Overcoming Loneliness

“Loneliness and the feeling of being unwanted is the most terrible poverty.”
- Mother Teresa

The beginning of the school year is often filled with excitement, challenges, and new experiences. Classes begin and routines are established, and before you know it, midterms have started and you haven’t done anything but eat, sleep, and study. While studying is a key to having a successful academic career, one needs to be mindful of maintaining a balance between classes and having a fulfilling personal life. With a busy academic schedule, it can be especially difficult to preserve the balance between school, home responsibilities and socialization, which can lead to feelings of isolation and loneliness. It often seems like a contradiction that one can be surrounded by people and feel lonely; unfortunately it is all too true, and all too common that one can feel lonely when in a crowd.

Most students experience periods of loneliness from time to time during their education. New students are especially at risk of feeling lonely. By coming to Northwestern Health Sciences University, you are often separated from the people you know well: your family and friends. It is hard to get used to new people, a new environment, and new academic challenges. Those you relied on for support are not around, and there is sometimes no one with whom to share your feelings and experiences.

However, feelings of loneliness can occur at any time during your education and can look different in each person. Some feel lonely when they are excluded by an individual or a group (social loneliness); other people feel lonely when they have no one to talk to about their deepest concerns, or with whom to build a close personal relationship (emotional loneliness).

Feelings of loneliness are common at universities for many reasons including:

- Being away from friends and family, and missing them
- “Starting from scratch” and making new friends after being away from a school setting for some time
- Having high expectations that college is the place where you will make friends for life, or are feeling disappointed in the number of people you have initially met
- Being anxious about work and feel in conflict about spending time on social activities

That being said, how does one prevent isolation and feelings of loneliness?

- Remember that loneliness is common; almost everyone feels it at some point in their lives.
- Think of ways to change your situation. This may involve finding a new circle of friends, joining one of the organizations at Northwestern or volunteering in the community. It may also mean finding ways of learning to enjoy your time alone, and using it more constructively and pleasurably.
• Do not wait for other people to visit or speak to you. Try to initiate conversations with people you sit next to in class, or the people who live close to you.
• Try to put yourself in new situations where you will meet people with similar interests, or look for ways to include others in your daily activities, such as eating with others, sitting with new people in class, or finding a study or exercise partner.
• Make use of campus resources. Find out about organizations and activities on or around campus.
• Do not deprive yourself of things you would like to do just because you don’t have someone to do them with. It may seem awkward at first, but go for a walk, to a concert, or to a movie alone.
• Give it time; don’t feel bad if people don’t call you or ask you out right away. Friendships take time to develop. Just keep talking to them, listening to them, and being around them. They need time to know you.
• On average, adults have six people that they identify as close friends. Everyone doesn’t have to like you nor do you want to limit yourself to just one close friend.

If you find you are struggling with loneliness and need help developing ways to cope, individual counseling services are available with Becky Lawyer, M.A., LPC, the University Counselor. Call 952-885-5405 for an appointment.