

Coping with Loneliness

Almost everyone feels lonely at times. Whether you're single or married, you may miss someone who has died or moved away. Or, you may wish you knew someone whom you could talk with or do things with on a regular basis.

Feelings like these are very common in a mobile world where people often live far from where they grew up. Whether you are lonely a lot of the time or just once in a while, you can do many things to feel less isolated and more connected to other people.

The difference between loneliness and being alone

Loneliness isn't the same as being alone. Everyone needs time alone to think and enjoy quiet activities such as reading, listening to music, or going for a walk. Quiet pursuits can be happy and rewarding. But loneliness is different from voluntary solitude. It's the feeling of emptiness or isolation you have when you want to be with others but can't or have too many thoughts and feelings you can't share with others.

Common types of loneliness

Loneliness can be very mild, resembling a dull ache in the heart you feel only at certain times, such as during celebrations or on weekends. Or, it can be so severe it causes intense emotional pain and physical symptoms such as crying.

You may be experiencing loneliness if you frequently:

- wish you didn't have to spend so much time alone
- get together with people you don't like just so you'll have company
- feel that you have nobody to talk to about certain things that are important to you
- worry about who would help you in an emergency
- feel that nobody really understands or cares about you
- have trouble making or keeping friends who share your interests and values
- feel isolated from people or excluded from joining in activities

- wait for people to call, write, or extend invitations, instead of taking the initiative to contact them
- stay at work longer than you need to because you don't know people outside the workplace or don't want to return to an empty home
- spend holidays or other special days alone, especially if you'd prefer to share these with others

Loneliness is often hard to recognise because it may be masked by other emotions, a busy schedule, or other factors. For example, many people feel "depressed" when a romance or close friendship ends. But they may not be suffering from clinical depression as experts define it. Instead, they may be lonely and may find it easier to overcome the feeling once they have acknowledged it.

Social media can also mask loneliness. You may have hundreds of friends or connections on Facebook, Twitter or Instagram. But if you rarely or never see them offline or can't talk openly with them when you do, you may still feel lonely.

If you feel lonely at times, try to identify the situations that make you feel this way. You might keep a log or journal for a week or two and note the times when you feel lonely and when you feel strongly connected to others. This may give you ideas on how you could reduce the times when you feel isolated and increase those times when you feel connected.

Ways to cope with loneliness

The best way to deal with loneliness may depend on its cause.

Situational loneliness. This results from missing a specific person or group and may last only a short time and go away on its own.

Frequent or long-term loneliness requires a more active approach. This type of loneliness increases your risk of many mental and physical conditions, from depression to heart disease, and can shorten your life. You'll enjoy life more if you don't always feel lonely. Loneliness isn't permanent—you can do something about it.

Here are some tips on how to reduce or avoid feelings of loneliness:

Know that it's OK to feel lonely at times. Remember that loneliness doesn't mean there's something wrong with you—it's part of being human. Telling yourself negative messages about loneliness will make it worse. Instead, try to look at feelings of loneliness as a wake-up call that can help encourage you to make positive changes in your life.

Find healthy outlets. Consider writing about your feelings in a diary, poem, song, or an unsent letter. This will give you an outlet for your feelings and may help you see things you could do to ease your loneliness.

Learn to enjoy your time alone. Think about the kinds of things you might like to do alone, such as reading a good book, listening to music you love, or taking up a new hobby. You can start with short periods alone that increase as you begin to feel more comfortable and enjoy your activities.

Reach out to others. Are you lonely because you wait for others to call, text, email, or extend invitations? You may have to learn how to reach out to others. Be willing to take even a small step to make new acquaintances or strengthen ties to old friends.

Set realistic goals. If you have few close friends, don't try to become the most popular person at work or on in your street. Set goals you can achieve, such as inviting a colleague out for coffee or calling a friend or relative you know will enjoy hearing from you every Sunday.

Get involved in community activities. Try to find at least one shared activity you can enjoy every week, so that you'll always be able to look forward to spending enjoyable time with others. You could join a class, or a house of worship, or get involved with a team, club, or volunteer activity.

Aim to have more than one close friend. Many people are lonely because they expect too much of a partner or one or two close friends who may not always share their interests or be able to meet their needs. A good way to avoid this situation is to develop a diverse group of friends from different areas of your life, such as school, work, and other activities.

Make time for in-person conversations. Sending texts or email and making quick check-in calls can be a great way to keep in touch with old friends or reach out to new ones. But everybody needs face-to-face conversations to feel

strongly connected to others. Make time for these, too.

Be willing to overlook small flaws or differences. Loneliness can result from expecting perfection. Accept other people's small flaws or differences as readily as you would like them to accept yours. Every friend doesn't have to share all your views or be your "soul mate."

Avoid relying too heavily on social media. Facebook and other sites can help you keep in touch with friends and former colleagues or classmates. But spending too much time online can lead to isolation. Limit your time on social media so it doesn't become the sole focus of your social life. And always take safety precautions. Never give out personal details that could compromise your identity, and if you want to get together with someone you've met online, meet in a public place and let someone know where you're going.

Remember that you can be lonely even if you are in a relationship or have a lot of friends. Loneliness has more to do with your feelings than with how long you've been married or how many friends you have. You can be lonely in a marriage if you can't talk to your partner about the things that are important to you. And you can have an active social life and feel lonely if your relationships seem superficial to you or don't meet your needs.

Think about getting a pet. A pet can help to ease loneliness in several ways. In addition to providing companionship, a pet can make it easier to connect with people. For example, if you walk your dog at the same time each day, you may find it easier to get to know neighbours.

Be patient. Friendships don't happen overnight. It takes time to build caring and trust. Take advantage of opportunities to build new relationships, but don't be disappointed if they don't develop as quickly as you'd like.

Consider talking to a therapist or other counsellor if you can't seem to connect with the people you'd like. Loneliness may be a sign of a deeper problem that would benefit from the help of a professional who can suggest ways to build strong ties to others. Your assistance programme can help you find a therapist or counsellor in your community.

Overcoming loneliness can have many physical and emotional benefits. The best way to feel less lonely is to take a proactive approach to reaching out and

developing stronger connections to people you know or would like to know.

Reviewed by Julia Bottles, Global Editorial Director at LifeWorks.

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Alexandra Mezey

Life Coach

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Alexandra Mezey, LICSW, has a master's degree in social welfare, completed postgraduate training in family therapy and advisement for Employee Assistance Professional certification. She has worked as a therapist and life coach, and as an EAP counsellor, helping people with issues across the lifespan.