

uOttawa Together Podcast

Episode 2: Solitude and isolation: their impact on mental health

At least I mean, I can't speak for any other explorers. But for me, I certainly experienced loneliness. And for me, that's a very important part of the experience. And it's something that I'm not ashamed of.

Hi, my name is Mark Patton, and I'm your host for this podcast. It can be challenging sometimes to feel connected. Like you're part of things. Physical distancing can make this even more challenging. In this podcast, we will be discussing issues related to human connection, interviewing guests and offering practical ideas and suggestions for building greater feelings of belonging in our lives. Our guest today has a lot of experience with isolation and building meaningful social connection in the world.

Jennifer Kingsley is a National Geographic Explorer, and a fellow of the Royal Canadian Geographic Society. She has been on countless expeditions in the Arctic regions of Canada, Russia, and Greenland, among others. She has also traveled to the Antarctic and Polynesia. She has written a book called Paddlenorth about a 54 day canoe trip on the back river that won the National Outdoor Book Award. I will be asking Jennifer about how she copes with social isolation. And her thoughts on building social connection and understanding.

(Mark) Jennifer, welcome to our show.

(Jennifer) Thank you.

(Mark) Through your work, you've traveled to many parts of the world. And so I'd like to start this discussion off by asking you what draws you particularly to remote places.

(Jennifer) As I've reflected on my work over the years, I realized that it really can happen anywhere. Because I'm a writer, I'm a journalist, I'm a radio producer as well. But I'm really interested in personal stories. And of course, everybody has a personal story. So even though I have traveled, as you said, in your introduction, very far afield from Ottawa where I was born and raised, I really probably could do it without leaving my neighborhood. And yet, I think there's something valuable about the outsider perspective, I'm really interested in small communities, and how people are knit together and interact, if they live far away from other communities, and in a relatively small community themselves. And I think the element of cultural exchange, which can happen, like I say, anywhere and with anyone, sometimes that feels deeper, and more different, I suppose.

When I travel further away and speak with people from totally different backgrounds, different languages, different landscapes, and so, yeah, it's something I guess, I've gotten used to and that I find very enriching. Those are the kinds of stories I like to tell.

(Mark) Um-hum. Like many people, I enjoy spending time in the outdoors and I have often been fascinated by people who spend long periods of time in isolation. It's, it's part of what drew me to read your book, Paddlenorth, which I really loved by the way. I'm wondering, do you think explorers experience loneliness different from other people?

(Jennifer) At least I mean, I can't speak for any other explorers. But for me, I certainly experienced loneliness. I don't see why it would be different for me than anyone else. Although I do think it's something you can practice. Like one of the things I've found sort of in the explorer space or like traveling or journalism is, one, there's very little emphasis on the process, which to me is the most interesting part.

And also, there's a real tendency to just always go away from the negative, like, what are the things you did and achieved and saw and the excitements and how amazing was it?

And even when I've been on trips, sometimes I felt that pressure, like, Oh, I do not feel amazing. Like, what am I doing wrong, I'm not a good explorer, I feel terrible. I'm not taking advantage of this opportunity. And so I think, you know, you've given us a chance to discuss the rest of the experience. And for me, that's a very important part of the experience, and something that I'm not ashamed of. And that has been a big part of my journey, not just in my work, but in my life. And I know that I'm not alone in that. So creating a place to be able to talk about it. And to recognize that it's not connected or disconnected from doing what you love or being interesting or having friends or like it's, yeah, because for me, it's it's it's a big piece of the pie.

(Mark) Right and along the same lines, many people who seek adventure are also seeking solitude, which sounds like a pleasant thing. Yet loneliness can be very painful. How do you understand the difference between solitude and loneliness in your life?

(Jennifer) The language around these concepts is really interesting, isn't it? Like, well, yeah, lonely versus alone versus solitude? Yeah, maybe solitude is the more romantic version or, on the days that you're actually enjoying yourself. And loneliness is when when it doesn't feel good anymore. I would say I certainly flip between all of those different words, you know, days that feel enriching, and I'm alone, and days where I feel very isolated and sad and feel lonely. You know, sometimes I would write about solitude but I think, recognizing that the I think the line between all of these things is very thin, it's very easy to cross over from one to the other. I certainly do that frequently. And I think that's something that I identify with. And that while one might feel better than the other, I don't think that makes either more important or better. I think it's not, it's not bad to be lonely. It is, it's part of life, at least in my experience.

(Mark) Can you talk about a time in your travels that really sticks out to you as lonely or isolating? And what about that experience made it so?

(Jennifer) Yeah, it's, I sort of think about two things when you ask me that. One is some of the travels that I've done closer to home, you know, in in the Canadian Arctic, or in other regions of Canada, where I have a sense that I should feel that I am at home in some sense, or that I should feel at home, because I'm still in Canada, because there's a lot of things that I recognize, even though there might be a lot of new things as well. And that oddly can produce a kind of isolation or loneliness for me, because I have an expectation, like an expectation that I should feel at home. And if I don't, then it seems that something is wrong, when in fact, it's not. [checking]

And I think the other thing is thinking of a place that is very far away, some of the places I've been that are very far away from Canada that are really culturally different, I would use the eastern Arctic, the eastern part of Russia, in a region called Chukotka, which I visited for the first time in 2017. And I would say that place has all of the, all of what you might expect, I

suppose, a place that you might feel isolated. I mean, it's very far away. The language is different, you know, very few people there speak English, and my Russian is still rudimentary. The landscape is different, the culture is different, the political background is different. And so I was also when I was there, working with the translator, so everything was every conversation I had was mediated.

And yeah, I think that's maybe more of a classic recipe for for feeling alone or isolated. I want to mention that for the work I've a lot of the work that I've done in the Arctic, certainly most of the work I've done in the last five years, I've often been with a photographer with a man named Eric Guth, who's from Oregon. And so and so I guess I want to add that having companionship, having somebody with you can make for great, you know, memories and camaraderie, but it's not going to necessarily protect you from loneliness and from feeling alone. So I think sometimes we would feel alone together, like just the two of us. But sometimes I think we still would feel isolated and lonely, even if you have somebody else in the room with you.

(Mark) So there are the obvious things like language barriers, and being in new surroundings or being by yourself in a way from friends and family. But it sounds like there are other things that can come up, or our own expectations can change, our experience of loneliness or isolation.

(Jennifer) Yeah, I would agree. I agree. And I think certainly expectations are a big one. Comparison is a big one for me, if I think oh, I owe someone else's over here. What are other people doing? And also, you know, if I let myself or if the situation causes me to be really run-down, and just personally not able to do the things I know I need to do for my own health, like yeah, those would be examples of things that might maybe turn flip that switch like turn the solitude into loneliness. And I think, for me learning how to recognize those things and start to get some skills and tools for like how what to do what not to do. How to kind of Yeah, bring myself back to more positive frame of mind.

(Mark) So what have you learned about coping with isolation?

(Jennifer) I mean, there's a variety, I guess what I've learned is that I have a variety of different things that I will try and that I will do. First of all, like I said before, I don't think that being lonely is bad.

I don't think it's necessarily something to avoid. And I think there's a lot of messages these days that tell us that go, if you feel bad, that's bad. And sometimes, especially for my travels, if I've been, you know, far away in another country, there's really nothing to do except to be in that present moment, do your best to sit with those emotions and kind of ride them out.

So I mean, that's one coping mechanism, I think that avoidance or trying to feel better right now, for me anyway, can compound those negative feelings with anxiety or like other unpleasant experiences.

And I would say there's like, for me ways of dealing with isolation when I am truly isolated. So when there is no internet, there is no possibility to phone someone, there's no way to be with someone, I really am just going to be alone. And so for me, a lot of those things are quite simple, like fresh air and nature and walking, reading and journaling. I mean, I am a writer. So for me, that's a huge way of processing the feelings that go with these experiences, and I mean, those often become part of my stories and publications later on. But then, so I guess there's the part that's like, how do I deal with it if I'm alone, and I'm kind of stuck alone? And

then how would I deal with it, if I have a way of reaching out of reaching out to people? In my case, I generally, you know, if it is, if it is kind of going in a negative direction, I almost always feel better, if I get out of my space, like go for a walk, I find even interactions with strangers, a lot of my work is based on interactions with strangers. So I don't think you need to have a really close friend or a family or somebody that you know, well, in order to feel a kind of social connection. And I don't think it has to be part of a lasting relationship. Lasting relationships and close relationships, I think are also important.

But in terms of yeah, feeling connected, I think that really can happen in the moment. And because of my interest in personal stories, and cultural diversity, I would say that's a basis of my work as a writer is listening to stories of people that I have just met. And I find a lot of social connection in those moments.

A friend of mine recently told me that she knows that she's ready to return from a solo kayaking trip, when she has worked through something or accomplished a piece of personal reflection.

(Mark) What is something that spending time in isolation has taught you about yourself?

(Jennifer) I mean, it's taught me that I'm what word would I use, it's taught me that I'm pretty tough. And I think I mean, and I use that that in the positive sense, you know, I'm not particularly like, physically strong, I don't do anything that looks very impressive from the outside. But I know that I can rely on myself. And that doesn't mean that I'm always going to feel great that everything, I'm always going to be positive and make the best of every situation, you know.

But yeah, I think it's taught me a lot of self-reliance, maybe that's a better word to use.

Yeah, and I think that solitude and sometimes loneliness are a very important part of my creative process. I think there's so many stories, so many ideas, so much writing, so many different things that I've tried, that I wouldn't have been able to do, ideas I never would have had, if I wouldn't have spent a lot of time on my own. Yeah, writing is definitely a big teacher for me in that way that I don't know. Maybe, like writing is something that you have to do alone. I mean, it's a it is a solo activity.

And so yeah, it requires that and I don't know I think there's a lot of a lot in our society right now that pushes us to be not only very busy and very out there, but also that whenever we do something if you think if I bring social media into the conversation, you know, you do something and then you need to reflect it right back right away. Oh, I just did this and I'm going to tell you about it. This is happening and now I'm going to show you about it but I don't know, I don't think that all storytelling works that way.

I believe in this kind of long middle period, in which solitude is an important part of the recipe.

(Mark) Great. The main picture on your website features this great image of you writing by the glow of a campaign headlamp at night, there's a can of spam beside you, and you appear to be alone. Is writing an isolating activity?

(Jennifer) Yeah, that picture was taken in Alaska at a place called Serpentine Hot Springs, which is on the Alaskan side of the Bering Sea. So just across, just across the way from the Arctic region of Russia, that I was talking about earlier.

And I mean, Eric Guth, the photographer that I worked with took that photo, so I wasn't alone. But the two of us were alone there for a few days. And, and I, I don't think of writing as being isolating simply because... it's funny, I, you know, you do it on your own. But I think the very nature of writing is that it helps you connect.

I mean, I don't always know what you're connecting to like connecting to yourself, or emotions or memories. For me, it often feels like I am connecting to another person if I'm writing about them, or remembering things about them. So, um, yeah, I might put that in the solitude category. I mean, once once I get going with writing, you know, I am on my own. But if the writing is going well, I never feel lonely.

(Mark) Jennifer, it sounds like part of what makes you feel less lonely is either connecting with your audience or simply connecting with the art of writing.

(Jennifer) Yeah, and I suppose connecting with yourself. I think that sounds kind of cliché, but there's a lot of truth to it. And I think, I don't know, I think we've learned a lot. we've all learned a lot about that and been forced to practice that in 2020.

So far, it's like, situations where we are alone, never mind traveling, never mind working, we're just alone. And we don't have a choice about that. And I personally, at certainly early in, the pandemic felt a lot of pressure, to be productive, to be creative, to make the most of it to do a project. I know, there was a lot of pressure like that coming over social media.

But ultimately, it's been a practice in solitude or alone time, I think for many of us. And I have certainly drawn heavily on my experience as a traveler and a writer, which is maybe a bit ironic, since I've been in my home in Ottawa, I've been here, the longest I've been here in years during this period, is the first summer I have not been in the Arctic since 2013. So everything's kind of turned on its head. But in a way, I think the work I was practicing before has been really helpful and relevant for me.

(Mark) In your three-year project called Meet the North, you work to humanize and build a sense of understanding about people who live in remote regions through storytelling. Can you talk about this project and how you went about building understanding?

(Jennifer) Yep, meet the North was a project that I started in 2015. And worked on it for three years. And that sort of morphed into work in other places in the Falkland Islands, and in in the South Pacific, in French Polynesia.

And the idea behind it was a storytelling project. But the idea was to follow recommendations. So I worked with this photographer, Eric Guth, and six different Arctic nations around the world. And we went in as outsiders, absolutely visitors to these communities. And yet, we would always ask whoever we met. Well, who did they think we should meet next? And then who did they think we should meet next? And who did they think we should meet next? And so we let the itinerary, we sort of followed a trail of recommendations.

And I didn't realize that that would be a way of following social connections. I didn't think about it that way. I thought of it more as an experiment and the journalistic process and analysis of like, where do we get our stories from? How do we get our stories? But really, when you ask for recommendations, you're following social connections, you know, who would you recommend if somebody asked you that question, and what's your relationship to that person?

But I think the most important thing that emerged out of that for me, in terms of social connection and storytelling was listening.

And I am still working on being a good listener. I think that'll be a project for the rest of my life. But it certainly has become my most important professional skill. And it's something and personal skill. I mean, it's something that I think is so undervalued. And so underemphasized. And yeah, I think almost everyone could relate to the feeling of being listened to, when someone is really listening to you, and what that feels like and I think that's a really powerful force for connection.

(Mark) I really like that. You know, in my work as a counselor at University of Ottawa, I oftentimes will hear students talk about, while they may have people in their life, they have these connections, they don't feel deeply heard. And that's there for somebody who really understands them. So I do agree that listening is a really important part of social connection. Perhaps on the flip side of listening is storytelling. And you've written a lot about storytelling. What in your opinion, is the value of storytelling in building social connection?

(Jennifer) Storytelling is a form of self-expression, in my opinion, even if you're not writing about yourself, right you are, we are all seeing the world through our own lens, through our filters based on our past experience, and storytelling as a way of processing that, and then putting it back out, for others to read or hear.

And I think in terms of social connection, when you do that, you're actually giving other people an opportunity for that connection, to maybe find something that resonates for them, or that they feel they have in common with you.

Yeah, I think it's, it's when you share your own experience, when you share your way of seeing things. And also, in my case, sometimes, you know, people will share a story with me with the understanding that I am then going to pass that on to others. I mean, I guess if we didn't do that, we just wouldn't know. We I mean, we wouldn't know so much about the world and about each other. And I know I can really feel when I talked about the things I do to deal with isolation, very often has to do with storytelling, not just creating stories, writing, but reading. I'll never go anywhere, especially not anywhere far away without a book. And so for me, that is a form of social connection. And some of the people that I feel have influenced me the most, especially when I was young, I grew up I'm an only child, I grew up mostly with a single mom, our authors, like there are people I've never met. But their perspective is was really important to me. And I would say I still feel connected to them, even though I've never met them, and probably never will.

(Mark) When you are traveling to remote places, how do you stay connected with friends and family and community?

(Jennifer) That is a great question. Um, staying connected with home versus not staying connected with home and how to do that, I would say has been a real learning journey and kind of balancing act for me. Because it might sound like a contradiction. But sometimes if I try to connect with home, to reach out to people to get a hold of my partner, Toby, to try to talk to friends, it can actually make me feel more isolated.

Looking at social media definitely can make me feel more isolated or more lonely. Because I think sometimes it's, it's about you want or need people to be there in a certain way, you know if to solve it or to, it's like you're looking for some kind of medicine. And

that's, in my view, just really not how social relationships work, or work should work or work well.

So I am probably connected with home quite a bit less than other people that I know when I'm traveling. I tend to save up stories and photographs to share when I get home. And I really tend to pace myself with that, because I learned, I have learned for myself over time, that sometimes when I do that really trying to reach out and then the person is not available or people don't get back to me in the way I want them to or when I want them to I realize again, I had all these expectations and it can actually deepen my loneliness, because it's not their job to keep me company or to keep me positive, you know, I kind of have to take care of that myself.

So I think I tend to prioritize like connecting with myself and connecting with people who are with me and around me even if they're not my close family and friends or in many cases, there were perfect strangers.

And I try to let those moments of connection with home and with people I miss and people I love, I tend to try and do that when I'm in a really positive frame of mind.

(Mark) And so it sounds like technology can be both a resource and a challenge to connection for you.

(Jennifer) Yeah, everyone is different, I'm sure. For me, I would say when I'm traveling far away, the less internet the better. In terms of my state of mind. Yeah, the internet tends to make me lonely.

(Mark) And so how would you like to see people use storytelling in their day-to-day lives to build understanding or connection?

(Jennifer) I think what I would say about storytelling is that there are just a zillion ways to do it. There's it's really kind of an endless journey in that way. Whether it's turning things over quickly in social media, whether it's spending several years working on a book, whether it's using your own personal journal, whether it's chatting with someone on the phone, like to me, those are all forms of storytelling. And of course, there's many nonverbal forms of storytelling. So I think in terms of social connection, it's about making storytelling your own. And I think I feel very grateful the last few years of my life, I've been able to pursue a form of storytelling, that's perfect for me, in that, it's allowed me to follow the things that I'm curious about. But that's different for every single person. And that's what's so amazing about it.

And I think your earlier question about also on that theme of social connection, storytelling is like, you can kind of open your world to other people, you know, yeah, there's many journalists in the world, but none of us would ask the exact same questions.

So yeah, the inspiring thing I think about storytelling, is it can be personal, it can be public, it can be, you know, it can be anything.

(Mark) In your experience, do you think that coping with isolation and loneliness is kind of like physical fitness? It's something that we can work at and become more skilled at coping with?

(Jennifer) Right. Yeah, I don't think I could recommend like a regimen. But I think I could say that. If we put all of our energy towards avoiding loneliness at all costs, then I don't think we

can build any endurance for it. And so there is a moment where I think you have to turn around and face it.

And, yeah, there's no way to get stronger or better at anything, unless you actually do it, you know, unless you actually go there. If that's what's upon you, then I think that's what, then there's so many ways that we try to and need to distract ourselves. But I don't, I don't think that's always the solution.

(Mark) I think that that's really good. In a way you've really worked, incidentally, through your travels at building that muscle, per se, have been able to cope with isolation by building different strategies. And I think that that is helpful for people to think about that. They can develop their capacity to cope with, or shift how they handle loneliness or isolation. Right?

(Jennifer) Yeah, I hope so. And I think there's also something very special about being alone, especially now that the internet is everywhere, and our phones are in our pockets. And most of many, many people are on social media in one way or another. Like that part of your life that nobody else knows about, like the things that you do, and the way that you.. you know, I think that's actually quite a special opportunity. And it's something to be cherished. And that doesn't mean that it's always easy.

And I know Gosh, like right now of people listening who've been feeling so much loneliness, and it's not about brush, I'm not trying to brush that aside. You know, I would say that I've felt those kinds of things really intensely in my life also. But it doesn't mean it doesn't have value, or that it's wasted time or last time.

(Mark) Like it's time that you may not have at a different time in your life, a time to yourself to reflect. Is that what you mean?

(Jennifer) I think so. And also that you don't really know where it's going to lead.

You know, I think I've had some of the best connections or ideas, things that have actually changed the course of my life in terms of opportunities or, you know, deciding to reach out to someone with a project idea or social idea. You know, I feel that that loneliness has an alone time, solitude. Has at times been an essential incubator for those things.

(Mark) The last question I'd like to ask you is based on your experience, do you have anything that you'd like to say to students who are listening in who are feeling isolated, particularly in the unprecedented times that we're living in?

(Jennifer) I mean, the whole experience when you're lonely and alone, is that you feel that you're lonely and alone. And it might be really hard to believe that you're not alone in that experience. And that some of the people that you love the most or look up to the most or think would never have these moments of loneliness, or, or anxiety, you know, I think it really is a shared human experience.

It's something that you have to endure alone, sometimes. But yeah, I would urge listeners to try and get, yeah, just get beyond the despair that can come with it. Because it is. It is something that's just about unavoidable, especially now, especially in 2020. Yeah, and it's not wrong. And it can be really hard. But in my experience, there can be it's always coming in a wave, and that wave will pass. And you really don't know what's going to come next and what

might be on the other side of that. I know it's hard to hold on to that sometimes. But I believe that.

(Mark) Thank you for joining us, Jennifer. It was a real pleasure talking with you.

(Jennifer) You're welcome. I really yeah, I enjoyed it. I think this is a really great initiative.

(Mark) If you'd like to find out more information about Jennifer or about her book Paddlenorth, you can find it on her website at Jenniferkingsley.ca

And if you're University of Ottawa student and are looking for opportunities to feel more connected, please go to the virtual Wellness Hub.

If you're struggling with isolation and loneliness and would like to access counseling, please don't struggle alone. You can find links to counselling services from the Wellness Hub or go directly to sass.uottawa.ca. Thank you for joining us and we hope that you will join us next time.