



# The Grandparent

A NEWSLETTER FOR AND BY GRANDPARENTS

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## WHAT IF WE STARTED TALKING TO EACH OTHER?

By Jill Murphy. Originally published in the *Sydney Morning Herald* on 4 December 2018

Yet another study, this one by Swinburne University and the Australian Psychological Society, has found that large numbers of Australians feel lonely. An interesting finding of this study is that loneliness isn't just about social isolation – even having numerous friends doesn't necessarily protect us from loneliness.

I wasn't surprised to read this. As a counsellor, I frequently encounter people who tell me that they feel alone, unable to speak to their closest friends and family members about their problems. They sit across from me, dripping tears, describing their unwillingness or inability to share how they're really feeling with their loved ones. It always strikes me as sad that many people, when they most need help, feel unable to reach out to those closest to them.

As a social species, we literally need one another to survive. The effects of loneliness on physical and mental health can be so devastating that it is now being considered a public health issue. It has even been proposed that Australia follow the lead of Britain and appoint a minister for loneliness.

This is despite the fact that we now have more ways to connect than ever before. As Michelle Lim, lead author of the recent study, has noted, this is because loneliness is not about the number of connections we have, but their quality. According to neuroscientist John Cacioppo, our relationships must be 'substantial



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or meaningful'. It's not enough to have thousands of Facebook friends if you can't call on any of them in a crisis. Meeting friends for coffee isn't necessarily meaningful if you keep the conversation as light as the foam on your latte.

While the quality of our relationships reflects individual traits and circumstances, I believe it also relates to an often profound discomfort with raw or intense emotion.

We invariably temper momentous occasions with humour (think of eulogies or wedding speeches). When someone asks the obligatory question 'how are you?', we generally reply with a mechanical 'Good, thanks.' Even if we answer truthfully, we often minimise our experience – we'll share an issue that's

causing us anguish, then close the topic or detract from it, affixing a trembling smile and reassuring our interlocutor with platitudes such as ‘anyway, it’ll all work out.’

In short, many of us are unused to having the real conversations about ourselves that contribute to ‘meaningful’ relationships. We may be scared of making ourselves vulnerable, or apprehensive about the response we’ll get. Clients often tell me that they don’t wish to burden anyone, or that they’re embarrassed to admit that they’re not coping.

acceptable façade.

Instead of being a problem, this newfound openness has helped me to create the best friendships I’ve ever had. I’ve found that more often than not, when I take the plunge and expose my nutty inner self, it encourages my friends to open up, too – and I discover that I’m not alone in whatever I’m experiencing. I’ve also found that by asking meaningful questions, rather than sticking to the conversational level of today’s weather, I can successfully invite others to connect too.

I’m not saying that in being candid about our

## ‘Unfortunately, once we start to feel lonely, we can find it ever more difficult to make connections.’

Unfortunately, once we start to feel lonely, we can find it ever more difficult to make connections. For all of these reasons and others, we close up and encase our authentic selves, like sugar-coated almonds, in a sweeter outer layer that we present to the world. That outer layer protects but also prevents us from being truly seen and understood.

Yet Lim notes that deepening the connections we already have is a key way to feel less lonely. I can attest to this. Most of my social interactions were once superficial – I would chat with friends about my life, but in truth I was keeping most of myself carefully protected by my pastel sugar shell. An unexpected effect of having children has been the cracking of that shell. I’m frankly so sleep deprived and emotionally fraught much of the time that I simply can’t be bothered putting on masks.

Between stopping my daughter from sitting on my son and stopping my son from climbing onto the stove, I’ve got enough to worry about without donning a socially

experiences we’ll always receive a positive response, or that we should do it indiscriminately; we need to have some sense of safety first. But sometimes when people tell me that their friends and family wouldn’t understand, I wonder whether they have given them



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the chance to try. If we hide ourselves beneath that sugary exterior, it can become harder and harder to know how to connect – and we’re increasingly finding that none of us are immune to the insidious spectre of loneliness.