

UWSM Broadcast: Social Isolation

Dale Biddell: Hello everyone. I'm Dale Biddell. I'm the Chief Executive Officer of United Way Simcoe Muskoka and I am so pleased to be welcoming you to our first-ever UWSM Broadcast. Before we begin, I would like us all to acknowledge the privilege we share to be having this event on the traditional land of the Anishinaabe peoples. They include the Ojibwe, Odawa, and Pottawatomi nations, known as the Three Fires Confederacy. At United Way, we honour Indigenous history and culture, and promote the spirit and intent of reconciliation with respect for all First Nations, Metis and Inuit peoples.

We're so pleased that you could join us for this Broadcast, our first-ever as I mentioned. The reason for us doing it this way is because we still find ourselves in an environment that promotes physical distancing and doesn't allow us to host documentary film series, which is an activity that we enjoy doing and gives us an opportunity to bring people together to learn about the social issues that are present across Simcoe Muskoka. As an alternative in this environment, we are promoting the idea of still continuing to be informed and learn about the issues that were here prior to COVID-19, but in some cases have been made worse by this pandemic, but through a way that provides you with ease and health and safety while you safely listen from home.

So let's begin. I'd like to introduce Doug Landsborough, our Marketing & Communications Specialist at United Way Simcoe Muskoka, who is going to be narrating this Broadcast for you, and he will be talking about the topic of social isolation. We're very grateful that you've tuned in and hope you enjoy this, and we also hope that you might share your feedback with us – and Doug it going to tell you how you can do that after the Broadcast, but we hope to be able to learn from you as well.

Thank you for joining us.

Doug Landsborough: Hello and thank you for joining us. As Dale mentioned, my name is Doug Landsborough, and I'm the communications specialist here at United Way Simcoe Muskoka. I'll be your host in our first-ever UWSM Broadcast. I'm going to be taking you on a deep dive into the very important and very real issue of social isolation.

During this Broadcast, we will be discussing what social isolation is and the effect it has on those experiencing it. We'll look at how it differs from loneliness and social distancing, and we'll also be looking at how social isolation affects different populations within Simcoe Muskoka, including seniors, youth, and marginalized communities.

While many of us have felt isolated these past few months as we work to fight COVID-19, we will also look at how the coronavirus pandemic has affected those experiencing isolation. At the end of the Broadcast, we will also talk about what local efforts are being done to help those living in isolation, how your support helps, and some simple actions you can take to help anyone you know who is experiencing isolation during these difficult times.

For your convenience, a transcript of this Broadcast is also available on the same web page where you downloaded this sound file.

Once again, thank you for joining us, and we hope you enjoy.

Doug:

Lately, many of us have been using the term *isolation* very loosely. It is not uncommon to hear a friend or relative say that they are self-isolating or socially isolating themselves, though our social distancing efforts should not be mistaken for social isolation.

Social isolation is the state of being cut off from normal social networks, aside from those that are required for basic aspects of life, such as interacting with a bank teller or grocery store cashier. When isolated, you can actually count the number of meaningful interactions you might have in a day, a week or even a month.

These interactions could take place in-person, over the phone, or virtually through email and social media. During a time when many people have dozens, hundreds or even thousands of connections through social networks, some people might think that it's almost impossible to feel isolated, but that couldn't be further from the truth. Many barriers can prevent someone from having meaningful interactions, and even those with a network of a thousand friends can feel alone.

But how does someone become socially isolated?

The most common cause of social isolation is a physical disability that creates barriers that can stop someone from leaving their house. This could include being confined to a wheelchair or being unable to walk for any number of reasons. The barriers created by a disability can trap someone in their house without supports or resources to help lower those barriers. According to Susan Dawes, the Client Services Coordinator at Independent Living Services of Simcoe County and Area, physical disabilities can limit even a person's most basic social interactions, like going to a bank or a grocery store. As we'll see coming up in this Broadcast, this can lead to a lack of self-worth, frustration, and mental and physical health risks.

Hearing loss is the second-most common factor that can lead to isolation. While hearing loss is a physical disability or impairment, it generally doesn't prevent someone from leaving their house. It can still isolate someone though, even if they are frequently surrounded by friends and family. Because hearing loss is something that many people experience as we age, we will talk more about this cause when we discuss how seniors are impacted by isolation.

There are a large number of other factors that can lead to social isolation, too. Mental health challenges such as depression, anxiety and social adversity can all cause someone to become secluded from others, as can personal crises like caring for a loved one, bereavement or loss, long-term illness and other family emergencies. Furthermore,

victims of domestic violence often become isolated from their social network, and this isolation can also be part of the abuse itself.

Income also plays a huge role in isolating someone. People living in low-income cannot afford going out for social events when the choice is rent or meeting up with friends or family. This is especially true for those experiencing unemployment or underemployment, when paycheques are not guaranteed or are insufficient for covering basic necessities. In a time when gaining employment can often be a case of who you know rather than your experience, this means that employment, like many of these factors, can create a cycle that further entrenches someone in isolation.

Low income and poverty can also create a technical barrier for those who are unable to afford a cell phone or phone plan to help them stay connected with friends and family, or help with the job hunt.

These are just some of the factors that lead to social isolation and, as we progress through this Broadcast, you will see that specific demographics and communities face increased threats from different factors. But for now, let's move on to what the overall impact of social isolation is.

Doug:

So we know what social isolation is, but how does it affect people living with it? Unfortunately, social isolation has been linked to a wide range of social, mental and physical health risks.

As we'll discuss after this section, loneliness is both a cause and a symptom of isolation, but it is not the only social health implication. Isolation can also engrain a fear or distrust of other people, both strangers and those you have known your entire life. What few relationships remain are constantly strained, driving someone further into seclusion.

When it comes to mental health risks, isolation can cause increased rates of depression and anxiety. At its darkest, social isolation is a factor in those contemplating suicide. Those experiencing isolation continually face lowered self-esteem and increased stress, which are linked to poor sleep and other unhealthy lifestyle habits. These are often part of the physical health risks attributed to isolation.

These physical health risks are many, and isolation can be so devastating that the University of California's Dr. Steve Cole calls isolation a "fertilizer for other diseases." Exacerbated by the social and mental health risks, experiencing social isolation can help cancer cells spread, accelerates the buildup of plaque in arteries and has been strongly linked to Alzheimer's and dementia. Furthermore, isolation has been linked to high blood pressure, heart disease, obesity, cognitive decline, substance abuse and, in the worse cases, death.

While all of these effects of social isolation are devastating enough on their own, they are made even worse by the fact that most of them are also factors that can lead to the

situation in the first place. Without the proper resources, services and support from friends and loved ones, all of these outcomes of social isolation will only isolate someone further.

While important to understand what social isolation is and the impact that it has on people, it's also important to understand what it *isn't*. In this next section, we are going to look at loneliness and social distancing, two terms that people have been using interchangeably with social isolation.

Doug: When thinking about social isolation, it's easy to confuse it with loneliness. And while loneliness is also a difficult and painful experience for people, we should understand the difference between the two terms.

Do you remember our initial definition of social isolation? It stated that isolation was a state of being cut off from society, one where you can *easily count* the number of meaningful interactions you have. This makes social isolation an objective state of being, one that can be measured and identified consistently across individuals experiencing it. And while those situations don't look the same, isolation is also an ongoing, seemingly permanent experience for many.

Loneliness, on the other hand, is a subjective experience. Somebody *feels* lonely, and this feeling is often temporary. It can be caused by many of the same factors that will lead to isolation, such as loss of a loved one or an injury, but loneliness can and often is recovered from.

In some situations, loneliness will begin the cycle that leads to isolation, trapping someone in seclusion from friends, family and necessary resources. While experiencing loneliness, mental health challenges may become more difficult and can increase rates of social adversity. For this reason, loneliness is often one of the many causes of social isolation, though there are many people who can recover from loneliness because they have those supports and connections, even if they feel like they don't.

Loneliness isn't the only thing we tend to think is synonymous with social isolation. Since March, we have all come together to help mitigate the spread of COVID-19 through public health measures that none of us have experienced before. One of these measure, as I'm sure you're well aware, is social distancing.

Social distancing has been an incredibly important method to not just slow the spread of COVID-19, but to save lives. While distancing ourselves, it wouldn't be surprising to hear people say they are *quarantining* or *isolating* themselves. While we technically are isolation, it's important to remember that what the majority of us are experiencing is only a fraction of what social isolation really feels like.

It has been difficult to refrain from social gatherings and outings, but for many of us, our connections and networks are still there. We participate in conference calls or Zoom

meetings for work. We have family Skype sessions every week or so. We message our friends and family on social media or keep up with the photos they're posting. It feels different than it did back in March, but we are still connected during our social distancing.

For those experiencing social isolation, those connections were not there before distancing measures were implemented, and they are definitely not there now. In fact, what few interactions a person who is isolated had—customer service employees, regular appointments, etc.—those are still drastically different, if there at all. And, as we just discussed, many of those affected by social isolation face increased health risks, limiting what few opportunities they might have to leave home.

So now we have a base understanding of what social isolation is, what it isn't, and how it affects people who are experiencing it. Up next, we are going to look at how social isolation impacts different populations.

Doug: Now let's be clear: everybody should be concerned about social isolation, because it's an issue that can impact anyone, including our friends, family and ourselves. A 2018 survey found that 40% of individuals have reported that they sometimes or always feel that they are isolated. With the current pandemic, that number is likely to be much higher.

With that being said, there are certain communities that face increased risks from isolation or disproportionately suffer from social isolation, compared to the majority of the population. To understand the full impact of social isolation, it's important to know how it affects these groups.

Before we look at social isolation and its impact on specific populations and communities, I want to note that the following sections will be disheartening and best, and difficult to listen to at worst. We ask that you stay with us to get a better understanding of how social isolation harms Simcoe Muskoka residents. You can turn this Broadcast off, but those experiencing social isolation cannot do the same with their situation.

Doug: Our senior population includes some of the most vulnerable individuals facing isolation. As we age, there are many changes that occur that can make drive someone further and further from their social networks and connections. Retirement, for example, marks the end of daily work relationships, which might mean no longer seeing good friends five days a week, eight hours a day. At its most difficult, we might not think work is important for our social and mental health, but the majority of our regular interactions come from our jobs. When someone retires, those interactions must be found elsewhere and will likely never replace the normal schedule we have become used to.

Tragically, as we age, we start experiencing the loss of friends and loved ones as well. Loss and bereavement have their own difficulties, and unfortunately this becomes more common the older we become. While those who have lost someone close to them struggle with that loss, something that might isolate them already, it also marks a loss of an important connection, further increasing the risk of isolation.

Jenn Pfrimmer: Particularly if that spouse was the social one, you know? Often times in a relationship there is one individual that might be a little more extroverted than the other.

Doug: That's Jenn Pfrimmer, Executive Director at Muskoka Seniors.

Jenn: I think that that's an important thing, too: recognizing the roles of a relationship and when that spouse is gone, what that can look like.

Doug: Jenn also notes that losing your drivers license is one of the biggest isolating factors for many of our seniors.

Jenn: When that is taken away, you are instantly dependant on somebody else.

Doug: And whether it be because of retirement or just aging and moving closer to family, a lot of seniors find themselves in new communities.

Jenn: We've got a lot of folks that come to retire here, which is well and good but it is not, or for some is not, it hasn't be their primary residence for a long time. So their social group, their networks. aren't even in this community.

Doug: Our body goes through physical changes as we grow older, too. Aging can lead to physical limitations that can prevent someone from leaving their house, which we already noted was the number one cause of social isolation. Hearing loss is also a common change that occurs as we age. While hearing loss does not usually mean that someone cannot leave their house, it creates barriers wherever they go. A senior who is losing their hearing can be surrounded by their loved ones, but still feel isolated when they cannot hear or participate in conversations. While hearing aids can remedy this, they are cost prohibitive and not an option for a lot of seniors on a fixed income.

In addition to being more prone to isolation, seniors face increased risks from being isolated, too. Without meaningful connections, seniors have shown increased cholesterol, weakened immune systems and increased risks of dementia compared to seniors who have important social interactions.

Unfortunately, aging also brings a whole host of other health implications that only compound with social isolation, making our senior residents one of the most at-risk populations.

Specifically in Simcoe Muskoka, we have a lot of rural populations as well. When our seniors live in a rural population, the geography itself can isolate them from others. For those living in Muskoka or northern Simcoe County, a lot of their neighbours are cottagers who are only around for two, three or four months a year. Once those cottagers disappear for the season, their closest neighbours might be kilometres away.

Though the experience of isolated seniors is often unique to an individual, retirement or aging often leads seniors, especially in new environments, to stay home more.

Jenn: So they're at home more. That then increases a risk of loneliness and could impact the risk of depression.

Doug: This then begins to impact someone's motivation, slowly impacting daily routines like getting ready for the day or maintaining your home.

Jenn: So now I'm not feeling very motivated, which then impacts our nutrition levels. So now my nutrition levels are being impacted, and when that's impacted that affects sleep, falls, weight, all of that. And so then you've got somebody who just moved to a new community, didn't seem like a big deal, and has the risk of being unmotivated, at greater risk for falls, malnourished, all because of a move.

Doug: On the other end of the age spectrum, youth are particularly vulnerable to social isolation. It's during our formative years that some of the most important foundations of our lives are built, and the impact of loneliness and isolation while we are young can have implications later in our lives.

First and foremost, academic success has been shown to be largely dependant on a sense of belonging. This belonging is important to create a positive social and emotional well-being, and its absence increases rates of depression in youth. Isolated children and youth also experience stress that people their age should not have to bear, which has not only been linked to physiological risks when they are young, but also impacts their health in adulthood.

Studies on social isolation have also shown that a lack of strong relationships actually impacts the development of our brain's structure, specifically the part of the brain responsible for many cognitive functions like planning, critical thinking and social interaction.

When it comes to preventing isolation, you might think that family connections are the most important, however studies have shown that friendship-related isolation is much more harmful than parent-related isolation, though that's not to diminish the impact of the latter. A 2012 study of 4,500 youth found that "social support from friends" and "spending spare time with friends" were the most important protective factors against mental health challenges.

Growing up is a critical time for all of us, but it can also be an exceedingly difficult time. The effects of being isolated while we're young carry well into our adulthood for both physical and mental health challenges.

In the next section, we are going to be talking about how marginalized communities are more prone to social isolation, and the impact that isolation has on members of these communities.

Doug: The LGBTQ community is one of the communities that face unique and harmful factors that can lead to social isolation. Similar to other groups we will discuss, many of these factors are environmental and social in nature. While Canadians pride ourselves in being an open and accepting country, discrimination and a history of harmful practices have led to the LGBTQ community more vulnerable to isolation than most.

While certain sexual orientations or gender identities encounter specific risk factors, there are some factors that apply to the LGBTQ community as a whole. These common factors include:

- Feeling the need to hide or conceal your sexual orientation or gender identity
- Fear of discrimination
- Past or current discrimination
- Housing discrimination
- Systemic discrimination in society and in organizations that provide services

Networks and connections that many people rely on can disappear when someone comes out to their friends and family, or it might be the fear of that rejection that leads to members of the LGBTQ community feeling invisible and alone.

For this community, fear and discrimination are the two biggest barriers to creating a strong social circle and accessing supports, some of them critical like shelter or transportation.

Gerry Croteau: Social isolation in this area centers around lack of ability to have transportation.

Doug: That's Gerry Croteau, Executive Director at The Gilbert Centre, an organization that services the LGBTQ community in Simcoe Muskoka.

Gerry: Someone who is in Midland, there's one bus a day to Barrie, and one bus back from Barrie to Midland. As well as, many folks don't have access to high speed internet.

Doug: And that's something we see time and again in people experiencing social isolation, particularly those in the LGBTQ community who need that transportation to get to support groups and resources.

Gerry: Just getting to places has been a challenge and contributes a lot to being isolated.

Doug: Trans individuals face their own unique risks as well, stemming from a lack of support, negative social interactions and an ongoing struggle to have their identities simply accepted by others.

Gerry: We've had incidences where trans folks have gone into shops, not so much in Barrie but the outskirts of Barrie—Midland, Orillia, Wasaga Beach, Collingwood, Bradford—and some of them have been detained by police because shop owners have said "there's a guy in here dressed as a woman in the lingerie department." And they're not dressed as a woman, they identify as a woman and they are a trans person.

A lot of landlords won't rent to you. It happens. It's not frequent, but it has happened. That's why I may point to it as one of the challenges that folks have.

Also just accessing medical services. If someone is transitioning or has transitioned, but hasn't changed their name legally, so their OHIP card may still read *John Smith*, when in reality their preferred name is Allison Smith, for example, but when they give their OHIP card and it's John Smith, then they're in the waiting room and they get called John Smith. And here they are, presenting as a female, it's awkward, embarrassing, and they tend to stay away from accessing medical help.

I had a client come in here who was 29 years old and feeling isolated because, at 29, he said, the first thing he said to me was, "there's a female inside of me that wants out, and because I won't let her out it's caused me to be isolated from my friends. I don't date, I don't go out. I just go to work and come home, because I'm not comfortable in my own skin and I don't know how to come out. This female won't let me alone, she wants out." You know what I'm saying? And that's heartwrenching.

Doug: LGBTQ seniors are also more vulnerable to social isolation, both because of the innate risks associated with aging and because many grew up having their identity more stigmatized than they are today.

Gerry: And also, remembering that up until 1969, it was against the law to be gay in Canada. There was a sodomy law. You could be imprisoned for being gay up until 1969. That's within my lifetime.

Doug: As a result, nearly half of all LGBTQ+ seniors live alone, either because they had to hide their sexual orientation or gender identity growing up or because their relationships were not legally recognized during the years when they would form romantic relationships. And even those that did retire with their partners found that retirement brought its own set of obstacles.

Gerry: George Smitherman, a former Health Minister for the province of Ontario, was once quoted as saying it's a shame that seniors have to go back into the closet when they retire, because a lot of retirement homes or long-term care facilities won't let seniors who have been together for 50 years be together in long-term care facilities or retirement homes, because of the stigma against LGBTQ folks.

Doug: For LGBTQ youth, both unconscious and conscious discrimination pushes children and youth towards being heterosexual and "normal". LGBTQ youth often don't have role models from their community. The act of coming out, while difficult at all ages, can be very isolating for youth and engrains an identity of being different. An identity of being "different" can push LGBTQ youth from seeking out others who are sharing or have lived through their experience, leading to a cycle of fear and self-stigmatism.

For the LGBTQ community, like many of the marginalized communities we'll be talking about in this section, isolation does not come from a physical disability or mental health challenges, though those can all be contributing factors. Rather, isolation is almost forced on these communities because of engrained discrimination.

Another such community, and the one we will be discussing next, is Indigenous peoples.

Doug: Indigenous peoples in our communities not only face increased social isolation but are at higher risk for the factors that lead to isolation in the first place. Both First Nations and Metis residents have, on average, lower income than non-Indigenous residents. We already know that low-income can lead to isolation through the inability to afford necessities and the barriers it creates to transportation and communication. In addition to lower income, the health of Indigenous peoples continues to lag behind majority of the population of Canada and our communities.

Racism is the biggest risk factor that can drive Indigenous peoples to social isolation. With systemic racism, there is not only a lack of access to resources for Indigenous peoples—due to barriers created by poverty and inequality—but there are disproportionately few resources that are culturally appropriate. Similar to the LGBTQ community, Indigenous peoples are also driven from creating meaningful social connections for fear of racist views, rhetoric and actions that still tragically exist across our communities and our country.

Past racism also plays a large role in isolating Indigenous communities and individuals. Here is Meghan Young, the Life Promotion Director with Feather Carriers Leadership for Life Promotion at the Barrie Area Native Advisory Circle.

Meghan Young: In terms of looking at a lot of the colonial policies that were developed and the way that Indigenous peoples, at the way relationships have been fostered with Indigenous peoples, even rooting back to identifying who is First Nations, who is Inuit, who is Metis, a lot of that underpinning in those relationships is from the context that Indigenous peoples are a problem, and so we need to divide and conquer in order to solve the problem.

And so when you look at the policies that have been developed as a result of that kind of thinking, you can understand how, from the very beginning, that we've been separated and segregated and seen as *other*. So all of those policies have a racist underpinnings, oppressive underpinnings, and have resulted in a lot of trauma for peoples and communities across North America and, more broadly, Indigenous folks globally.

So when you look at the creation of the Indian act, they imposed those patrilineal systems and so, if your father was somebody considered to be a status Indian, they were able to pass on their status to their children, regardless of who the mother was. When you look at how that legislation was applied to women, that was not the case. So a woman who was registered as a status Indian at that time, she was only able to pass on her status to her children depending on who the father was, and that father also had to be a status person, otherwise her children would not be status.

And so you start to see how that works, and that starts to create that divide and conquer and those divisions in our communities, because you have people who are relative who are no longer able to live in their own community, and it started to sever those relationships and separate family members from their networks of support.

So when you start to see how legislation is imposed upon us where mothers end up losing their status because they are with somebody who is non-status and are forced to leave

their community, forced to raise their children outside of their community, then you start to see how we have been impacted by this social and physical isolation from that time.

And that also happened as a result of, I'm sure you're aware, through residential schools. So the education that our children received when they were in community was not perceived to be important, it wasn't valued in any way, it was seen as being highly problematic. So many different Christian denominations worked with the Canadian government to create the residential school system, and they felt that they could better educate our children and our communities, and basically teach them how to be White people. The best way to do that was to remove children from communities, have them live in an institution, and really try and program them, brainwash them, into having a different understand about life.

Through that, you also see how people are physically and socially isolated. They're taught that what their parents and grandparents and communities do is wrong, is sinful, is going to result in them going to Hell. That creates a lot of shame and a lot of division, and a lot of uncertainty about who they are as Anishinabek, as Haudenosaunee, as Mi'kmaq people, many different peoples, Metis peoples, Inuit. When they're not able to learn and develop within their community an understanding of who they are, that creates social isolation.

Doug: The last residential school in Canada only shut down in 1996. These institutions not only served to erase the social identity of Indigenous children, but perpetrated physical, sexual and emotional abuse, created inhumane living conditions, exposed children to diseases, forces children into labour, and made those who left the school feeling as if they Indigenous identities were something to be ashamed of.

This horrible practice created an intergenerational effect, which passed on the stress and grief experienced by Indigenous communities to create a collective experience of powerlessness. In a 2012 study, a sample of 127 residential school survivors found that 65% have been diagnosed with PTSD, 21 % with major depression, and 7% with anxiety disorder. While these are individual diagnoses, the impact of residential schools has resulted in increased social isolation throughout the entire Indigenous population.

Meghan: It's our belief and part of the work I do with BANAC is really to foster four primary health outcomes. The Thunderbird Partnership Foundation worked with First Nations all across Canada to really look at and understand what are those things we need to be healthy, thriving communities. The four main health outcomes that they found in those communities that are healthy and thriving are a strong sense of hope, meaning, belonging and purpose. I think the one that specifically resonates with the questions and the work that you're doing is that sense of belonging. If our understanding of who we are as peoples is stripped from us and we're taught that who we are is problematic, then it is difficult for us to have a sense of belonging in the world at large, but also with community.

I think that's one of the places where racism plays a huge role. When you're perceived as a certain way on the outside and you have people telling you that you don't belong here because of how you look, that can create a lot of devastation.

Doug: Indigenous peoples are also over-represented in our criminal justice system, too. While Indigenous peoples account for less than 5% of the country's population, they make up 20% of our total imprisoned population. While criminality has its own stigma associated with it that makes creating meaningful connections difficult, foremost among those is finding employment after incarceration. We discussed before that income is one of the most important determinants of social isolation; for a community that is over-represented in the legal system, this presents a huge barrier to forming those essential supports.

According to the John Howard Society of Ontario, 60% of employers require a criminal record check for new employees, and 15% do not hire someone regardless of the type of offence or age of a person when they were incarcerated. For Indigenous peoples leaving the criminal justice system, this only makes social isolation and all its harmful effects more likely.

Meghan: A lot of the work that we're trying to do is trying to repair the devastation that happened, repair these relationships, and shift the focus from one that we're a broken people to one that we are healthy and thriving communities. I think sometimes it can be complicated when we're asked around social isolation, because yes, that still very much is a reality that many folks experience, especially during a global pandemic, so we're all experiencing it, but then having this history and having those policies and ideas—that kind of thinking regarding Indigenous folks that we're people that need to be helped or we continue to be this other—I think that also contributes to our continued social isolation and we're still trying to figure out how we shift the focus on that, and how do we promote life, how do we foster healing and come together to really foster connection.

Doug: The last demographic we will touch on in this Broadcast will be newcomers and immigrants, though we have by no means covered every group that experiences social isolation. In fact, discussing any of the communities or demographics we've already touched on could already take up a presentation longer than this Broadcast. And, as we said before, anyone can experience social isolation. The unique experiences of communities and demographics will create different risk factors or make them more prevalent for certain groups.

For immigrants, there are some barriers in particular that make social isolation a bigger risk. A language barrier exists for some immigrants, which immediately prevents meaningful connections from being created. For those who do experience a language barrier, the remaining risk factors can be made even more difficult to overcome. Newcomers and immigrants commonly don't know about community resources, including those that could help create a strong social network. Employment also presents a barrier for immigrants, regardless of language they speak.

A study conducted by the County of Simcoe found that the immigrant population in Simcoe County possesses, on average, higher rates of post-secondary education, but

experience higher rates of poverty at the same time. Those who move to Canada face unemployment and underemployment more than someone born in Canada, but not because of a lack of qualifications. Similar to other groups who face employment discrimination, income plays a large role in whether someone becomes socially isolated.

While many residents of our communities have family and friends nearby—in the same house, on the same street or maybe just a short drive away—many immigrants leave their social connections behind when they move to Canada. This means that, aside from the family in their home, meaningful connections are extremely limited. For immigrant youth and seniors, this can be especially damaging because of how vulnerable they already are to social isolation.

Like other minority groups, discrimination and racism also excludes immigrants from feeling accepted or welcomed in their new home. This is especially true for visible minorities, who face increased discrimination. Unfortunately, this can have an intergenerational effect; though the children of immigrants might not face the same risk factors as their parents, racialized Canadians are still victims of racism that can lead to social isolation, other economic consequences and mental, social and physical health problems.

As I previously said, any of these communities or demographics, and any number of other ones, could be the topic of a Broadcast similar to this one. For the groups we just discussed, there are increased risk factors that can lead to social isolation and the negative consequences that come with that, whether they be threats to you mental, social or physical well-being.

We hope that hearing about these experiences has sparked an interest in you into hearing about social isolation and how you can help specific communities or people suffering from social isolation. While we will touch on that and the work being done in Simcoe Muskoka in a bit, we also need to talk about how COVID-19 has affected those experiencing social isolation.

Doug: It's no secret that our way of life has changed since the COVID-19 pandemic began. We're living through an event that nobody alive has lived through before. Our lives are being forced to change, both at home and at work. And, for better or for worse, the effects of social isolation are not immune to this change.

For those already experiencing isolation, the effects were immediate and jarring. Some services that individuals relied on—transportation, counselling, and more—were open on a Friday but did not reopen the following Monday. Throughout the charitable sector, those providing frontline services to people experiencing social isolation and other struggles have had to adapt how they can provide those services, if they can be adapted. Many are left wondering if they will be able to continue helping our communities' most vulnerable in six months or a year.

Mental health risk factors and those associated with income spiked in severity. Many Simcoe Muskoka residents are only now starting to go back to work, but more still find themselves unemployed. For those already living in low-income households, things got even worse, while there were some who found themselves in need of assistance for maybe the first time in their lives. Worse, it was not only physical limitations that kept people in their homes for days on end; it was necessary for all of us to stay home, away from our normal networks.

For some seniors, staying inside and isolated became, tragically in many cases, a matter of life and death. Those whose only meaningful connections consisted of their family were cut off from even them. I think we're all haunted by pictures of family members visiting their elderly loved ones from outside their window.

For our youth, for those whose development is reliant on connecting with their friends, they suddenly found themselves not being able to see each other. They had to navigate a new learning format without being able to help or play with one another.

For our marginalized communities, services that were already limited in number and scope were reduced when they have been needed most. The Albert Kennedy Trust, a UK charity that helps young members of the LGBTQ community who face homelessness, publicly advised young people to "press pause" on coming out during the pandemic. At a time when stress in households is higher than ever and when resources and services for LGBTQ+ youth are limited, the charity warned that there was concern of families kicking their child out of the house if they come out now.

But through all of the chaos and change that has marked this pandemic, we have also seen acts of kindness. People offering to shop for their immunocompromised neighbour, adults helping their elderly parents move in to give them that connection and safety during the pandemic, and probably more family video calls than we ever thought we could manage.

When I spoke with Gerry Croteau of the Gilbert Centre, he told me that COVID-19 had forced the organization to adapt, and as a result they can actually help out more individuals.

Gerry: COVID-19 has enabled us to do more online programming. In fact, we've been heavily supported by many of our funders to enhance online programming, because it keeps that social isolation from getting any more concerning for folks, and it has enabled folks to go online. Whereas before they had texting or emails, this way they could actually go online. A lot of it is Facetime, Zoom meetings or Microsoft Teams meetings, where they can actually interact by seeing others, not just hearing, but actually seeing other folks.

For example, in our youth programming for youth who are questioning their sexuality or are transitioning from male to female or female to male, or are non-binary, they found now that, because we have online programming, they now feel less isolated, if you will. They can actually feel connected because they can go online with a bunch of other folks

and be part of a program that normally would not allow them to be a part of, because they can't get into Barrie.

Doug: Inspired by these acts and in response to the increased needs of those experiencing social isolation, let's bring some hope to this Broadcast as we look at how you can help.

Doug: Being such a complex issue, social isolation doesn't have an easy solution. Someone's isolation could be caused by substance use, mental health challenges, domestic abuse, loss of a loved one, unemployment or underemployment, illness or a disability, discrimination or any one of the many risk factors we covered throughout this Broadcast. These are deep-rooted issues and, as such, they might seem impossible to overcome.

A great first step is one you have already taken by listening to this Broadcast; you've educated yourself on social isolation. Be aware of the warning signs, understand what can cause isolation and don't simply shrug it off if you see these signs in a friend, family member or co-worker.

I really like how Jenn Pfrimmer of Muskoka Seniors put it when she told me that people should be reaching in and reaching out.

Jenn: I think reaching in and reaching out is probably what I would suggest. As the individual themselves, do what they can to reach in. It's just reaching into that person's life in some way or another. Whether that's just a call, or spend the five minutes when you see them in their backyard to chat with them. Create an opportunity for social engagement in some way or another.

And for reaching out, that would be reaching out into the community to just educate yourself. If you're able to educate yourself in what is being offered, then when you have a conversation with somebody, then you can be the one that educates them on what's available.

Doug: Reach out to those close to you, too. Sometimes it can feel difficult to stay in touch with our friends and family, but keeping those connections is more important than ever. Remember that one of the factors that makes social isolation a cycle is that it causes people to draw back from the few meaningful connections they have. Be proactive and reach out to people in your life, whether you think they might be experiencing social isolation or not.

If you can do so responsibly and while respecting social distancing measures, visit those who you can. A chat in someone's driveway is better than a "see you when this is over." Find virtual ways to connect with people, through social media or video chats, to help make a meaningful connection with them during these difficult times. Even if you feel like you've had one too many video chats, it might be the highlight of someone's week.

If you know someone who is experiencing social isolation or is in danger of experiencing it, reaching out to them might not be enough. Encourage them to connect with local resources or community navigators to get appropriate help. In Simcoe Muskoka, United Way Simcoe Muskoka funds 211 Central East Ontario, a 24/7 service that helps connect individuals with the services and organizations they need, even during a pandemic. Encourage friends or family to call 211 by dialing 2-1-1 on their phone or visiting 211ontario.ca if you think they need some help.

Finally, your support is always welcomed and appreciated by organizations like United Way Simcoe Muskoka. Since the pandemic began, UWSM has increased funding to our Urgent Needs Fund to help address the increased needs of those who have become isolated, and we have provided funding for increased mental health services that can be accessed across our communities virtually or by phone.

If you are able to give a gift and help our most vulnerable residents, like those experiencing social isolation, you can donate online at uwsimcoemuskoka.ca.

Doug:

From everyone at United Way Simcoe Muskoka, we would like to thank you for joining us in our first-ever UWSM Broadcast. Social isolation is difficult, yet important issue that too many of our friends, family and neighbours face every day. By listening to this Broadcast, you have taken that great first step.

I'd also like to give a big thank you to the local experts who helped us get a better understanding of social isolation:

- Jenn Pfrimmer from Muskoka Seniors
- Gerry Croteau from The Gillbert Centre
- Meghan Young from Barrie Area Native Advisory Circle
- Susan Dawes from Independent Living Services of Simcoe County and Area

We hope you have come away from this Broadcast with a new understanding of social isolation and some ways to help if you know someone who is isolated. My name is Doug Landsborough and it has been my privilege to be your host for this event. If you have any questions, you can email me at dlandsborough@uwsimcoemuskoka.ca and I encourage you to connect with us on social, @UWSimcoeMuskoka. Let us know what you thought of the Broadcast and what you learned.

If you listened to this Broadcast before July 27th, we would love to get your feedback through a survey you should receive this week. This feedback is so important in helping us with future events like this one.

Thank you once again for listening and for supporting United Way Simcoe Muskoka and all those experiencing social isolation.

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