

Issues of social isolation and how pharmacists can help

Hena Arif

Currently, the government of Canada has issued a social isolation policy. The spreading coronavirus disease, known as COVID-19, has caused them to take such measures. COVID-19 is spreading very rapidly and spreads through the air and person to person contact. One may not know where the virus may be present, but one can socially isolate themselves and follow other healthcare guidelines of the WHO to help reduce the risk of infection. This action is incredibly important especially since one does not know who has been infected due to the prolonged incubation stage of the virus. People should be willing to follow these guidelines to take care of their own health, but many do not. Many seem to ignore these guidelines and are non-adherent to the policies being put in place. This can be due to a variety of reasons. Some reasons that can cause this non-adherence could be the feeling of loneliness at home during isolation and the mistrust in government and other people. One group of people that can help combat these issues are frontline pharmacists. Pharmacists can play a key role in identifying these issues and working around them which can lead to increased adherence.

One issue with social isolation is the fear or experience of loneliness. Some research has shown that the risk to human health presented by social isolation is similar to that of obesity, physical inactivity, lack of healthcare access, and smoking.¹ This means that social isolation could present a big risk to human health. Some research showed that loneliness could increase chances of earlier death by 26% and social isolation can increase it by 29%.² In short, humans are a very social species and socialization is actually a key component to their overall health.

With social isolation, their overall health may be compromised. People may start encountering mental and social issues while staying locked at home all the time. This is especially seen in the elderly population who may already have comorbidities.² They may feel lonelier at times like this. These are some reasons why people do not like being isolated. They may feel as if general mental and social well-being is more important than the risk of getting the virus. They may also feel that if they do contract the virus, they can still get better, but this social isolation will do irreparable damage to their mental health. This leads to non-adherence to the healthcare guidelines regarding COVID-19. Pharmacists can help identify these issues with loneliness and damage to mental health. They are one of the most accessible healthcare professionals. When people come to the pharmacy, the pharmacist can evaluate the mental status of their patient to identify any negative effects of social isolation. During prescription renewals and other interactions, they can make their patients feel important and they can talk to them and alleviate their loneliness. Another method could be including a questionnaire with prescription renewals to identify lonely patients, especially the elderly.³ This has shown to be effective in identification of those suffering from loneliness.³ Pharmacists can advise them to connect with their loved ones via phone calls and video chat. There are many ways to alleviate the burden of social isolation and pharmacists can help guide their patients to these strategies and ease their burden and mental stress.

Another issue with social isolation is the distrust in government and other people. People will generally be resistant to following guidelines if they do not trust the government. For instance, the Trump Administration released a model for COVID-19 which was met with a lot of scrutiny.⁴ It is an epidemiological model which is not meant to be the exact truth, but rather a

possibility.⁴ People get upset when these models are not correct and this weakens their trust on the government and the people who make the models. Additionally, a 2014 survey showed that 74% of Norwegians believe that most people can be trusted while in Italy, the figure was 29%.⁵ The survey further showed that 60% of Norwegians trust their political institutions while only 21% of Italians trust their institutions.⁵ Norway was seen to be able to more effectively contain the virus with fewer than 25 fatalities as of March 24th, 2020 and Italy remains to be one of the top hit countries with the pandemic.⁵ A survey also showed that less than around 20% of Americans trust their government.⁵ The United States is also a top hit country, struggling to contain the virus. A lot of the guidelines to combat the pandemic rely on mutual trust of one another and the government.⁵ These guidelines such as social isolation, not meeting relatives, and staying at home cannot be adequately reinforced and require mutual trust between people and the government.⁵ Even trust of one another in the community is important so that people can be ensured citizens are doing their part in containing the virus and a collective effort is more likely to be successful than someone following the guidelines alone.⁵ Pharmacists can help build trust within the community. With their continuous interactions with patients, they can build a rapport with them which can eventually build into trust.⁶ They can guide them the right way and if they emphasize social isolation, patients may take it more seriously. The key thing is to show that they truly care and want what is best for the patient.

Social isolation is very complicated. It requires trust and control over the feeling of loneliness. This is not very easy to do and that is why many people do not adhere to the guidelines. Pharmacists can help in managing these issues. It mainly takes true care and dedication as well as an attentive eye to the patient. They can help patients overcome their

loneliness issues and give them a reason to trust the severity of the situation and urgency of social isolation. Social isolation may have complicated issues, but with the help of pharmacists, adherence to social isolation can be increased.

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