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HOST: It's probably not surprising that so many of our speakers over this past year have focused on the loneliness of lockdown.

Part of the reason it's important to keep having this conversation is to fight the stigma against talking about loneliness and mental health issues. The physical and mental effects of loneliness are as serious as any other health issue.

Health reporter Wency Leung immersed herself in this problem in order to cover it. Here she is at The Walrus Talks Mental Health:

WENCY LEUNG: Hi, my name is Wency Leung, I'm a health reporter with *the Globe and Mail*. Remember what loneliness felt like before the pandemic? For me, it was the occasional pangs of longing for company. Whenever I went travelling alone for work. Now it's the craving for even a superficial chat with a stranger. When I'm stuck alone in my home office, if many Canadians were lonely before the pandemic even more have now joined those ranks, the thing is loneliness isn't benign. It hurts our physical health. It hurts our mental health. It can even kill us or take years off our lives. A few years back, I noticed a cluster of studies crossing my desk that showed loneliness increases people's risk of a range of illnesses from cardiovascular disease and cancer to depression and dementia. One study in particular, an offsite at 2015, met in analysis from researchers at Brigham Young university showed loneliness and social isolation are as deadly as very well-established health risk factors, such as obesity, smoking and lack of physical activity.

So why is loneliness so toxic? I started seeking out experts in this relatively new field of loneliness research to find answers. As it turns out, the pandemic has highlighted some of the potential mechanisms. First of all, interacting with others is intrinsically rewarding. Take that away, and it's no surprise it can negatively affect your mood. Social interaction is also perhaps one of the most cognitively stimulating things we can do. Without the mental exercise of keeping track of who's who, and who's doing what. I'm hearing from doctors and nurses that people who already have dementia are experiencing more rapid cognitive decline. Second, other people give us important social cues. They help provide us with motivation and they take care of us when we're sick. Without them hospital ERs are now seeing a rise in patients, particularly older adults who are forgetting or neglecting to take their medications, becoming a macerated due to lack of appetite and putting off seeking care for symptoms like heart attack or stroke.

By the time they do show up at hospital, their prognosis is much worse. In lockdown, you found yourself putting off showering, eating whatever's at hand, instead of making yourself proper meals or just struggling to motivate yourself to get out of bed. You may have a sense of what I'm talking about. If there's no one around to care, whether you do these things or not, it can be easy to neglect self-care, but there are hypotheses that the harms of loneliness go even deeper and are tied to inflammation or our immune systems response to injury and pathogens. Inflammation is beneficial when it's helping our bodies heal or fight off illness. But when it's chronic inflammation can actually damage our health, chronic inflammation has been linked to a host of illnesses, including depression. The other piece of the puzzle might be the stress itself of being lonely.

Chronic stress is tied to elevated levels of the stress hormone cortisol, which affects regions of the brain involved in emotion as well as cognitive function. So stress may also affect your, our sleep and lack of quality sleep can also be detrimental to our mood and our ability to focus and concentrate. The good

news is there are ways we might be able to cure a loneliness or at least mitigate its ill effects because there's this idea that inflammation plays a key role. Researchers are looking into whether anti-inflammatory medications can reduce some of the harms of loneliness. If this bears fruit, we may see a day when doctors prescribe Advil as part of their treatment of a lonely people. Another idea is to engage in pro-social activities. So simply going out and meeting other people. Isn't very effective at any rate. We can't gather right now anyway, but if you just throw a lonely person into a party, there's a real risk.

They could feel even more alienated and lonely if they don't make any meaningful connections. But say, if you do some volunteering or participate in a group hobby, which can be done virtually, then you engage with other people for a common purpose without the pressure of making friends. There also appears to be benefits to simply opening up about your loneliness. The more we stigmatize it, and the more we learn there are others out there feeling lonely too, that can make you feel well less alone. Finally, if there's one thing you can do today is to pick up the phone call a parent, call your socially isolated aunt or uncle or cousin or friend. Ultimately the solution to loneliness is letting others know you care about them and knowing they care about you back. Thank you.

HOST: Wency Leung spoke at The Walrus Talks at Home: Mental Health in March and she's just one of the over 800 fantastic Canadians who have wheeled, walked and webcammed onto a stage at The Walrus Talks.

We're coming up to the end of season two of The Conversation Piece! Do us a favour and give us a starred review on Apple iTunes, Spotify or wherever you download this podcast from so we can start off Season 3 with a bang!