

WHAT IS SOCIAL WITHDRAWAL AND ISOLATION?

Are you spending increasingly more time alone because you think no one understands what you've experienced or what you're going through?

Are you avoiding social situations because you might be reminded of things you hope to forget?

Do you avoid others because you feel you should be able to deal with challenges on your own?

These can be signs of social withdrawal or social isolation.

What's the difference?

Social withdrawal may be a temporary phase of avoiding time spent with some of the people you normally see or doing some of the activities you would usually enjoy. It might be brought on by a stressful time at work, grief or trauma, or simply because you are overwhelmed with the mounting pressures of a busy, stressful life.

On the other hand, if you are experiencing ***social isolation***, you may even want to avoid contact with family and close friends and just be by yourself most of the time. This can become a longer term issue and affect your overall health and wellbeing.

What are the impacts?

While you may want to be alone because it feels tiring or upsetting to be around people, sometimes a vicious cycle can set in. The more time you spend alone, the less you feel that people understand you. The less you feel that people understand you, the more you want to be alone.

While in the short term it can feel better to stay away from people while you work through something, in the long term it can make it more difficult for you to do the things you enjoy or lead a fulfilling and rewarding lifestyle.

This can result in feelings of loneliness, relationship problems, or even alcohol or substance abuse. Left wholly unchecked, it can lead to (or make worse) depression and anxiety. It can also affect and hurt those you care about who struggle to make sense of your decision to isolate yourself from them.

What can be done?

Leaving these issues to go unchecked will only make your situation more difficult in the long run. Returning to normal will seem even more daunting if you leave it too long.

When you find yourself wanting to withdraw or isolate yourself socially, it's important to:

- Address what is causing you to want to be alone.
- Reach out to your friends or family, even if it's the last thing you want to do. Spend time with them, and consider telling those you trust about what you're going through. You will feel better in the long run by doing so.
- Connect with social groups or participate in clubs, hobbies or activities with like-minded people, focussed on something you enjoy or find rewarding.
- Reach out to a counsellor, your GP or a mental health professional to discuss your feelings and explore options for coping strategies or treatment.

