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CREATE A NEW CHRISTMAS TRADITION - EXTEND A HAND OF FRIENDSHIP

AMA President, Dr Tony Bartone, is urging all Australians to create a new Christmas tradition this year by reaching out and extending a hand of friendship.

“The festive season is a time when friends and family join together to celebrate and connect, but for some people, Christmas can be the hardest and loneliest time of the year,” Dr Bartone said.

“One-quarter of Australians say they’re lonely. For those experiencing social isolation, mental illness or missing family members or loved ones, the festive season can significantly intensify that loneliness.

“This year, start a new family tradition by extending a hand of friendship to those in your community who might be lonely, elderly, or vulnerable, and would benefit from a friendly greeting.

“When someone is suffering from loneliness, no matter how young or old, it's important to let them know that they are not alone - as obvious as that may seem.

“One small act of kindness can mean so much. Even sending a spare Christmas card could potentially be the open invitation that someone needs at a time when they need it most.”

AMA tips for a healthy holiday season:

- Say hello, smile, and have a chat with your neighbours.
- Reconnect with old friends - pick up the phone, call around for a cuppa, or invite them over.
- Spare a chair – invite someone along to your own festive season plans.
- Send a card with a friendly note explaining who and where you are and letting them know you’ll be around if they need help.
- Street ‘get-togethers’ and even apartment ‘get-togethers’ are a good way to foster social connections.
- Not everyone celebrates Christmas, so be mindful of people with different religious and cultural affiliations.

For anyone experiencing loneliness or isolation, there are some actions that can help:

- If you are online, join forums and chat sites.
- Make sure you exercise or walk every day.
- Become a volunteer.
- If possible, consider having a pet. Pets are important companions and improve your mental and physical health.
- Join with others at a charity Christmas lunch.

Background:

- As part of the *Australian Loneliness Report 2018*, the Australian Psychological Society found one in four Australians feel lonely.

- One in two Australians feels lonely for at least one day in a week, while one in four (27.6 per cent) feel lonely for three or more days.
 - Lonely Australians are 15.2 per cent more likely to be depressed and 13.1 per cent more likely to be anxious about social interactions than those not lonely.
 - Lonely Australians have significantly worse health status (both physical and mental) than connected Australians.
 - Relationships Australia reported in 2018 that one in 10 (9.5 per cent, or around 1.8 million based on 2016 population) Australians aged 15 and over report lacking social support.
 - A 2016 Lifeline survey found that more than 80 per cent of Australians believe society is becoming a lonelier place.
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23 December 2019

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