



SOLITUDE CAN BE IMPORTANT PART OF MENTAL HEALTH

BY TONISHA MELVIN

By nature, humans are social creatures. We spend a lot of time gathering for celebrations, entertainment, and sports. However, in light of the global pandemic, we've often been forced to live in quarantine and/or lockdowns for the safety, health, and well-being of ourselves and others. This has led to people changing the way they think, act, react, and even feel.

In order to adequately address the pandemic, scientific guidance has dictated that people socially distance from others or quarantine if they have come in contact with someone who has COVID-19. Those measures are important, but they come with consequences.

We've been forced to refrain from being socially active. Americans have been confined to home to work while living with children learning from home or loved ones who need around-the-clock care. In even worse cases, people have been forced to live alone. They are trying to adjust to communication through never-ending Zoom or Microsoft Teams calls, emails, and social media notifications — all while juggling life, which can be overwhelming.

Most people are buying items online — sight unseen or barely seen. While there's a mandate to be socially distanced from others for physical safety, should people also choose solitude for emotional safety? Often, with so much closeness, we forget to make time for ourselves.

Social solitude is different from loneliness. Social solitude is a choice someone makes for reflection and self-awareness. Loneliness is a state of feeling sad and alone without contact with friends or family. Recently, even former First Lady Michelle Obama admitted that she suffered from low-grade depression as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, racial and political tensions, divisiveness, and mounting grief and loss of lives. She noted that “these are not, they are not fulfilling times, spiritually” in

an interview with journalist Michele Norris.

As a nurse practitioner who works in primary care, I deal with patients who suffer from depressive symptoms that can include sadness, difficulty concentrating, sleep and appetite disturbances, loss of interest in activities, and/or irritability. These symptoms can affect anyone, especially due to ongoing despair and frustration of things you can't control.

Although these crises are causing turmoil, it is imperative to encourage people to engage in solitude to focus on self-care for their mental safety. This involves participating in mindfulness, exercising, meditating, eating healthy, spending quality time with loved ones, and, perhaps most importantly, utilizing coping mechanisms like social media holidays.



TONISHA MELVIN, DNP, CRRN, NP-C (Mercer University-Atlanta Campus) is a nurse practitioner at the Washington, D.C., VA Medical Center, where she serves as a mental health/primary care provider, program director, and assistant clinical professor for adult gerontology NP graduates. She was named one of 68 African American Leaders in Healthcare by *Becker's Hospital Review* and is a contributing author of *The Charge Nurse Leader Program Builder: A Competency-Based Approach for Developing Frontline Leaders*, a comprehensive curriculum and road map for developing nurse leaders and ensuring charge nurses are trained, mentored, and supported in their roles.