

Isolation Podcast Final_mixdown.mp3

Voiceover [00:00:02] This podcast is brought to you by the University of Aberdeen.

Bekah Walker [00:00:08] It's the time of year, again, when sparkly lights start to fill the streets and the shops get busier and busier. It's often described as the most wonderful time of the year but for some, the holidays can heighten feelings of sadness and disconnection from others. Our episode today will discuss loneliness and isolation over the holidays and how we can get through it. Joining me today I have Michael, who is a PGT student studying International Business Management and Marylee, who is one of our University Chaplains. Welcome to you both and thanks for joining me today. So, the winter holidays can be something that you might look forward to all year round. It could be your most favourite time and most magical time of the year or as we alluded to at the beginning, it might be a time of year that you find a little bit tough. The holidays are often associated with a time to have fun, laugh and be sociable with family and friends. But for some of us, the expectation to be joyful and full of festive spirit can bring anxiety, sadness and even feelings of dread. So just why are the winter holidays the most difficult time of the year for some of us?

Michael Kazibwe [00:01:12] In my view, I think the winter holidays are the most difficult time because you're in a scenario where you are away from your family for some time, so you find your emotions going up. Maybe you're missing your parents and you're missing the rest of your family. And then if you're trying to adjust to the weather, because the winter season is normally a bit cold compared to all other seasons, you're basically forced to be indoors or to try and find new hobbies that don't really let you go out.

Marylee Anderson [00:01:50] One of the things in Aberdeen as well is that you forget how dark it gets, right, because it gets dark so early. It's dark when you wake up and if you're working, it's dark on your way home as well, and that's often quite difficult.

Bekah Walker [00:02:07] Yeah, absolutely, it's horrible, it's a really miserable day, today as well, with the rain and it just almost doesn't get light all day. It just feels a little bit more depressing, I guess. Rather than in summer, your mood might be a little bit more elevated just when you see the sunshine and it's, maybe a bit easier to go out for walks a bit more enjoyable and warmer climates. Like the other day I went for a walk after work and I actually couldn't believe how cold it was. I think I got to the end of my street and I came back, and I was like, you know, no it's far too cold. [Laughing] I wasn't prepared for it. And I should be. I've lived in Aberdeen my whole life. But yeah, I wasn't prepared for the temperature.

Marylee Anderson [00:02:57] It was very cold. But I'm very fortunate I have my dog, so I have to go out every morning for a walk and that normally actually does set me up for the day. I think actually working from home has benefits for me at the moment because I'm able to walk him in the light, whereas at this time of year normally be walking him in the dark and so I am appreciating getting out and just getting that fresh air in the morning and I do find that really helpful. It sets me up for the day, actually, because then I'm just in my house at the computer and so having my dog making me walk is great. But on days like today, it's harder because it is grey. And actually, where I live it was sheet ice. So, it was actually quite stressful because I think I nearly fell on my behind a couple of times. But even still, just getting out, getting fresh air, doing a little bit of physical activity does raise your mood.

Bekah Walker [00:03:54] Yeah, absolutely. I completely agree with that. And I think as well some people can find this time of year quite challenging and quite difficult is that a lot of people start and certainly nowadays potentially come from different type of families, joined up family. So they will have maybe their stepfamily and their biological parents are not together and that can make Christmas time quite challenging for people because they have to decide who they're going to spend Christmas with or maybe they spend it with some people that they don't know. And then that can bring anxiety. And it's maybe not enjoyable either. And also, I think sometimes if you've lost a loved one close to Christmas, that could be the first time you're experiencing the holidays without a loved one and that in itself brings its own challenges. And you might depending on the anniversary or if there is a particular time as well, it can be challenging every year, like not just the first year as such.

Marylee Anderson [00:05:02] Yeah, I think that that last point is a is a big one for me personally. We lost my husband's mum just in October. So, this is a difficult Christmas because we're obviously still grieving, it's the first Christmas and my husband just had his birthday. So, it is really going to be hard. And I guess for all of us, you know, we're not actually going to probably for many of us spend Christmas with who we would normally anyway. We're having to make a lot of choices. And so, for me, I've been working out and processing how we will manage and get through these next weeks. You know, Christmas is a big deal to the family, and I think like at the base, it's like we actually just have to partly just have to accept that it will be different. Knowing we can't change it any more than we can change it anymore than we can change waking up to a horrible day like today or one of those lovely crisp, blue, frosty days that I love. We can't control that. We can't change it. So, I think a big part of it is just accepting that it is different and then that we use up a lot less energy fighting against something that you can't do anything about. So that's where I'm at the moment with it is going to be different, you know, and we'll just get through it how we can, step by step.

Michael Kazibwe [00:06:26] I think in situations like that, managing emotions is really crucial. You need to find a way of learning to live with some of the things that happen in our lives that we have no control over. It's not easy, but it takes some time to really get to adjust to such situations when they need a lot of support and probably mend your relationship with maybe God or whoever you believe in. It really comes in handy in such moments.

Bekah Walker [00:07:06] Yeah, absolutely and I feel that this Christmas particularly, there will be a lot of people that will maybe be feeling isolated or lonely that maybe would not normally experience feelings like this over the Christmas holidays. How do you think that Covid-19 is going to impact people this Christmas? And I suppose particularly from our student's perspective?

Michael Kazibwe [00:07:30] Covid-19 is basically going to keep people indoors, there won't be so much activity as they would be during a normal Christmas. Activities, like visiting friends or maybe going out to walk, to play, stuff like that will be cut down. And then given that there is that assumption that it spreads faster during the cold weather, so most of the people end up being indoors, most of their time.

Marylee Anderson [00:08:07] My son is 20 over Christmas, so he's feeling it and what he's really missing, and I think it's the impact of Covid, is just the fun of going out with friends, like just going to the pub or just like he would have people over just to play the Xbox or whatever. He's still able to go to the gym and he's still working and stuff. But it's

that social interaction that's the biggest thing. And I think the biggest impact because, it's great that there is Zoom and all the rest of it that mean that we can keep in touch. And I actually find it quite positive, I've got together with my friends from school much more than I would have before. We would normally just have had one weekend away once a year. But we've been meeting regularly on Zoom, which is great. So, in some ways there's actually been more connection. But there's nothing like that physical connection, you know, and actually being with somebody. For me and certainly speaking to my kids and other people, including students whom I have spoken to, it's that physical just being with people that's the the hardest thing that we're missing.

Bekah Walker [00:09:20] I think as well, being physically with people, that does lift your mood as well, like if you're maybe not, I know there's been times where, you know, you go and you meet your friends and I maybe can't be bothered to, like, get ready and do my hair and makeup. I feel like it's such an effort to to do that sometimes and you just maybe can't really be bothered. But once you get there, you always have an enjoyable time and you always come home feeling so glad that you did make the effort to do your hair or makeup and, you know, go out and meet your friends. Whereas this year we don't really have that. Numbers are very are very strict on who we can meet and there are going to be no Christmas parties as such. And like you say, that Zoom or doing stuff virtually there is definitely pros and cons to it. Absolutely. It can be really challenging. I think a lot of people spend a lot of time on a screen, whether they're studying or they're working. And it's also important to have that break from screen time because that can be quite stressful as well. Although you're, connecting with people. It's also important to look after yourself and take time for yourself. And I suppose what I'm trying to say is that it is OK to say no sometimes to people that no, I don't really want to have like a zoom call or something, but just to let people know that you're OK, but you just need some time for yourself. And then it's also OK to change your mind and think, I would actually be keen to do that, I suppose is really important just to watch after our friends and understand potentially will be why someone doesn't enjoy this time of year particularly. And once we understand maybe why they don't enjoy it, we can support them better and always just be welcoming. And people, you know, turn down invitations to zoom calls or whatnot, still continue to invite them because you never know when they might change their mind, not just say, oh, well, they wouldn't come anyway because sometimes you don't know the battles that other people are facing. And then that's only going to lead to people feeling more lonely or isolated if they aren't included in things. At least if you're included and you have the option then that in itself will help you to feel a little bit less lonely. You know, you've been thought about by your friends and that can go a long way.

Michael Kazibwe [00:11:54] I think during this time, it's okay to say no, but however on a positive note, you can drop back and get to actually think about your life, think about life after covid. You can start planning your life, now that you have some time alone and time to actually think through various issues and think through various decisions that you may want to make in the future.

Marylee Anderson [00:12:24] Yeah, I think it's that whole social thing and the kind of Christmas parties that we have that we just can't have. You know, maybe it's trying to think of it slightly differently and embracing the opportunity to have a bit more quiet, maybe take a new hobby, a bit more reading, you know, but rather than fight it, try and embrace them. I have a friend who realised, after adding up all the hours that she was online and on her phone and has committed to read some books instead and put some of that time that she was kind of mindlessly sitting on her phone doing some reading. So, there are some positive things like that that we can do and just try and embrace it. Watch a really good

movie that we haven't watched for ages or movies that make us feel good, you know, just those little things and just enjoy the fact that we're inside and cosy up with a hot chocolate or whatever that is.

Bekah Walker [00:13:23] Yeah, I find it really interesting that you say Michael as well, like planning ahead. That's so important to have stuff to look forward to and to help maintain that positive mindset. And even planning ahead over the holidays, just over the duration of the holidays, even if you're thinking Monday, I'll connect with my friend from school, Tuesday I'll connect with my Mum. Even just having the plan to stay connected with some people will, each day will help you feel connected and less isolated. And we might be feeling isolated, but also the person that you reach out to they are potentially feeling isolated as well, and even just getting a quick message saying I am thinking of you, how are you? It can really brighten up your day but also brighten up their day. So to get together, I think if people are looking out for each other, we can get through this difficult winter break by just reaching out to each other and I think that's the most important thing and that has a lot of power behind that is really effective. And it will have a knock-on effect if someone's got a message out of the blue and it has made them feel happy, they might be inclined to then also send someone else a message. So, people are not feeling hopefully as isolated.

Marylee Anderson [00:14:47] Yeah, I was listening to a book by Maya Angelou and she said to be a rainbow in somebody's cloud. And it's that thing that you're talking about. Yeah.

Bekah Walker [00:14:59] Oh, that's really cool. I've not heard of that analogy before, but that's that's really, nice. It's a really good way to look at it. So, have you guys got any tips at all on staying connected or managing feelings of isolation and loneliness that you've experienced yourself or maybe that others have, and it's been helpful for them?

Michael Kazibwe [00:15:18] I think, in my perspective, engaging in physical activity, someone you can take jogging can go to that gym. Eating healthy is also crucial because there is a direct relationship between the food we are taking and our emotions and balancing out with your hormones. Yeah, you should also be more outgoing with your flat mates and stuff like that. Don't be afraid to start up a conversation and get to know them, they get to know you. It lightens up the mood.

Marylee Anderson [00:15:58] Those are a few of the things I was going to say. You know, don't underestimate things like sleep and the impact that lack of sleep. At this time of year, it's easy to kind of almost hibernate so keeping kind of good sleeping routines is good. And exercise and eating healthy, they have a massive, massive impact. And then I think we've already talked about staying connected and just reaching out to people as well. And although we need to take time for ourselves, we do also need to keep that connection going to.

Bekah Walker [00:16:32] I know, certainly when I was younger, when I was on holidays from uni or school, sometimes I would turn night in to day and that's really difficult with staying connected with the people as well, as you're doing everything in the evening, whereas other people are in bed. And it's so important to keep that sleep routine up. And it might sound silly as well, like you say, Michael, about the food you eat but one hundred percent, it's so important to look after our wellbeing in that way because it all has a direct effect and correlation on how we feel mentally and how we can focus our days as well.

Marylee Anderson [00:17:11] Yeah. And I think that focus of your days, I think you talked earlier on about planning, but setting like a small goal for a day is really good because the sense of achievement you get from doing it is brilliant. And that could just be as simple as actually getting out your bed and getting dressed and not spending the day in your PJs and that's a great achievement. So recognising those small things that you've achieved and maybe even if it's, you can treat yourself for that and give yourself a pat on the back, whether that's a treat after a good walk or whatever it is. Yeah, just small goals and recognising that you've achieved something is helpful to you.

Bekah Walker [00:17:51] One hundred percent I, I find that so important. There's been days in the past few months where you just feel like everything gets on top of you and you're maybe not being the most productive with your work or your coursework. But I try and get out every day out to the gym or for a run and at least if I do that, I feel like I've achieved something for the day. I feel like I haven't just sat down inside all day and done nothing. And it's had such a good effect on how I perceive myself and in these current times that I have still managed to achieve small goals. And if you can't achieve that small goal, think of something that you that you can achieve. I suppose that's key in making it an achievable. You don't have to commit to, I'll clean my whole house top to bottom, and you know, I'll sort through my clothes maybe throughout the whole of the holidays that might be your goal. But each day have a small goal, even if it's like sorting out one of your wardrobes or one drawer or something like that, it makes you feel so much better.

Marylee Anderson [00:19:08] Yeah. You feel like you've achieved something.

Bekah Walker [00:19:10] Yeah. That is definitely key in keeping up our keeping up our spirits. And I wonder if there's anything else that we can maybe offer in terms of advice to any listeners who maybe are not getting home for Christmas. They're going to be stuck in Aberdeen. They're quite far away from home, potentially time differences as well. Is there anything that we're aware of that is happening within the university or in general within Aberdeen that's happening over the festive period to keep our students connected and not feeling so alone?

Michael Kazibwe [00:19:53] I think during this time, students can engage in self-education, it's very crucial. You can pick up articles from various places, from magazines, watch documentaries, just keep yourself busy, amass enough knowledge as you can from various aspects, it broadens your understanding and also makes you feel good about yourself, makes you comfortable, you can start a conversation with anyone in any field in whichever course, without having to hold back. At least you have a perspective or a view about something in their field. So, you can use this time to self-educate and amass some knowledge outside of what you actually study.

Marylee Anderson [00:20:48] And I think, you know, it's really difficult, but for being isolated, we do have things like Zoom and all the rest of it. So, taking advantage of that and limiting it if it gets too much, but take advantage of that. And there are going to be others who are going to be students who will be in and around Aberdeen so, you know, you can meet for the socially distance to walk. And, you know, when you get, that connection and that bit of fresh air as well and I know that the university have some things going on, events and activities over the winter period as well, which, Rebekah, you'll be much better placed to tell everybody about than I am [laughter].

Bekah Walker [00:21:30] Yeah, there is various things that are happening over the holidays. We Will be able to share the links in the comment section of the podcast, so

you'll be able to sign up for things. We've also developed a wellbeing toolkit here within the wellbeing team, which has various top tips based around the SAMH five ways to wellbeing on things you can do to keep yourself connected and feeling less isolated, looking after your wellbeing over the holidays and throughout the rest of the winter. And within that document, there is also links to internal and external support services and opening hours and their availability to help and support over the holidays. If you need someone to speak too, there will be people at the other end of the phone. So, don't be afraid to reach out to family and friends or support services. I mean, that's what they're there for. They're there to they're there to listen and help ease any feelings of anxiety or sadness that you might have. And we'll definitely share the links to the toolkit in the comments of the podcast here. And I guess I would just like to say thank you to you guys for joining today. It's been great chatting with you and having your input and sharing your experiences with our listeners. So, thank you so much. And to our listeners, thanks for thanks for tuning in. And I hope you've enjoyed the episode. Please do take care of yourself over the holidays and I will speak to you all after. Thank you.

Voiceover [00:23:30] This podcast is brought to you by the University of Aberdeen.