

Loneliness and The Fog of Recovery

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www.trafn.com/blog.html - October, 2016

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One of the more common, yet more subtle triggers that can up-end an otherwise long-term, stable recovery is loneliness. While it can effect anyone at any age, it becomes even more prevalent the older we get. This is because as we age, unlike when we were younger, we tend to have fewer and fewer opportunities to meet new people. Our older selves become more set in our ways, have more responsibilities and demands on our time, and we tend to stick to what's familiar and long-standing in our lives. Unfortunately, this can lead to narrower social circles, a loss of friends and loved ones over the years, and an increasing amount of alone time. At some point, if the balance shifts to far toward isolation, then being alone can become quite lonely, producing stress and triggers which invite relapse.

The transition to loneliness is often a subtle one which evolves over years: a friend moves away, someone close passes away, a new job requires that you move to an unfamiliar town, etcetera. Then one day you wake up to find that what used to be your fulfilling life now has a new, inexplicable, and unexpected hole in it: loneliness. For those of us who have been in a stable recovery for many years, this evolving loneliness can become a confusing and slippery slope into the fog of recovery.

Loneliness in later life is not easy to reverse. You can't just move back to where your friends all live, you can't bring back a departed loved one, and it not as easy to make new friends like when we were in our 20's. In fact, for many of us, loneliness becomes a permanent part of the aging process. But just like every skin mole does not turn into skin cancer, loneliness does not have to lead to relapse. Though it may not be reversible or curable, it can, quite often, be managed so as to limit its effects on our emotions and our lives.

Expectations play a large part in loneliness. Understanding that we're no longer in our teens, 20's or even 30's goes a long way toward setting reasonable goals for our social time, our alone time, and how much loneliness we actually experience. That is not to say that we should have no social interactions in our lives, for this would lead to a trigger-burdening amount of loneliness and relapse. No, the goal here is to find a realistic balance that accurately reflects and sufficiently satisfies our need for human

interactions.

Socially, we exist on three levels: me, us, and we. The me level is how we interact with ourselves. Do we enjoy being on our own? What do we do when we're alone? How can we make our alone time more enjoyable? There are many ways to make your me-time a more satisfying experience. Having a hobby, playing a musical instrument, or even reading are just three common ways that can keep our being alone from becoming lonely. Sometimes these are things that we can do daily, but they can also be periodic activities like taking yourself out for a nice meal once a week. The important thing here is to realize that me-time is a chance for you to do something you enjoy while on your own.

The us level of socializing occurs when we engage in one-on-one activities, and it can involve many of the same things we like doing during our me-time. Go for a walk with a friend. Meet someone for dinner. Even a relaxed conversation over the phone can go a long way toward adding quality we-time into our daily lives. Of course the challenge as we get older is in finding another person with whom to do these things. Luckily, in the internet age, there are many opportunities to find others to interact with, and these engagements can even happen online.

Finally, there's the we level of socializing during which we interact with a group of people. This can include activities like joining a walking/jogging club, going to a karaoke night, or joining a bowling team. Unlike us-time, the value in we-time is that we're engaging with a group instead of just one other person, the reward being similar to enjoying a three course meal versus just having the entree. This is not to say that we-time is better than us-time, for they both provide unique and valuable opportunities to improve the quality of our lives, while at the same time diminishing the effects loneliness can have upon us. Again, the internet offers many opportunities for us to find we-time activities through websites like MeetUp.com and other community social pages.

I am almost sixty now, and as I've aged I've found myself with an ever smaller circle of family and friends with whom I can engage. Thus, the older I've gotten, the more often I've found myself experiencing loneliness. Yet, by investing in quality me-, us-, and we-time, I have been able to successfully manage how lonely I feel and to prevent my loneliness from becoming a gateway into the fog of recovery. Currently, I take myself out for a nice dinner during the week (me-time), go out to lunch with a friend on the weekends (us-time), and I've joined a group that meets weekly to share and play music together (we-time). By practicing these three simple interventions, I've

dramatically improved the quality of my life, and I've found a realistic and valuable balance that keeps my alone time from becoming lonely.

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The Fog of Recovery (June, 2016)
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http://trafn.com/fogofrecovery_oneoffs.pdf

Cravings and The Fog of Recovery (August, 2016)
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Childhood Abuse and The Fog of Recovery (September, 2016)
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