks that are going to be able to provide likely the highest quality or the highest value of support to you. So, if you are fortunate enough to have some physical connection with friends and family, that is great. A lot of us probably will need to connect with friends and family using online platforms, and it is wonderful that the technology exists that allows us to do that. However, I do want to mention that too much time in front of a screen is exhausting. We have heard recently about Zoom fatigue, so if you find that you are using online video platforms to connect with family and friends, pay attention to the impact that the video screens are having on you and take breaks when and where appropriate. You will need to find that balance. To completely shrink away and not use the technology to connect could be problematic because it would reduce opportunities for you to connect with other people but doing too much of it too can grind you down and be overwhelming. So just be conscious around it and use your best judgement. Check in with yourself around how you are feeling with respect to screen usage. It is also important to connect with other students at George Brown, so even though we have largely moved to an online platform, you are still a student. You are still enrolled in a program. You are still part of the George Brown College community, and the various support divisions and departments that existed when we were all going into school physically still exist, albeit in an online platform. So, I am talking about stuff like the Student Association, the Black Student Success Network, the International Centre, Peer Connect. All of these supports still exist, and you can find them ultimately by going to the main George Brown College website and just typing these programs or services into the search bar to get connected to their specific webpage. So, do not deny yourself the opportunity to maintain connections with the George Brown College community. Another thing that can be helpful is offering to help somebody, so I think that this was mentioned in a couple of slides previous just around the neuroscience piece. When we help other people, first, it provides a wonderful distraction to our feeling of loneliness. It feels good to help another person, and in the process of helping another person, we are fostering and participating in an interpersonal connection. So, whether that be a neighbour, a friend, a family member, either in face to face or online, the act of helping helps more than just the person that you are helping. It helps yourself, so pay attention to and seek out opportunities to be able to do that. Virtual volunteering is another good way to help other people, and we have a resource for this a little bit later. At the end of this presentation, we are going to provide you with some online resources that will allow you to connect directly with some of the strategies that we are talking about right now. Okay.

Next. And I think the next slide, if I am not mistaken, will be Gen talking a little bit about some strategies for improving social connection.

**GEN BEAUPRE:** Okay. Thank you, Jeremy. So, Jeremy talked a lot about some options for increasing your connection, and although they are more limited right now, there are still quite a few options. However, though, however you choose to connect with others, and that is entirely up to you, but however you choose to connect, there are some key things to remember in terms of improving those connections and reducing those feelings of loneliness. One of these is being strategic, so think about the types of relationships that you want. And that is very important in terms of how you are going to spend your energy, your time, and to get sort of a more bang for your buck. So, think about are you more interested in one-on-one connection with people or a small group, larger groups. That will determine the type of activities or ways of connecting that you are going to engage in. Think about if you are thinking, are you looking to have fun, or are you looking to engage or to have more intellectual stimulation? What are your interests? You know, do you need emotional support? So those are all questions that you may want to ask yourself when you are trying to figure out how you would like to connect with others. Take it slow and be patient. So, in terms of that, you know, one of the things to think about is if you have been feeling very isolated for some time, it may be good to give yourself some small goals and take it one step at a time and remember too that it does take some to feel connected and to feel like you're part of a group. So be patient and keep on trying. It may take a little while, and you may not feel any less lonely initially. But eventually, those feelings may subside. Keep in mind that you will not be everyone's friend, of course, and that is okay. Not everyone will be your friend either. Right? It is not a reflection on your value or your worth as a person. It just means that you have not met the right group of people or the right individuals yet, and you just do not mesh yet. And that is okay. You just keep on trying, and eventually, you will be able to find that. Aim for healthy relationships. So, some of the things to think about or to ask yourself is am I feeling heard when I talk to this individual or this group of individuals? Are my needs respected? Does the other person feel the same way? Do they feel like they are heard? Because if the relationship is just one-sided, it is going to be very difficult to form that meaningful bond that will help address those feelings of loneliness, so this is key to remember. And if you are finding, you know, for a lot of us, sometimes it is hard to say no to people, or it is hard to ask for what we need. And if this is something you struggle with, then it may be something that you want to work on or you want to talk to a counsellor about because this may permeate various relationships in your life, and it may be helpful to kind of work on that and see if there can be some improvements in that way. Avoid comparing yourself to others. That is a common one and a hard one sometimes. Right? With social media, it really makes it easy to compare ourselves to others. But what is important to remember is that, you know, although other people may look on social media like they are, you know, very happy and with lots of, you know, connections with people, remember that it is a very subjective experience. It may be deceiving what you seen online. That individual may have a lot of people around them, but they may still feel lonely. So, something to keep in mind in terms of perspective

when you are using social media. And for some people it is so triggering that maybe the best thing to do is to consider reducing their use of social media, at least for a period, if they notice that it is impacting them in a negative way. And on the topic of social media, although it is a great way to connect with others, it can be a great way, it is also good to have some of that time connecting with others be face to face via video right now or some phone conversations. Right? There is nothing like hearing someone's voice or seeing their face. There is a lot more information you can get from a person and a lot more connection that can happen with those pieces that cannot happen when we are texting or when we are using social media. And finally, think about your mental health. You know, what is, you know, poor mental health can really intensify feelings of loneliness, feelings of isolation, may cause us to withdraw from others, may bring on some negative thinking. So those are all things that can make it difficult to connect with others or to find the motivation to connect with others, so take care of your mental health. As Jeremy mentioned earlier, that there are some resources or ways to gain support, and he is going to share some specific resources as well for helping you taking care of your mental health. Check out some of our other websites that will be available on our website as well with the topics of mental health and stress management, et cetera. Those are all pieces, if you can take care of that, then a connection with others will be a lot easier. So, I will pass it on to, pass it back to Jeremy, so he is going to talk to us about some of the resources that we have been talking about.

**JEREMY JACOB:** Great. Thanks, Gen, and thanks for those strategies. I think that they will prove to be quite helpful and good things for us to keep in mind to be sure. So, the meta-message I think that we want to communicate to folks that are watching this presentation is that the antidote to loneliness is more social connection. At least to the best of our ability, try to maintain and develop new social connections. While physical distancing tends to limit types of social connection we can have, there are still many ways that we can connect with others, certainly by leveraging technology that will allow us to do so. So, the next three slides are going to present to you some, you know, solid, researched opportunities to make connections, to seek out supports that can improve your health and wellness, hopefully reduce your sense of loneliness. These lists are not exhaustive, but it is our hope that it gives you some idea of where to look for online supports as well as online places to connect with others. This is a video recording, so you will not be able to directly click on these links. But I would encourage you to pull out your phone and take snaps of these slides so that you at least have the URL, and you can sort of type that into your computer's web browser or whatever device you are using to connect to the internet so that you can have direct access to these links. And the time of the recording has been where it is October of 2020, and we recently went through these links just to make sure that they will work and that there were not any dud links. So, all these links as of the time of the recording are still active, so hopefully they remain so moving forward. So, the first slide talks about mental health supports, so the list that you see in front of you, these are formal mental health supports to provide mental health support to folks that are dealing with some level of struggle, some level of challenge, even above and beyond feelings of loneliness. Depression, anxiety, worry,

interpersonal relationship issues, I mean, you name it. The whole spectrum of possible challenges or difficulties that a person can have may be able to be addressed through these supports. The top two I want to talk about specifically. So, the George Brown College Counselling Department has their own website, and that is the link to it. Through that website, you can get direct access to registering as a student for counselling supports within the college. We recently revamped this website, and there is additional information contained on the website to help support your overall sense of health and wellness. There's also external resource links, so we would encourage you to, even if you are not interested in getting connected to individual counselling supports, please go on this website, and look at some of the offerings that are there because it was designed with trying to provide information and options for students that might be struggling in various ways. Real Campus is also a comprehensive health support, both physical health and mental health support, so if you have not opted out of your student insurance, then you have access to Real Campus. And like I said, it is more than just mental health support. There is the potential to get connected to other supports under the umbrella of health and wellness, so please consider going to the Real Campus website. There is a very brief registration process to get connected to Real Campus, but it will open opportunities for formalized supports that hopefully are something that could sort of help you with whatever it is that you might be dealing with. Okay. Maybe the next slide, please.

**JEREMY JACOB:** So, this second resource slide falls under the category of peer mental health support, so not everybody who might be struggling feels like they need formalized support. Some folks find way more usefulness or utility in peer support, and so this list, this shorter list, is about peer mental health supports that exist online. And the nice thing about peer mental health supports is, you know, it is not formal, so for folks that might be craving connection but not necessarily interested in talking directly to a counsellor about it, they would rather, you know, speak to somebody who is, you know, closer in age or in their peer group, these links will get you connected to those informal peer-based supports, which, again, it is a personal choice. Even though I am a counsellor and I support the counselling profession, I also recognize that, you know, whatever it is that a person is dealing with, if they have a greater sense of what would be important for them, then it is important that that person get connected to the resource that seems appropriate for the needs that they are having. So, this is just a list of peer mental health supports that could hopefully be helpful, and then maybe we will go to the last slide, the last resource slide.

**JEREMY JACOB:** So, these are just other resources that do not necessarily fall strictly on the formal mental health or peer support slides. A couple of them that I want to mention is the volunteer online, so I specifically want to mention this one because I briefly spoke a few slides ago about how volunteering, putting yourself in a helping position, can be helpful to make you feel better, to foster connections, and to help somebody else out. In the sort of COVID era that we are now living in and the difficulties with the physical distancing piece, you know, being able to go into an agency or



organization, sign up as a volunteer, and work directly with people may be a little bit more limited than it otherwise was. So, this [onlinevolunteering.org](https://onlinevolunteering.org) organization is, you know, they have taken on their mission to provide a platform to help people get connected to volunteer opportunities online, so it is helpful in the sense that it is still putting yourself in a helping position. You get the opportunity to help somebody else out. You get the opportunity to foster a connection, potentially feel a little bit less lonely, and then you are also doing it in a way that is much safer. So, if the, you know, if working directly with somebody is something that makes you feel a little bit nervous or the idea of doing it with a mask on is just not palatable to you, doing it in an online platform allows you to make that connection without necessarily compromising your own level of comfort or your sense of health. So please check out that website in addition to the other ones that we have listed as well. And our deepest, most sincere hope is that you find some of these resources specifically helpful to your situation and the needs that you have. And I think that that is it for that slide.

**GEN BEAUPRE:** Okay. Thank you, Jeremy. So, some concluding thoughts and final thoughts that we wanted to mention is loneliness, as we mentioned, is a normal and appropriate emotion that many people are experiencing, especially right now with the COVID times that we are in. There are many things that you can do to help reduce those feelings of loneliness, and we are certainly hoping that the information that we provided and the resources that we gave you will give you a sense of what ideas or some things you can be doing to help with that. Online resources are available to support your efforts to increasing social connection to others and to get some emotional support when it is so hard right now for so many folks. And our hope is that the webinar gave you some inspiration, some ideas, some motivation to take some steps to increasing your sense of social connection and reducing any feelings of loneliness you may be experiencing.

**GEN BEAUPRE:** And we wanted to also share with you, Jeremy did talk about the George Brown College counselling service a little bit earlier, but we wanted to give you contact, specific contact information in case you do want to book an appointment. What you do is you go to our website, as Jeremy mentioned earlier, if you want to take a screenshot or picture, some way to capture this so you have it later, the website is at the top for the registration form. If you do not or if you want to go back to it later, you can always go to the GBC website and type in counselling services on the search field, and it will bring you to our website and all the other resources that are there. If you need assistance in booking an appointment or if you have questions and you want to know how we are doing this counselling thing while we are working virtually, certainly feel free to contact any of the emails that are listed here. Depending on your campus, it is a slightly different email, and there also are, phone lines are available. I believe you may have to leave a message, a voicemail message, and then, but those voicemails are being monitored. And calls are being returned, so either way, whether with voice or email, you want to reach out and have questions, feel free to do so. And as, I just want to remind you too -- Jeremy mentioned it earlier -- but on our website, there is a lot more

than just appointments -- right -- just booking appointments. There are resources, a curated list of resources, on information if you want to know about ways to increase your wellness, some self-care tips, if you are looking for improving your sleep or improving your nutrition. There are some websites that we have on there with some good content that is relevant for students and that you can just link to by going through our website, so feel free to do that. So, I just want to thank you so much, Jeremy and I would like to thank you for watching our webinar today. We hope that the content was useful to you, and we really hope that, again, that you are going to be able to know at least where to turn to -- right -- where to turn to for help, where to turn to for increasing connection. And please do not hesitate to reach out. No question is too big or too small. No problem is too big or too small for us. We like to meet with all students, and we are here to help you. We are not here to judge you, so please feel free to reach out if needed. And please enjoy the rest of your day. Thank you so much for watching our webinar.

**JEREMY JACOB:** Yeah. Thanks, everybody