

A GARDEN OF RELATIONSHIPS

Loneliness & Isolation in a Changing Culture *Growing a Garden of Renewing Relationships*

Social distancing may be something we do to avoid the transmission of a virus...

However, it increases emotional pain in people who feel lonely and crave social interaction. Many of us are **energized** by working alongside other people, experiencing physical contact, and intermingling with others as part of a physical gathering of people. When forced to isolate, the **boredom** and accompanying **loneliness** can be overwhelming.



It is my opinion that changes we are seeing in our culture creates the absolute perfect opportunity to fight against loneliness and isolation by growing a garden of renewing relationships.

Why? Because we are all experiencing something not witnessed in our lifetime. We are all hyperaware of maintaining a **six-foot distance** from other people, **wearing a mask** around others, and almost involuntarily **holding our breath** when we pass near people we don't live with! Our radar is finely-tuned for people attempting to connect with us in some way other than being physically present. We feel the **need for connection**, and it makes sense to us. Our **routines** have all changed, and the different ways we can connect with people are more interesting to us. We are more willing to give connecting a try than we might have been before this change began.

Why not use this opportunity to take stock of your relational garden and consider planting additional renewing relationships, nurturing struggling ones, and pruning draining ones!



A renewing relationship is **life-giving** and **generates energy** instead of **draining** it from you. Renewing relationships create an environment where growth can happen naturally, instead of feeling forced, pressured or controlled. **In a renewing relationship neither person has more power than the other**, and when conflict happens it is faced squarely and then moved beyond. There are many ways to resolve conflict in a healthy relationship. In a renewing relationship, **appropriate feelings are shared freely and truthfully**. When you're in a renewing relationship you don't want it to end – in a draining relationship you can't wait for it to end!

At the end of this article there is an exercise titled, "**Circles of Influence**" where you can evaluate and manage your relationships. *Write the names of those closest to you in the center circles based on their influence in your life. Place them either above or below the mid-line based on their positive (above) or negative (below) impact on your life. When you're finished, you'll have a display of where the various relationships in your life land on your circles.* How many are above the line? How many are in the first 2-3 circles versus how many are in outer circles, or almost off the page?

Now you have a better sense of whether you need to **plant new seeds, nurture positive relationships**, or **prune your draining relationships** to increase both the quantity and quality of renewing relationships.

Planting and nurturing the seeds of a renewing relationship might be as simple as identifying existing people in your circles with whom you **enjoy being around**. When you discover a person in an outer circle you think might become a renewing relationship, plant the seeds of growth by **reaching out** and **engaging** the person. Nurture current relationships in much the same way. Use the pandemic and our "**stay at home**" guidelines to begin. Keep in mind that **details** are important and conversation creating an **emotional connection** is more effective.



- *Check-in via call, text or video call with the person and ask how they're doing*
- *Share how you're doing and how isolating is affecting your regular routines*
- *Inquire as to how the pandemic is affecting them with regard to anxiety or fear*



- *Listen carefully for feeling words and common experience, and ask appropriate questions – most conversations die because of a lack of thoughtful questions*
- *Share common interests and talk about your own personal experience*
- *Refuse to dominate the conversation and make sure you are listening as much as you are talking*
- *Your goal is to understand and be understood – not to win or lose in the conversation*
- *For relationships with whom you have a history, share pictures and memories from the past and celebrate good experiences*
- *Share stories that are interesting to both of you*
- *Initially, keep the conversation brief and be sure to close with a request to talk soon*
- *Make a note in your calendar to remind you to make your next call*

For draining relationships, it may be necessary to prune them by choosing to limit the amount of interaction. With **sensitivity** and **graciousness** make yourself either **unavailable** or **less available**. Depending on the nature of



the relationship, **reasons may or may not be provided**. It is up to you to **protect** your personal energy and know you are not required to submit yourself to a continually draining relationship. If in special cases **pruning is not possible**, then work can be done to **negotiate new boundaries** including a conversation about what is and is not **appropriate** in the relationship.



The more seeds you plant and nurture, the more renewing relationships will populate your **relational garden**. Not all attempts at growing a relationship will work because not everyone you reach out to will be ready to move your relationship to a deeper level. Do not allow this to **frustrate** you or **derail** you from your **goal of growing your relational garden** with more renewing relationships.

The effort you invest to cultivate your connections into renewing relationships will be evidence that you are alive, growing, hopeful and moving forward.

The alternative to growth is to **retreat** into **isolation, loneliness, and fear**. This will exacerbate your **emotional pain** and separate you from **life-giving, renewing relationships** that can



improve the quality of your life in a time of forced social isolation. I encourage you to take advantage of the **immediate opportunity** and step out of your comfort zone and into a **new era** of your relationships. **Your garden will grow** and serve your relational needs for years!

