

Alone, NOT Lonely

Combating Isolation in Solo PD

Written by: *Brienne Leclaire*

Managing Parkinson's alone can be an isolating experience. Isolation is not an uncommon occurrence. Studies have shown that one in six adults feel isolated either socially or geographically and 25% of people over the age of seventy feel isolated. Isolation increases our risk for certain health conditions such as stroke and high blood pressure while also having significant impacts on our mental health such as increasing our risks for depression, apathy, and anxiety. Being isolated also impacts our general feeling of well-being and we see this popping up in different Parkinson's symptoms. These include increased fatigue, increased apathy, insomnia, increased muscle tension, headaches and body aches, and increased feelings of loneliness or sadness.

One of the most important things that we can do to combat isolation is building ourselves a routine. Making a routine for your day will look different for everyone depending on your needs and schedule. Apathy is common in Parkinson's and can make it harder to maintain a routine and keep up with daily tasks. Routine helps build structure in our lives including all the activities we do daily. If there are other activities you do less frequently you can build those into your routine as well.

Meaningful social connections are so important for reducing feelings of isolation. Staying connected with those in our circle and connecting with other people in our communities helps us feel less alone. Social connections might look like going over for family dinners, meeting with friends, spending time with friends and families doing activities and going out into the community. It can also be making phone calls to friends and family or connecting digitally like on zoom or skype. Another option is connecting with people over social media where we can connect with people with similar interests.

We can also make meaningful social connections by getting out in our community. You can join a group, club, or a community organization. This is a fantastic way to get out and join things that connect you with people with similar interests and build social connection. You can attend a support group like the support groups we run here at Parkinson Association of Alberta. We run support groups all over the province with options for in person and virtual groups. You can also make social connections by volunteering. There are always wonderful organizations looking for volunteers in a bunch of different capacities. Volunteering helps us help other people and give back to our communities giving us a sense of pride and purpose.

Participating in hobbies can help us combat feelings of isolation. Hobbies look different for everybody; you might have a hobby that you have done for a long time, or you might be starting something new. It could be gardening, crafting, knitting, golf, fishing, or all kinds of different hobbies. Hobbies help to keep us busy making us feel less isolated and more fulfilled. We can also take advantage of things like getting connected with different groups that also take part in these hobbies. Joining a community group, or online group on social media like Facebook. Social media has different groups dedicated to hobbies. These groups are where people share their hobbies, their expertise and ask questions about them. Local community centres and seniors' centres often have hobby clubs that people can get involved in as well. Bringing the socialization and community aspect to often individual hobbies.

Consider learning something new. Lifelong learning not only helps our cognitive abilities stay sharp, but also helps us engage with others. Having an expansive knowledge base can help us in our social life by connecting with people in more diverse ways. There are many ways to learn and engage our brain in things like reading, listening to a podcast or an audiobook, watching documentaries, learning a new skill or language. Anything that helps us expand our knowledge and skills can help us engage our brain and in turn make us feel more connected.

Next up we have exercise! When we exercise, we feel good, it helps us increase our energy levels and promote good health. Exercise can be anything that gets your heart rate going and exerts energy. When we feel better about ourselves, we feel less isolated and feel more comfortable to get out there and socialize. Exercise can also be a social activity if you engage in it with a group. It is something that can help combat isolation and make us feel better overall. Hand in hand with exercise is getting outdoors. This can be getting outside for a walk, working in the garden, or even just sit out on the deck or in your yard and enjoy the sun. Getting fresh air makes us feel better and improves our overall health which in turn reduces isolation.



The last tip is to practice self-care. Think about all the activities that we do that help us take care of ourselves, this is self-care. All the things mentioned in this article fall under self-care. Odds are there are many other things that you already do to take care of yourself that make you feel better, increase your feelings of well-being, and promote overall health. Some examples are scheduling regular doctors' appointments, eating healthy, getting enough sleep, taking medication properly, doing personal care like bathing/showering. Activities that improve our sense of well-being and self also fall under self-care. These could be things like meditating, doing yoga, practicing breathing exercises, attending spiritual or religious services, and being connected to something bigger than ourselves.

There are many ways we can combat isolation and how we do so will be unique to who we are as an individual. Finding what works for us takes some trial and error. Do not be afraid to step out of your comfort zone and try something new. If you take anything away from this list, take away that combating isolation is accomplished in two parts. Taking care of ourselves, so we feel good, AND connecting with others around us.