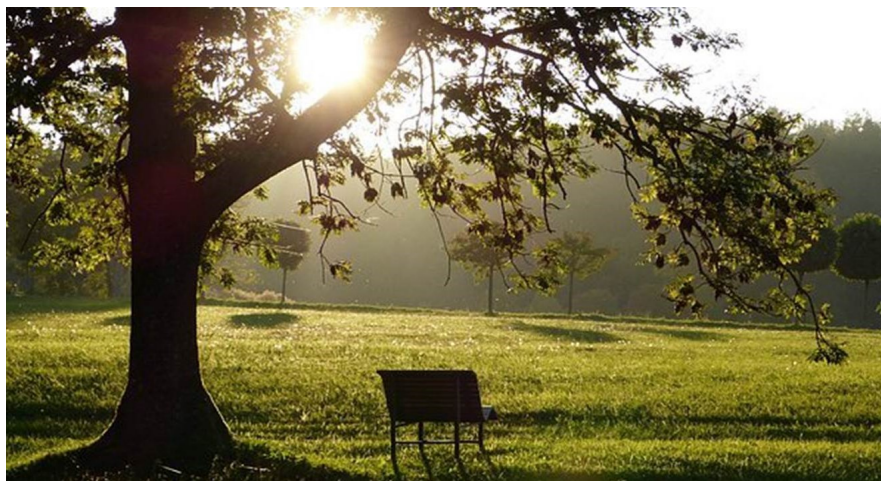


# Loneliness and Belonging

by Rev. Kathy Dale McNair

Loneliness is on the rise in America, in part due to the social isolation imposed on us by the global pandemic. It is putting a strain on our emotional and mental health.

The CDC reports that loneliness is becoming an epidemic in the older adult population. Nearly one fourth of adults aged 65 and older are considered to be socially isolated. Loneliness can shorten one's life and affect the quality of life. A sense of belonging can enrich one's life and add more years to one's life than might otherwise be expected.



Loneliness is a natural part of the human condition. Some emotions that are associated with loneliness are sadness, loss, grief, and anxiety. Other factors contributing to loneliness that are specific to older adults are loss of a spouse, loss of a job, living alone, fewer meaningful connections, limited resources, limited transportation, and compromised health.

Emotions that surface in response to any of these situations can create stress and build up pressure. Unrelieved grief over disappointments and losses can open the door where loneliness can move in. Protracted loneliness might turn into despair, and despair might turn into depression. When depression sets in, it can become a more serious mental health condition and professional help may be needed to restore emotional or mental health.

The opposite of loneliness is belonging. Belonging eases the ache we feel in our heart when we feel lonely. Belonging can be found in the close connection of family or friends, in a work setting, on a sports team, even when we feel allegiance to a nation. Belonging can be found in fellowship, worship, and common activities in a faith community. People sometimes refer to “my church family” or “my church home.” These references indicate a feeling of belonging.

The church is uniquely positioned to cultivate a sense of belonging in others. Community is a natural part of a church's culture. Enjoying fellowship brings people together in a friendly way. Having activities to share gives a person meaning. Having others to relate to warms one's heart and refreshes the soul.

Members of a church can learn how to approach others as a companion. In so doing, the person



they are relating to may feel that their burden is lighter, and their spirit is being restored.

Your faith community may want to address the issue of loneliness and intentionally focus on helping people know that they belong. Knowing how to come alongside someone who may be feeling lonely can help relieve their suffering and renew their sense of connecting to others.

### Here are a few **Companionship skills** that you can learn:

- Approaching someone who may be suffering from loneliness requires a delicate, sensitive first contact. Learn how to approach another with careful introductions and gentle inquiries.
- Use reflective listening to discover feelings and themes in the conversations between the two of you.
- Be open to a person's spiritual story - listen for words of faith, hope and love.
- Honor their feelings and experiences.
- Understand the meaning of empathy, sympathy, and compassion.
- Be willing to faithfully walk with this person over time.

These skills are drawn from the **Companionship Workshop** which offers skills on listening, companionship, relationship building and boundaries.

Another course that helps equip people who want to become a companion is **Restoring Wholeness: Spiritual Support for Mental Health**. This course helps individuals understand themselves better so they can better understand the person they are companionshiping. The topics in the course are:

- loneliness and belonging
- loss and meaning
- grief and growth
- anxiety and peace
- depression and vitality

Exploring these topics helps each person understand how these emotions can challenge and ultimately contribute to a sense of wholeness. When you understand yourself well, loneliness diminishes. Then you can feel like you belong.

Quaker author, Parker Palmer, says "Wholeness does not mean perfection: it means embracing brokenness as an integral part of life." This concept helps people understand that loneliness and other rough patches in life are an important part of the whole. Having someone who is a companion helps both people look at challenges with fresh eyes.



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The pastoral care team, social workers, chaplains, and deacons in a faith community will benefit greatly from these courses. Lay people will also benefit. The more people who are skilled, the more people there are to reach out to someone who may want a companion. Becoming a companion strengthens one's faith and the belief that God has a purpose for us all.

Fred Rogers of the TV program, Mr. Rogers Neighborhood, once said, "In a crisis, look to the helpers." The helpers are often quiet and effective responders to a difficult situation. Equipping members of your faith community to be helpers in any setting can avert crises and strengthen the weave of your faith community's fabric.

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References:

**Pathways2promise.org**

<https://www.thecompanionshipmovement.org/>

The purpose of **Companionship Training** is to develop the capacity of congregations and communities to support recovery and wellness. This happens by growing the ability to share the journey of emotional healing with one another. Companionship develops as one person responds to the suffering of another by helping to support healing and wellness. We practice companionship by walking alongside someone, sitting on a park bench, talking at a meal program or in a shelter, welcoming a person to your house of worship.

**Faith Hope & Good Mental Health**

<https://www.faithhopegoodmentalhealth.org/>

The **Restoring Wholeness: Spiritual Support for Mental Health** course explores challenging and restorative emotions. Spiritual practices are woven throughout the sessions to provide comfort and inspiration, to anchor walking through difficult times with another. The group of participants grow as they share with one another. Understanding one's own struggles helps participants be more comfortable being with others who may be living with mental health challenge.

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Both programs are Zoom friendly. Every congregation should have a person who understands Zoom, someone who can help or give instructions to those who might need help so they can participate in these or any Zoom program.

*Rev. Kathy Dale McNair is a specialized minister in the PCUSA focusing on mental health. She is the founder of **Faith, Hope & Good Mental Health** ministry. She is also a consultant to churches wanting to start mental health ministries.*

***Restoring Wholeness** is their new curriculum which helps people understand themselves and see how their emotions promote good mental health or can lead to mental health challenges. For more information, go to: [www.fhgmh.org](http://www.fhgmh.org).*