

New program at local library sparks conversations in a time of social isolation

As Canadians collectively experience the challenges related to COVID-19, many are struggling with changes to their lifestyle, routine, and overall well-being.

To help offset stress, isolation, and loneliness caused by the pandemic, the New Tecumseth Public Library has shifted its programs online and started a new one called "COVID Conversations."

Organizer of the new program, Kimberly Burgess, said when the Library started back up its book clubs and other adult programs through Zoom, participants would often discuss how COVID-19 was affecting them at the beginning of each session.

"What I decided to do was start a program where that is just what we talk about, so, for an hour each week we just chat about how people are feeling," she said.

"We can talk about what they're experiencing, things that they're having difficulty coping with, and share tips with each other," Burgess added.

"I'm hoping people feel less isolated in their homes, that this is a chance for them to connect in a meaningful way."

Burgess said people often joke that humans are "social beings," but that's the reality.

"We're missing each other and as the closures are extended all over the place, people are struggling," she said. "I've had people cry in some of my programs because I might have been the first person that they spoke to in the last couple of days."

"People are missing people."

The first four COVID Conversations are based around topics that frequently came up during other programs, such as being home alone, home with kids, working from home, and having no work.

"Home alone is huge, there is a demographic that is struggling, not being able to see their grandkids, not being able to see their adult children," said Burgess.

That was the focus of the first COVID Conversation, which was held on May 8 and she said it was a great success.

While only four people participated, they were all fully engaged and shared how they're coping with a loss of physical connection to family, friends, daily structure, schedule, and routine, Burgess said.

They also shared tips on how to stay physically active, mentally healthy, and stay connected with friends as well as the outside world.

Burgess said this can be done by doing socially distant family visits, outdoor walks to get fresh air, setting manageable goals daily through a to-do list, joining an online fitness class, and scheduling regular video chats or phone calls with family and friends.

"Participants greatly appreciated and enjoyed the opportunity to connect and realize they are not alone in their challenges," Burgess noted.

Home with kids was the topic for May 15 and participants discussed how they're adapting as they help their children with school and take care of them 24/7.

Looking ahead to May 22, the COVID Conversations session will focus on working from home and some of the related challenges.

"Before when we all went to the office working at home was a treat," Burgess recalled. "If you could work from home periodically, everybody loved it but now being forced to work from home is completely different."

She told The Times many people who are working remotely are now having issues with productivity.

"For the library staff that are still working, we talk about how our hours are going up but we're achieving less and until you hear other people say that you think it's just you," Burgess says. "There's comfort in knowing that other people are dealing with the same things that you are and that it's not just you."

The fourth conversation is scheduled for May 29 and geared towards people who are unemployed because of COVID-19.

In April alone, almost two million Canadians lost their jobs.

"There's a lot of people who now have to deal with that and even with the financial benefits that the government is trying to get out to people, there's still fallout from simply no longer working," Burgess explained.

Going forward, Burgess said they're taking the program week to week because there's no clear date when the local library will reopen and what its capacity will be when that happens.

"Even if the library reopens at a certain point, libraries, community centres, restaurants, there will still be a demographic that is high risk, that isn't going to necessarily want to venture out into that right away," she noted.

Meanwhile, for the format of COVID Conversations, in addition to Zoom, people can join in by phone, if they're less comfortable using video conferencing technology.

However, the library will do what they can to assist people who aren't tech-savvy to get them setup.

To find out more details about COVID Conversations or register for a future session, email kimburgess@ntpl.ca and express your interest.

"We don't want anyone sitting at home by themselves, thinking there's nobody out there for them," Burgess stressed.

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