

FEAT FACTSHEET

How to cope with loneliness

Loneliness is one of our greatest dreads. Most of us have felt it. Most of us have feared it. Yet, it is a subject that is rarely talked about. This leaflet outlines the causes of loneliness and what you can do to overcome it.

What exactly is loneliness?

To feel lonely is to be overwhelmed by an unbearable feeling of separateness, at a very deep level. To some degree, it is a totally normal emotion, a part of growing up. At birth, we all start the process of separation, the growth towards becoming individuals. Also, from our earliest months, as awareness of our separateness dawns upon us, the parallel need to seek relationships begins.

It's a balancing act, a see-sawing between the search for intimacy and an acceptance of isolation that continues throughout life. However smoothly this passage from birth to mature adulthood goes, there are bound to be times in our lives when this process of growing up, of becoming separate selves, feels difficult; times when we feel anxious, abandoned, unloved, insecure. In other words, when we feel lonely.

Modern lifestyles

Recent changes in employment practice, a rising divorce rate, and the fact that people can more easily move away, have caused many to suffer the ache of loneliness. A considerable number of people in all age groups now live alone.

For details contact Fife Employment Access Trust, Journey to work programme:
Telephone **01592 749880** or visit **www.journeytowork.co.uk**

Feeling unwelcome

Negative attitudes towards single mothers, and to those who are long-term unemployed or who have mental health problems, can increase a person's sense of isolation. He or she may come to feel that the loneliness, which has been caused by their circumstances, is somehow all their own fault. Also, we live in a society in which there are massive inequalities, and in which many people feel excluded. People who don't feel they have a voice are bound to feel powerless, disregarded and lonely.

The old cliché that it is possible to feel lonely in a crowd is also painfully true. Someone who is constantly surrounded by people may still feel desperately lonely. Many people seeking help for overwhelming feelings of loneliness have an active social life, a busy job, a stable relationship or marriage, and a family.

The importance of solitude

Being alone is not the same as being lonely. There are plenty of loners who happily choose solitude as a way of life. Solitude has been helpful to a number of well-known writers, philosophers and composers. Some people need to be alone to allow creativity to blossom.

What are the most common causes?

Loneliness is not one single, simple thing. There are both different degrees and causes. It's possible to talk about three different kinds of loneliness: circumstantial, developmental and internal.

You may have chosen to change your circumstances. Moving to a new area or starting a family, for example, can be exciting and positive. Yet, people often find that to begin all over again in a new environment can be very painful. Divorce, bereavement, retirement and unemployment are common causes of loneliness. If the partner or the job that boosted your self-esteem and made life meaningful suddenly disappears, everything can feel hopeless and futile.

Single parents

The house-bound mother with her first baby can feel acutely isolated, but single parents are particularly vulnerable. Many people say that when a relationship ends, they seem to lose friends as well as their partner, while the stress of bringing up children single-handedly can make it difficult for a social life.

The elderly

It's a similar picture for older people. Retirement, the death of a spouse or close friends and a move to a new home may come all at once, and feel overwhelmingly bleak. In retirement, many older people have no close family to turn to for companionship and may be wary of going out alone.

Lone carers

The people who care for elderly or disabled family members may also become very lonely. Exhaustion easily sets in, and social life and friends can gradually fade away, as carers may not have much time for themselves.

Mental distress

Being labeled as mentally ill can be distressing and potentially very isolating, not least because public opinion can be so hostile towards anyone with mental health difficulties. Someone with a diagnosis of schizophrenia, for example, will have to cope with very distressing symptoms, but will also be up against a widespread misconception that people with this diagnosis are violent.

The very nature of some mental health problems reinforces this isolation. Someone with agoraphobia may be stuck at home and cut off from the normal social outlets. Feelings of panic at the thought of being sociable and meeting new people are much more common than people think. A survey of mental health problems in the USA found that social phobia was the third most common problem, after depression and alcohol dependence. People who are anxious, depressed, or trapped in addictive behaviour, may have low self-esteem and feel guilty and worthless. This can lead them to shun company and cut themselves off from their families and friends.

Physical disability

People with a physical disability are similarly disadvantaged and stigmatised. Mobility is often a problem and many disabled people find themselves excluded from access to a large number of social activities. People who are HIV positive or who have AIDS are also likely to encounter prejudice.

Discrimination

Being treated as 'different' by others often makes people feel even lonelier. Being discriminated against, or subjected to racist attacks, causes black and minority ethnic people to feel alienated and isolated.

A person's sexual identity can also cause loneliness. 'Coming out' as gay is still very stressful, as is reflected in the increased suicide rate among gays and lesbians. Some adult survivors of sexual abuse may find any kind of intimacy with others impossible.

Why does it seem worse at certain times of life?

At various stages in life, we reach milestones like adolescence, young adulthood, the 'thirty-something' stage, mid-life crisis, menopause and old age, that we have to pass through, which often accentuate these needs and make us feel vulnerable to feelings of insecurity and loneliness. It's important to remember that these are phases that will pass, and although change can feel painful, it can also bring with it new awareness and possibilities.

How can I overcome it? It's possible to overcome loneliness, if you are really determined to do so. To help yourself, you will need to give a lot of time and energy to thinking about the reasons for your feelings and what positive steps you can take.

Learning to be alone: If you are someone who panics when left alone, and seeks others out in order to avoid inner loneliness, it might be worth spending some time learning how to feel relaxed in your own company. Spending time alone may involve facing the difficult feelings that relentless socialising keeps at bay. It may also enable you to focus on the kind of person you really are, and what you really want.

Techniques like yoga, meditation, and even just keeping a journal, can help you to relax and replace frantic activity with a calmer sense of yourself. Concentrate on something that really interests you, which you can enjoy as an end in itself. Focus on the pleasure it gives you and the fact that time spent alone can be rewarding.

Learning to be with others: If you spend a lot of time alone, because you feel uncomfortable in a social situation, the following suggestions may be useful. If your difficulties in relating to other people are to do with setting boundaries in relationships, saying 'no' and expressing your feelings, you may find assertiveness training helpful. Social skills training may also be appropriate.

If you are really out of practice at meeting people, it's important to take small steps, first, and not launch head-first into an intense involvement with one person. Make the most of every opportunity for social contact, however slight. Talk to shopkeepers, don't snub a fellow passenger who tries to start a conversation with you.

For information on local groups, cultural societies, sports organisations, evening classes, voluntary groups and political parties, ask at your local library. Local newspapers may also have listings of social clubs, public talks and what's on guides. Many organisations, clubs and societies also have websites now, so an internet search may prove useful. Joining a class, local interest group or volunteering may make it easier to relate to others through the medium of a shared interest.

Talking to a counsellor allows people to safely explore and understand their problems, and to find the courage and strength to face and change a situation they felt defeated by. They may acquire a sense of self-acceptance, and find relating to others enjoyable.

Last updated: 14 July 2009

For details contact Fife Employment Access Trust, Journey to work programme:
Telephone **01592 749880** or visit **www.journeytowork.co.uk**



charity number SC022263