

Loneliness

Only the lonely
Know the way I feel tonight
Only the lonely
Know this feeling ain't right
– Roy Orbison

If you feel lonely, you're not alone.

Loneliness is a subjective sense of isolation – a feeling of not being able to connect with other people, a sense of being apart. As humans, we feel the need to be with other people. We need to relate to others, to get involved in their lives, to work with them, and to express our emotions around other people. Our social needs are nearly as powerful as our other basic needs, like our needs for food, water, and shelter.

When we are deprived of our social needs, we can become fearful. Our sense of being alone might become amplified. It is common for a person in social isolation to magnify the thoughts that accompany loneliness – and then withdraw even further from others. When we choose to withdraw, we may end up feeling trapped in our isolation.

Given the importance of social connection, it is surprising that twenty percent of people feel sufficiently isolated that loneliness plays a major role in their lives. Over the past several decades our culture has changed to the point where loneliness has emerged as a major social and psychological problem. We are a culture that places a premium on individualism. We emphasize the importance of being able to do things on our own. Many people pride themselves on their ability to survive and experience success without having to depend on other people. The down side of this social norm, however, is that many of us feel lonely. We do need other people.

Research findings confirm that as a society we are moving toward more loneliness. Respondents to a social science survey in 2004 were three times more likely to report that they had nobody with whom to discuss important issues than respondents in 1985. During the past twenty years the size of the average household has declined ten percent to 2.5 persons. In 1990, more than one in five households was headed by a single parent – and today that figure is one in three. In 2000 more than twenty-seven million in the U.S. lived entirely alone, and the estimate for 2010 is twenty-nine million.

The Effects of Loneliness

Physical pain alerts us to the need to take action to end the pain. Social pain in the form of loneliness tells us to end our isolation. Indeed, functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) of the brain indicates that the same region of the brain is activated when a person feels rejection as when they feel physical pain. Research has found that chronic feelings of loneliness accelerate the aging process. It has an effect on our stress hormones, immune function, and cardiovascular function, which, over time, are compounded.

Loneliness also has an effect on our thoughts and feelings. When we feel socially isolated, it is more difficult to concentrate and we are more easily distracted by unimportant events. Our self-esteem might plummet when we feel lonely. We tend to make small errors into catastrophes. We are more likely to have feelings of depression.

When we feel apart from other people, we find it more difficult to take corrective action when things go wrong – and we might find false comfort in addictive behavior. We might feel that everybody else is connected and happy – and here we are struggling to get by alone. Our thoughts may become distrustful, and we isolate ourselves even further from other people. We might think that we are destined to be alone, and then we may give up hope that things will ever get better. We may feel that if there were only a friend out there, life would be easier (and it would be).

Interestingly, research has found that people who feel lonely have as many social contacts as people who don't feel lonely. And almost everybody has a feeling of being lonely occasionally. Loneliness becomes an issue only when it settles in long enough to create a persistent loop of negative thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. Loneliness emerges from how we think.

“The most terrible poverty is loneliness, and the feeling of being unloved.”

– *Mother Teresa*

Breaking the Loneliness Cycle

We create a reality for ourselves that determines how others view us. Other people observe this reality and use it to define us. Then they act toward us on the basis of that assessment. So, if we see ourselves as lonely people who are trapped in a cycle of isolation, others will also see us that way and will treat us accordingly. We then get caught in a negative feedback loop where we become self-protective, we distrust that others will like us, and we move even further into isolation. It becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.

When we get caught in this loop, we lose control and self-regulation. Our thoughts might become distorted so that we can't take effective action in connecting with other people. Our level of activity declines, replaced by passivity and negativity. In our loneliness, we might not be able to read cues from other people appropriately, and then we make decisions that hamper our ability to break out of the isolation and make friends.

Obviously, the place to start when we want to break out of the loneliness cycle is to change how we view ourselves, despite our years of evidence that might convince us otherwise. And then we need to start taking action to bring people into our lives. It might sound hard, but it can change things for the better.

Steps to Take for Ending Loneliness

1. The first place to start is to **recognize and fully admit that you are trapped in the loneliness cycle.**

Look at your thoughts and feelings. Do you feel that you are apart from others? Do you take a cynical view about the intentions of other people? Do you distrust others? Do you feel that there is nobody you can turn to? Do you feel that nobody else shares your interests? Do you feel that other people are around you, but not with you? Do you feel that your relationships with other people are not meaningful?

Admitting that you are lonely is difficult. It goes against the way people like to see themselves. But making this admission allows you finally to tackle the problem and start to cultivate meaningful relationships with other people.

2. The next task is to **extend yourself out to other people.**

You might feel that it is dangerous, or even threatening, to start meeting others. So, start small and don't have great expectations. You need to challenge the idea that meeting other people is unsafe. A few good experiences will go a long way toward breaking the loneliness cycle. Just don't expect that you'll meet a "best friend forever" as you start the process. Getting a smile from someone else is good enough at this point. Get enough of these smiles and you'll begin to feel that meeting others is not so unsafe.

You can begin your experiment by engaging in simple exchanges in a store, the library, or at work. Just saying to someone, "Isn't it a nice day?" or "I really enjoyed reading that book" is a good way to start, and it can bring a response that makes you feel better. If you get no response at all, don't worry about it. Maybe the other person is just having a bad day or didn't hear you. Make an effort to engage in these simple social exchanges a few times a day.

It might help to involve yourself in charitable activities. Volunteer at a hospice or a shelter. Pass out food to the homeless. Visit people in nursing homes. Teach the elderly how to use a computer. Coach a kids' sports team. These activities might not bring you complete social fulfillment, but they allow you to engage in small talk that pays off – and that's the goal at this stage.

3. **Develop an action plan to challenge the loneliness cycle.**

You are now at a stage where you can begin to challenge the thoughts that have guided you in the past. As you engage in more activities and feel comfortable in being around other people, your old automatic thoughts about being alone will still come into play – and you need to be aware of them so that you can replace them with thoughts that lead you to feel positive about socializing.

Keep a journal of your thoughts. Make four columns on a page. The first column should identify the situation you are in (e.g., "Volunteering at the theater"). The second column can identify the feeling you are having at the time (for example, "Feeling apart from the others"). The third column should be the thoughts you are having at that time (like, "Nobody here really likes me"). And the fourth column should be a positive thought that challenges the thought in the third column (as in, "Actually Cynthia and Richard seem to really like me"). Over time you'll be more aware of your negative thoughts that lead to loneliness and then replace these thoughts with more optimistic thoughts – and it is these positive thoughts that make it easier to get involved in more social situations in the future.

4. **Take a selective approach toward other people.**

Feeling an intimate connection with other people will break the loneliness cycle. Over time, as you get to know more people, the question of quantity versus quality comes into play. You want good friends who open themselves up to you, disclose bits of their life to you, and instill a sense of trust that they value you and will be there for you.

Choosing high status friends or people who are physically attractive might not bring you what you really want. Compatibility depends on finding people who share your beliefs and are at a similar life stage.

Breaking the loneliness cycle is both difficult and gratifying. Most people find it helpful to do this work with a trained therapist who can serve as a source of insight and support. The process can start with a phone call.

Is Loneliness a Problem for You?

Answer the following questions. If you have more “yes” than “no” answers, you might find it helpful to start the process of alleviating your loneliness.

Do You Feel ...

1. That you are not in tune with the people around you?
2. That you lack companionship?
3. There is no one you can turn to?
4. Alone?
5. That you are not part of a group of friends?
6. That you are not outgoing and friendly?
7. That you are no longer close to anyone?
8. That you are often left out?
9. That your relationships with the people around you are not meaningful?
10. Isolated from others?
11. Shy?
12. That there is nobody to talk to about important issues?
13. That other people are around you, but not “with” you?
14. That you can’t share your interests with other people?

This quiz is derived from the UCLA Loneliness Scale developed by Daniel W. Russell (1996).