

Episode 203: Break Free from Isolation: How to Manage Loneliness with Chronic Pain

Lindsay Weitzel, PhD:

Hello everyone, and welcome to HeadWise, the videocast and podcast of the National Headache Foundation. I'm Dr. Lindsay Weitzel. I'm the founder of Migraine Nation, and I have chronic and daily migraine that began at the age of four. I am happy to be here today with Dr. Melissa Geraghty, PsyD. Hi Dr. Geraghty, how are you?

Melissa Geraghty, PsyD:

Good. Nice to be here. Thanks for having me.

Lindsay Weitzel, PhD:

Thank you for being here. Dr. Geraghty is a clinical health psychologist and the Director of Mental Health and Support at the US Pain Foundation. We're lucky to have her. I always love her viewpoints. And our topic today is loneliness and isolation in migraine and other types of head pain that might keep us at home or away from our social support network.

So I can't wait to hear what she has to say about this. Dr. Geraghty, why don't you begin for anyone in our audience that may not know you or have met you before. Why don't you begin by telling our audience a little bit about yourself. And why you love working with the migraine and headache community?

Melissa Geraghty, PsyD:

Yeah, absolutely. So, as you said, I'm a licensed clinical health psychologist, Director of Mental Health and Support of the US Pain Foundation. I'm also the CEO of Phoenix Rising with Dr. G and an international keynote speaker. And I am also a chronic, medically complex, rare disease patient. And I have many different types of migraine and headache diseases.

So as someone who has personally navigated chronic pain and complex medical illnesses my entire life, I'm really passionate about supporting other people in similar situations so that they can feel understood and empowered in their own health care journey.

Lindsay Weitzel, PhD:

I love that. Everyone loves your viewpoint being someone who is also experiencing chronic illness and chronic pain. And we can't wait to hear what you have to say on this topic. It occurred to me to ask you to come talk to us about this because recently I started feeling almost a secondary isolation. I know what it feels like to be isolated due to daily head pain, daily migraines, etc. But I also have a child that has daily chronic head pain and I was feeling a secondary isolation just because I was taking care of my child. And we were both getting a little bit isolated, and I felt sorry for him, and I felt sorry for myself. And I thought we could just approach this by starting with even just my life experience. And when I was very young, I was also isolated from my friends even at that age.

So I wanted to just talk about this and bring it up with you and have you tell us what is known and how we can help prevent it. So how common do you think feelings of loneliness or isolation are in people with migraine or other chronic head pain?

Melissa Geraghty, PsyD:

Well, first of all, I'd like to say that I really appreciate you sharing your personal experience and your child's experience. Because the more we talk about these things, the less people feel alone. Because really, feelings of loneliness and isolation are unfortunately quite common among individuals with migraine and other chronic pain conditions.

The unpredictable nature of many of these conditions, along with the debilitating symptoms they cause, can absolutely lead to social withdrawal and difficulty maintaining relationships. And also, the invisible nature of these illnesses can make it challenging for others to understand the extent of a person's struggles, which then can make people feel more alone.

Lindsay Weitzel, PhD:

And as women too, we have a following of many females, we're always taking care of other people in addition to ourselves. So if someone else is isolated, we're even more isolated. So I think it's important to point that out, because we're often taking care of another family member with migraine or chronic pain, and we also have it. So I think it's important to point that out in case other people out there are feeling the same thing.

Do you think this can be worse for some people based on their personality type? In other words, is this experience more difficult for an extrovert than it is for an introvert?

Melissa Geraghty, PsyD:

This is a great question. So extroverts who typically thrive on social interaction and external stimulation may find the experience particularly challenging as they may struggle more with the lack of social engagement. Now introverts, on the other hand, may be more accustomed to solitude and may find solace in doing things alone. However, regardless of personality type, chronic pain and illness can profoundly affect one's sense of connection and belonging. So it's really essential for us to recognize individual differences and tailor those support strategies accordingly to address the unique needs of each person.

Lindsay Weitzel, PhD:

So you think it doesn't necessarily mean you're going to be in more trouble if you're an extrovert? Can you learn some skills that will help you a little bit, like take on reading a little more or something? I don't know what it would be. You would, but definitely you can kind of fix it for yourself a little bit.

Melissa Geraghty, PsyD:

Yeah, there's lots of adjustment adjustments people can make. And if they don't know where to begin, they can absolutely reach out to a pain psychologist, kind of strategize, and friends and family, to figure out how can I fill my time in different ways and still feel like I'm having some connection.

Lindsay Weitzel, PhD:

I was reading an article on this topic and it went so far as to say something that I thought was very interesting. It said that some people start to experience feelings of shame after they have been isolated due to their illness, almost like they start to feel like there's something wrong with them or that they've done something wrong.

Can you comment on this? Because I have a feeling that we have some people in our audience who felt that way before.

Melissa Geraghty, PsyD:

Yeah, feelings of shame arising from isolation due to illness are unfortunately not uncommon. And when individuals are consistently unable to participate in social activities or fulfill certain responsibilities due to their condition, they may internalize a sense of inadequacy or fault. And so this can lead to self-blame and feelings of unworthiness, despite the absence of any wrongdoing on their part.

Lindsay Weitzel, PhD:

I'm glad that you said that. We don't need to feel shame. I think shame, if anything, is going to make us feel worse. So I think that's something we need to make sure that we avoid, and we don't want to feel inadequate for sure. We want to make sure that on the days that we are feeling well, we are able to perform instead of sitting there feeling like we've done something wrong. I always like to point that out. So thank you for saying that.

Melissa Geraghty, PsyD:

And when feelings of shame and inadequacy pop up because they very well might, then being able to talk about them, voice them, process them, is so important so that you don't get shame on top of shame for having these thoughts.

Lindsay Weitzel, PhD:

So for people sitting at home who feel like they know they're going to eventually have to cancel things, so they don't want to make plans, etc. They don't want to end up losing friends. They worry about these kinds of things all the time. What advice do you give to people to try and prevent social isolation when they have migraine or other chronic pain or chronic illness?

Melissa Geraghty, PsyD:

It's essential to recognize that chronic illness is not a reflection of personal failure. And seeking support and understanding can help individuals navigate and overcome these feelings of shame and self-doubt.

So people might need, like I said, a support of a clinical health psychologist or pain psychologist to help process this. And also seeking out supportive migraine and headache communities, whether online or in person, can provide valuable understanding and connection. And also exploring alternative forms of socializing that accommodate their limitations, such as virtual hangouts or low energy activities. And these can help individuals maintain social connection while managing their health.

Also, I feel that what's so important is practicing self-compassion and recognizing the importance of self-care, because these are crucial and navigating the challenges of chronic illness while staying connected with others.

Lindsay Weitzel, PhD:

So if we find then as people do get down a little bit once they find that they've had to cancel a lot of social plans due to migraine or pain. What advice do you have for keeping their mood up once they've done that and they're kind of in that low, lonely space?

Melissa Geraghty, PsyD:

Which again is common. And so if you're frequently canceling social plans due to migraine and chronic illness, it is important to prioritize self-care. So practicing that self-compassion that I was talking about and remind yourself that it is okay to prioritize your health, even if it doesn't feel great, even though you feel like you're missing out, and even if you feel like you're disappointing other people.

And when you do have to cancel plans, try to engage in activities that align with your values, those things that you really care about in life. And maybe that's art or listening to music or practicing some mindfulness. And reminding yourself that while it might not be the same as in-person hangouts, you can also stay connected with loved ones through phone calls, video chats, text messages, even if you can't be physically present. So focusing on what you can do rather than what you can't, and celebrating those small wins really helps. Because sometimes what seems small is really a big deal. And again, seek support from a pain psychologist or join a peer led support group like the US Pain Foundation has, to build a community of people who just get it.

Lindsay Weitzel, PhD:

I can say something that came to my mind while you were talking. We do try to limit screen time because we do want kids in pain to get outside still and do other activities. One thing that I've noticed that my child that has daily pain and often can't make it to school and misses their friends so much, they game together. And I know that some people are like, gosh, get them off of it. Well, sometimes this is how they keep their friendships going when they can't really leave the house much. so that's not it can be seen. That can be a positive thing sometimes. So it's not a terrible idea. And I know people that do little art groups. I have no artistic talent. I wish I did, but art groups together online that they're with their with their migraine friends and things like that. And there's such a great idea. So I'm glad that you brought that up.

Is there anything else that you would like to add to this topic today before we go? Anything you think we missed?

Melissa Geraghty, PsyD:

Yeah, I just like to emphasize again that it's okay to prioritize your health. And take the time you need to rest and recover and really remember that there are so many ways to connect with others that don't include having to leave your home if you're unable to. At the moment, is it the same? No, but it's still connection, and that's what we want to focus on. And so yes, video games, support groups online, people will do knitting clubs, book clubs, all those things. And it's just so important that we find multiple ways to have connection.

Lindsay Weitzel, PhD:

Well, thank you so much for talking to us on this important topic. I hope that everyone feels encouraged if they have been spending a lot of time alone, which all of us do if we have chronic migraine or chronic pain. It's normal to end up spending some time alone and it's okay. And just take good care of yourself mentally. Take good care of yourself physically.

Thank you everyone for listening. And thank you again to Dr. Geraghty for being here. Please join us again on our next episode of HeadWise. Have a great and pain free day.