Social Isolation & Social Fitness

Objective: To provide information on social isolation in order to optimize social fitness and resiliency within commands and units.

Summary: Loneliness and social isolation have negative effects on mental health (and therefore readiness). It is also difficult to recognize, difficult to talk about, and is not readily apparent in the Marine Corps, especially because we spend so much time in close proximity to each other. Leaders should be equipped to talk about it frankly, openly, and compassionately. This information sheet is intended to equip leaders with tools to lead a discussion and assist Marines in the role of being each other's keeper.

Suggested Application: A deeper understanding of social isolation may allow Marines and Marine leaders to better assess root causes to barriers of performance, and seek alternative solutions to standard medical and non-medical ones.

Suggestions for delivery: Standard training methods apply. This topic is a good one for more senior leaders (platoon sergeants, sergeants major, or even company commanders or battalion commanders) to deliver during a standard small-unit training session.

Information for Presentation/Training:

A growing body of evidence suggests that there is an epidemic of loneliness and social isolation in the U.S., which has significant negative physical and mental health effects. Marines are not immune to this. While in the military, you are almost always in close physical proximity to other humans (unless you live out in town alone or you have your own barracks room), but that doesn't mean that Marines don't experience loneliness and social isolation.

- Loneliness affects more than one-third of American adults, with particulate likelihood among people experiencing challenging life circumstances (loss of a loved one, chronic or catastrophic illness).
- Certain age groups, notable adolescents, young adults (the age of nearly all Marines), and older adults are particularly at risk as marked by growing incidence of depression, substance abuse, and suicide.
- Research indicates that external factors, for instance, the internet and social media engagement exacerbate feelings of loneliness, depression, and anxiety.
- Of particular note, health risks associated with loneliness and social isolation are comparable to the dangers of smoking and obesity, increasing mortality risk by up to 30%.[i]

There is no agreed definition of "loneliness" in research. One explanation is that painful feeling that occurs when there is a gap between the number and quality of social relationships and connections that we have, and those we would like to have. Most agree that there are two dimensions of loneliness: social and emotional. Social loneliness occurs when someone is missing a wider social network, and emotional loneliness is caused when someone misses an "intimate relationship."

Marines are not known for being "touchy-feely." And your drill instructors would likely yell at you and make fun of you if you admitted to being lonely. But they would also tell you that we are our brothers' and sisters' keeper, and that we look out for each other. Following are some ideas for leaders to consider in thinking about loneliness and social isolation:

- Do all my Marines have friends or family that they hang out with? And if my Marines enjoy "alone" time and are introverted, are they practicing healthy habits (for instance, are they going for hikes alone, or are they spending the entire weekend alone in the barracks?)
- How active are my Marines on social media, and how large of a part of their lives is it? Without being intrusive, it's also important to know if you have Marines that stay up late into the night posting, arguing, and attacking/being attacked on social media (not a healthy habit to have).
- Do my Marines who are going through personal challenges (family death or illness, divorce or break-up, etc.) have someone to talk to (friend, counselor, chaplain, mentor)? And as a leader can you facilitate that?
- Is everyone checking up on each other, and are we ensuring that no one is left behind?

Following are some strategies to combat loneliness and social isolation:

- Give yourself a break (don't blame yourself).
- Connect in real life. We often default to using our smartphones. It's easier, and now it's culturally accepted. But we can decrease our loneliness if we build stronger in-person connections. We do this by looking people in the eyes, listening, being mindful, and choosing not be distracted by our phones or other technologies.
- Rethink how you spend your spare time. Opting to stay alone *every night* with our phones, watching Netflix, or playing on Facebook can really get us stuck in loneliness.
- Stop focusing so much on you. Shift your focus. Reach out to other Marines. Volunteer for a good cause.
- Spend money on experiences (and not just a night out at the bar) rather than on things.
- Pay attention to the things that matter. That also implies tending to your network. Good family and friend relationships take work and investment. So work and invest.[ii]

For further reading:

Cacioppo, John. *Loneliness: Human Nature and the Need for Social Connection* (W.W. Norton & Co., 2009).
Murthy, Vivek, M.D. *Together: The Healing Power of Human Connection in a Sometimes Lonely World.* (Harper Wave, 2020)
Coyle, Daniel. *The Culture Code: The Secrets of Highly Successful Groups* (Bantam, 2018)

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[i] https://www.artandhealing.org/unlonely-overview/
[ii] https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/click-here-happiness/201902/feeling-lonely-discover-18-ways-overcome-loneliness