

uOttawa Together Podcast

Episode 4: Love and loneliness in the time of COVID

SPEAKERS

Theresa, Mark

Theresa

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Mark

Hello and welcome to uOttawa Together. I'm your host Mark Patton. It can be challenging sometimes to feel connected like you're a 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.

One of my favorite things about hosting a podcast is that it gives me the chance to recognize the work that people within our university community are doing to address issues of loneliness and connection. In this episode, which was recorded about a week before Valentine's Day, I chat with Theresa Willoughby, who is a mental health and wellness counselor here at the University of Ottawa. She has specialized training in relationship counseling and works with many students who are looking to build greater social connection. In this episode, we discuss the impact of the pandemic on relationships and some of the more common challenges that we hear from students. We cover practical tips for improving relationships and recognizing unhealthy ones. We discuss things like, you know, how do students navigate housing, where some housemates are in relationships, and others aren't? I hope you enjoy this episode. Welcome to our show.

Theresa

Great. Thanks for having me.

Mark

So I'd like to start by asking you how you became interested in relationship counseling.

Theresa

So I've worked in the field of intimate partner violence for many years. And my time in that work was really looking at what are some of the warning signs of toxic relationships? What are some of the dynamics? What are the impacts that those have on individuals, on relationships, and mental health?

And when this opportunity came up, uOttawa to work with a counseling team, I thought it was the perfect pairing to help students explore, you know, if they were in unhealthy or toxic relationships, what that looks like, also, what are healthy relationships? Now and then, as they go forward in their life, how can they also have healthier friendships, partner relationships, whatever it may be, and that they're feeling good about themselves in the process.

Mark

Right. And, you know, it's great to have that skill set on the team at the University for sure. And, and just to say, you do work both with like students individually on challenges they may be having in relationships, but also you do work with, for instance, couples and people in relationships and with those relationships, I'm wondering, like, in what ways, Theresa to relationship issues come up in your counseling sessions with students? And what are some of the common themes?

Theresa

So sometimes it comes up as the main issue. So you know, right off the bat, students are saying, I want to talk about my relationship I have now so it could be a partner relationship, could be a friend relationship, or some dynamics with family. And so some of the kind of mean, things that come up with that are, you know, they're definitely having some challenges in their relationships, whether it's, you know, fighting or arguing, poor communication, maybe feeling lonely, or not sure. If it's going anywhere. They want it. No, they don't want to be in a relationship anymore. But they're worried about how much time they put into it and you know future goals. They've talked about that kind of thing. Or just even what kind of relationship they want to have, do they want to have, you know, a more exclusive relationship, or they want to open things up in their relationship, or is it more casual? They have hookups more non-monogamous? And how do they explore that when they're already in a relationship?

Mark

Yeah, I certainly hear a lot of the same themes in my sessions with students as well and wondering, in what ways have you witnessed the pandemic impacting relationships?

Theresa

Well, in some ways, I think it's easier and harder to connect in relationships. You know, the pandemic has changed everything we do day-to-day, the ease of you know, going out, seeing people, talking to people, just being around each other. In class, that's a lot more difficult. So we're, you know, some students, they find it easier to maybe find time or connect with people more frequently. But some of those limitations are also you know, how do they meet people, when, you know, everything's online, especially when we think about classes, right? They can't just kind of go to class or go to a coffee shop. or go to the library and meet people so it's a lot more challenging to do that. And you know, social media or texting, things can get misinterpreted or misconstrued, right? So kind of what I see it's, you know, maybe you're spending more time alone, maybe you're spending more time together, if you're in a partner relationship, sometimes relationships can progress a lot faster than before.

Mark

Right.

Theresa

And I've seen some students are, you know, moving in together a lot sooner than they would have maybe in the past or spending a lot more time than they would have in the past because they're in the same bubble right now or the opposite or maybe they're not in the same the bubble, or they've had to go back home, or there's more physical distance between them. And then how do they negotiate all of a sudden, this is a long-distance relationship.

Mark

Right? Yeah. Do you have you mentioned dating, do you have any suggestions for people who find that physical distancing has made dating more challenging?

Theresa

Students talk to me about a lot of creative ideas they have just even, you know, having to be socially distance, because even if we live in the same city, there may be some challenges, right? If you're living with your family, or roommates, about, you know, just trying to be safe during the pandemic. So if you're in the same city, right, but you still need to follow those parameters you know, students have talked about just like getting outside, which is not you know, it's really hard to do but going for hikes, or walks or skate on the canal. Also, you know, just online trying to connect and do things like watching, you know, movie or playing games together, gaming, maybe cooking together, as opposed to you know, it's just like talking. And there may be some other different things to explore. Those same things can be done if you're long distance or physically distant, too. So really I just here like trying to look for creative ways to connect.

Mark

Right. Yeah. I've heard from a number of students living with housemates that there can be a divide between those who are in relationships and those who aren't for single housemates. This can bring up jealousy and feelings of inadequacy and shame in seeing their housemates in love. Like you were saying, you know, where there's this maybe even a very intense relationship, because of the situation. What are your thoughts about this type of situation?

Theresa

Yeah, it's so hard. I think when you know, as we're talking about all the changes with the pandemic, that you may feel more isolated. So maybe in the past, you have roommates or relationships, but doesn't bother you as much you can go to class, you need your friends, you're doing other things. Maybe you're dating too, and so it's not impacting you as much, right? But now you're kind of more cooped up or with these people more often so that's what you see. right? I'd say, you know, first thing is to see, you know, you feel comfortable talking to your roommates about how you're feeling or maybe just some different ideas about it, right. So it could be, you know, how much time are the partners spending in the in the place you're in, right? So maybe you can negotiate that. Also making time for not having other people over? Right too so it's just like the roommates hang out and watch a movie or do something together? And also, you know, for that single person, can they have friends or family over in a safe way or outside. So they're also getting some connections too or social connections?

Mark

I think sometimes for those for the people in that situation, too, it's almost being able to recognize that they are in an unusual situation in that like it may feel they may feel like there's something wrong with them or something. But that, that polarization or that diversity between the experience of people in the house is, you know, it doesn't mean that there's something wrong with him that it's actually really understandable in the context. And even those feelings of jealousy and or whatever is coming up, but it really is normal and understandable.

Theresa

Yeah, I think just normalizing like that. You may be feeling those more heightened emotions, but that doesn't mean that it's not true or you don't feel that way. But because of the situation it might be more heightened. Of course, you want to have some connection, right? We're all feeling a bit disconnected or lonely. And so how can you get those needs met? Even if it isn't dating, that could be an option, meeting somebody but also who are people that are important to you in your life? that give you good connections and make you feel good, right? So maybe it's friends, family clubs, exploring some new things, interest groups, right? I've heard a lot of popularity with the gaming club on campus. So have a look at that webpage and see if there are things you haven't looked into too.

Mark

Some students that I work with have mentioned the concept of love languages, in sessions in reference to different styles of expressing or experiencing love. Is this something that you work with in sessions?

Theresa

Yeah, definitely. It's, and we talk about healthy relationships with when I talk about that with students, and looking at, you know, all aspects of what, what that looks like. So it could be communication. It could be, you know, strategies to improve connection, that kind of thing. Love Languages is part of it. And it's a fun quiz that was developed by Gary Chapman. And really, it's a quiz that you can both do. And it kind of goes into five different love languages. So the five love languages can be physical touch, acts of service, words of affirmation, receiving gifts, quality time, and in the the quiz you rank them. And based on those results, you can see for you and your partner, what ranks the highest, right? And that's really interesting, because often we tend to do things for our partners that we like, right? So I know for myself, like, I really like baking, so I usually like bake something for my partner, where he might like, you know, maybe more quality time, or he might like it when I notice things that he's doing, right? So how can you put like the best use of your time into something? When you're looking at that relationship? Right? What's the most? You know, how can you use that strategy to meet your partner's needs? Right?

Mark

Right, I can certainly be guilty of that, where I might do what I want in return. And, like, there, it sounds like there's like an empathy part of really being able to hear what the other person needs or wants and how they'd like to experience that.

Theresa

And I would say, when we have those discussions, whether it's just with an individual person, or with a couple, that often looks simple is better, right? We sometimes we think of these elaborate, like, we

need to go to a restaurant or, or go to the spa or do something big, but often, it's just like, those simple things, I want to spend time with you, I want you to notice what I'm doing. Or I just want to hug, right?

Mark

When many people think about love, they think about conventional terms of being in a relationship. I'm curious, are there other ways that students have been able to meet their needs of experiencing love or social connection?

Theresa

Yeah, connections can be so diverse, right? And I think it's a time in your life, for a lot of students that they're kind of exploring, you know, what's relationship look like, for me, has to fit with my values, being curious and open to that. So students talk a lot about maybe what they'd like to do, where peers are doing. So you know, is it a hookup, maybe having more open relationship? Maybe non-monogamous, just hanging out together or being exclusive? Right? So connections can be sexual, intimate, emotional, practical, playful. And really, it's an individual choice. So that might mean exploring a bit more to see what fits with you. I would say, you know, some students talk about all my friends are kind of hooking up with people. And encouraging that, but I'm not sure that really fits for me. And, and, but there's some pressure to be doing that, too. Right. So that's okay. We talked about that. How does that fit with you? Is that something you're curious about? You want to explore? And on the opposite side, you know, I feel this pressure to be an exclusive committed, monogamous relationship, but you know, I'm interested in same sex relationship or putting things up more, and then how do they have that conversation with their partner? And how does that fit with? You know, open and curious and their own values? Right?

Mark

Uhum. Right. And I'm also, like, recognize that there are some students who don't necessarily want to be in relationships and and how do they work on like, experiencing connection and, and love and that sort of thing? In that context as well. Right.

Theresa

Right. I mean, there's a lot of pressure, you know, societal peers, what we see in the media to be, you know, coupled, I would say, and it's okay, like, there's so much diversity and what that looks like. So, as I just mentioned, maybe that's in the partner relationship, but also, you know, for some people they have, you know, friends, they have family, they have religious or cultural group, they have those connections in their life, and they're okay with that. Maybe they want to focus on their academics, feel the pressure to be in relationship but they don't necessarily want that or have the time for that. Yeah, is that okay too right?

Mark

It also seems important to mention here, like, I think you're already doing it and in talking about this, but that in counseling services, we're not focused on a particular kind of relationship. And that we're we are we do work with people in different types of relationships or people who aren't in relationships, right?

Theresa

Yeah, open to all different, you know, presentations of that, right, I just want to be with the student and where they're at. So if they're exploring things, you know, I'm going to be there with them. And if they're way more information about 2s LGBTQ, relationships, diversity or specific resources that we also can support them with that too.

Mark

Some students have told me that they actually find that they have reduced stress in some areas of their lives since the start of the pandemic. So before they may be felt pressured to be social. And I'm wondering well like, what do you think it might be like for these students and others, when there are no more requirements for physical distancing?

Theresa

That's true, I do hear that quite a bit. You know, I think we all have different levels. Like what we need to connect with others right? and maybe we, before we were doing a lot of social gatherings felt the pressure to be doing that. But now, it's kind of shifted, and maybe we're okay with some of that not having to be a social or to, you know, make that effort go and do things. I heard a lot about that, during the holidays, that students were talking about, actually, it was nicer to not have to do all the family or social gatherings so they could kind of learn a bit more.

Mark

So it lowers the expectations. Right?

Theresa

Right. Yeah. And maybe just having a bit more time to spend with the people you were connecting with, and develop those, like more quality of relationships and develop a bit more, I've heard a lot of students talking about maybe focusing on smaller group of people, like their inner kind of social circle rate, but really spending a bit more time in those relationships, but also the worry about, what does it look like if all of a sudden, we're kind of going back to school, let's say, right, or being more social and social gatherings, because we've had all these different messages about, you know, distancing, and being careful, right? So my thoughts about it, or, you know, just really just taking it slow, and checking in with yourself to see how you feel about it. Right? So jumping back to maybe how you used to do things, maybe that doesn't fit anymore, but it may take some time to explore that. Where do you want to put your energy? Who do you want to spend time with? How do you feel when you're out with other people, I think there's gonna be some level of kind of concern, worry, anxiety, I think that would be quite normal. How do you kind of experiment, test that out, sit with it a bit, but not overwhelm yourself, either. And make sure you're doing all the things you can do to take care of yourself. And if you need some extra support, hopefully you can reach out to counseling or people in your life.

Mark

I can't imagine like for me, when I reflect on it. Like, I think there's gonna be a relearning process of how, you know, if I get invited out to some kind of social gathering, like, how do I do that? And you

know, what, what, what, what are some of the things like managing anxiety in those situations, and that kind of thing is going to be something I'm going to have to go back into.

Theresa

Yeah, I think when, even before the pandemic, sometimes with, you know, situations where you may feel more anxious or stress, the students would talk about, you know, what are you worried about? What are some things that you've put in place that might be helpful to you just, you know, said with maybe a social gathering, you might feel more anxious, right? So expect that that might happen and have some strategies, you know, students we talked about, sometimes when it's like a gathering or birthday, and the expectation is, you'll be spent all night there with these people, right? That doesn't work for some people so you know, how much time you want to spend? How are you going to leave? Right? And then what are you gonna do after just take care of yourself? I think there's some good things to think about.

Mark

Right. So maybe even practically, like starting small and having shorter, shorter kind of gatherings or less people to start as a way of, you know, getting used to looking at, you know, changing our comfort level with these kinds of things.

Theresa

Yeah, right. Just experimenting and seeing how it feels for you, and what things you might need to put in place. And then if you do want to still do those things, maybe there's certain people or things that you're kind of triage, right, take off your list of no, I'd rather spend my time, energy on these other things now.

Mark

Um-hum. A significant part of your career, as you've mentioned, has been supporting people who have experienced abuse in relationships. Research indicates that rates and the intensity of intimate partner violence has increased since the start of the pandemic, and I'm wondering, what are the signs to look for that a relationship is abusive?

Theresa

Yeah, the biggest sign is trusting your instinct that something is off or wrong. Maybe you've had people in your life, friends or family kind of say something about the relationship, but also just coming back to I'm not sure what it is, but things are not going well, and to, you know, connect with some counseling or crisis resource and check it out. Besides the kind of more common ones we see, or we know about physical abuse, pressure to have sex, alcohol drug use, you know, I spend more time focusing on more the emotional or the psychological abuse, I find that's a lot harder to see, or put together, right? Because when we take one of these things out of context, it might not seem like abuse, but one put them together, there's more of a pattern going on. So things like gaslighting, it's just that feeling like you're always doing something wrong, that you were to blame that you need to change what you're doing, isolating you from your friends and family. You know, whether that's they don't like comments other people are saying or you feel like people don't get relationship, right. Jealousy, more intense jealousy, intrusiveness, wanting to know where you are, what you're doing, all the time checking your

social media to see if that's true, right? and threats when you try to end the relationship or talk about problems in the relationship. Are you the only one who understands me? And I might hurt myself. Or you'll never find someone else. Right? Those are some of the things that we explore in more detail and if you're not sure, check it out and talk to us up anymore about those.

Mark

Right? And what resources would you suggest for people who are experiencing abuse maybe who hear themselves or their experience in that list.

Theresa

So during the pandemic, we have this new service called Unsafe at Home Ottawa. So I encourage you to Google that and have a look. It's a text and online chat service is available seven days a week, from 8:30am until midnight. So I'm gonna give you that text number, have a look and gives you more resources and different information. So that's 613-704-5535. In addition to that, have a look at the Ottawa Coalition to End Violence Against Women, their website, they have some great national provincial crisis lines, resources and local ones. I'm just going to highlight a couple; The assaulted Women's Helpline, Talk for Healing is a culturally grounded confidential helpline for Indigenous women in 14 different languages. And Fem'aide is a French speaking number also for gender-based violence. We also offer counseling, a part of our center and we have some resources on our website. So have a look there also.

Mark

Great. And for students who seek relationship counseling, where there is no abuse, but they want to improve their relationship, what are some practical tips you might suggest?

Theresa

I have a lot of students that come in and they want to improve their relationship. And so we talked about a couple different things. The first one is, what do you do to connect with each other? What are some of the things that you like to do together? Often, you know, we're quite busy with school and families, friends, other things, then what do you do to kind of have fun, just kind of, and then when you know, you do have those moments, we're able to go for a walk, right? Watch a show together put together, it definitely improves communication. So that's the next one is, you know, what is healthy communication look like? Right? How do we talk about what our needs are? What our wants are? How do we fight fear, right? A lot of conversations are about having arguments or miscommunication. And then how do we resolve those going forward? Right? Looking at our own stressors to and what we've learned about relationships and conflicts from our lives, right? and then how we bring that into a couple relationship. And so we talk about some different ideas around that in counseling, and then get creative and have fun, putting more difficult sometimes I call the hot button topics on the shelf for a bit and really making that time to connect, be creative. Often, you know we're in a better place. We feel safe, you feel more secure, connected with our partner to work through those more difficult challenges.

Mark

Right? Yeah, recognizing when you're when you're out of your zone of functioning, when you're not, you're not in a place to kind of resolve these things in setting aside time when you are more, is that right?

Theresa

That's right. You know, the couples work is also, you know, making sure that you take time for yourself. So part of being a couples counseling is we do always be encouraged to do individual counseling too, right? So besides the relationship or time that you're spending together, what are you doing outside of that? How are you taking care of yourself? What other interests you have? outside of the couple relationship and friends and family, right? We want some overlap in the relationship. But you also need some time away, to just recharge, right and then come back together.

Mark

Right. So if we were to sum it up as sort of three tips, what would what would be your top three tips for students?

Theresa

Yeah, connect, communicate and get creative, and have fun are the ones that we tend to focus on.

Mark

Um-hum. Awesome. Great. Um, this is a bit of a more personal question, what have you learned about your relationship? During the pandemic, during the last few months?

Theresa

That's been challenging, right? to do things we used to like to do. So, we've had to you know get creative. We've had to talk more, we've had to take some time apart to kind of recharge. And it's definitely you know, it's not easy for anybody. Right? So I think acknowledging that, right, it's, we're all kind of readjusting. I say, like each time, right, any new change that comes up, locked down, right? I have kids that are in school, they're not in school, right. And sometimes I have more time for myself than others. And so trying to do the best we can each day, but trying to have some connection, keep that communication open. And take that time for ourselves, that has been really helpful.

Mark

It sounds almost like I guess in times before might be more being really thoughtful, but planning time together. Whereas now there's still that planning thoughtful time together, but also planning time apart. And how do you, how do you make that happen, too, right?

Theresa

Um-hum. Well, a lot of us are spending, especially it's winter, right now we're spending a lot of time together in one place, right in our homes were before we could go out, come back, come back, right. And so yeah, we are sticking probably, more time together, we're just seeing each other spaces. So I know, we've talked about this mark with other students just having like, your own space to do your work, right? Even if it was a little nook in your apartment or space, changing your clothes, right? When you are in class, right? Or when I go to work, right? Taking maybe like a snack or break to eat

somewhere different, right? That may be with your partner or without. So I think talking also about how much time we're going to spend together? When are we going to connect? Right? So maybe we'll check in the morning, we'll eat together later. I'm going to do this on my own, you're going to do this on your own right? and so right to keep that communication open.

Mark

My last question for you is based on your experiences, do you have anything you'd like to say to students who are listening and who feel isolated, particularly in the unprecedented times that we're living in?

Theresa

I think all these podcasts have been so great, because we're really talking about social connection. And you know, we're social beings, we need to connect with people, but everyone has different degrees of that and how much they need that right. So it's been a difficult time to connect. And maybe you've been going through a lot of changes and stress individually or in your relationships. That would be very normal. And but if you are feeling is really challenging and you're not sure what to do. Now, I really encourage you to explore that with someone whether it's a trusted person, counseling, from the community resources, we've talked about looking at, you know, what are your needs and wants, building a safe, supportive environment relationships in your life. It's not kind of an either or right? Being alone or being with somebody or being coupled. It's taking care of you and making sure you have fulfilling relationships in your life.

Mark

Um-hum. Great. Well, thanks so much for joining us, Theresa.

Theresa

Thanks for having me.