Coping with Loneliness

Other than being emotionally painful, loneliness can affect people in many ways:

- **Physical Pain:** Research shows that the areas of the brain that deal with social exclusion are the same areas that process physical pain, adding a scientific explanation to the oft-romanticized experience of a "broken heart."

- **Depression:** One study found that lonely people showed more depressive symptoms, and that lonely and depressed people alike tended to experience less "togetherness" in social interactions. Research has also found that depression and loneliness can feed off of each other, each perpetuating the other.

- **Physical Health:** Several studies have linked emotional stress with depressed immunity. Other research links loneliness and depression with poorer health and wellbeing. That means that people who are experiencing loneliness are susceptible to a variety of health issues.

Loneliness is to some extent a normal part of being human. It may be necessary at times for reflecting on life or for assisting in emotional healing for example in resolving grief. Some spiritual leaders have experienced severe loneliness as part of their emotional and spiritual growth.

Loneliness, when prolonged, can leave a person feeling extremely sad with a belief that they have little to live for except a life without meaning or purpose. Loneliness usually occurs to people because of unfortunate circumstances such as the death of a loved one, loss of job or rejection in a relationship. We feel the contrast between how things are now and how they used to be.

People can live with others or be married, and yet in their mind feel totally isolated. They may have nothing in common with the person they live with, or they may be caring for an elderly partner who is sick and who is unable to speak or respond.

You can be overwhelmed with a feeling of loneliness in a busy street, in your work place with colleagues or at a family function. You can feel contented and at peace on a quiet beach or mountain far from any other human being. Loneliness is therefore a state of mind rather than a measure of the number of people with whom you interact.

An individual may have more in common with some people than others and one can feel alienated or detached if there is a mismatch of attitudes, values or interests. Loneliness is the feeling of needing some companionship and support that you don't feel you are getting. It appears when our perception of the world does not match our belief about how it should be.

Another cause of loneliness is comparison with the apparently happy social lives of others. When we see other people appearing to enjoy their involvement with friends, family and lovers we desire those same pleasures and tend to ignore the positive aspects of our own lives which others may envy.

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Ways to deal with feelings of Loneliness

1. Develop a gratitude attitude. Make a list of people and things you are grateful for in your life. These can be everyday things like the ability to walk and take exercise or to be able to cook your own food or make independent decisions. It is important to recognise one’s strengths and resources such as friends, relatives, skills etc. Remembering these factors will help to counteract feelings of self-doubt and negativity about oneself.

2. Seek out ways to serve others. Volunteering your time for those less fortunate will give you a sense of usefulness and will help you realize that you really are one of the more fortunate people in the world. Service organizations often attract people who have the potential of becoming friends for the future.

3. When you find yourself longing for the past, tell your mind to stop. Saying "stop" aloud will help bring your attention back to the present to focus on the actual need before you at this present moment.

4. Write out the things you would like to have back and then score off those that realistically you cannot have back. Tearing up, burning or throwing away the paper you have written on can have a powerful symbolic effect.

5. Spend some time alone mindfully while you walk. This involves keeping your mind on the present as much as possible by bringing your attention back to one of your senses so you are always looking, feeling and smelling the sensations around you. Being comfortable alone will begin to lessen your compulsive need for companionship.

6. Make a list of the things you enjoy doing or consider useful and write out a plan of when you are going to do them. It is much harder to feel lonely when you are actively engaged with tasks that you enjoy or which you consider meaningful.

7. Consider getting a pet. Pets — especially dogs and cats — carry so many benefits, and preventing loneliness is one of them. It can connect you with other people — walking a dog opens you up to a community of other dog-walkers, and a cute dog on a leash tends to be a people magnet. Additionally, pets provide unconditional love, which can be a great salve for loneliness.

8. List those activities you used to enjoy or those which you have thought about taking up. Decide on one small first step towards taking up one of those activities. Taking the first step will lead to something else. Join groups for the activities and let the socializing be a bonus.

9. Take regular physical exercise, which activates the endorphins in your brain and increases feelings of well being.

10. Talk with God and tell Him how you really feel. Ask Him to help you overcome these feelings.

“Sing to God, sing praise to His name, extol Him who rides on the clouds - His name is the LORD - and rejoice before Him. A father to the fatherless, a defender of widows, is God in His holy dwelling. God sets the lonely in families, He leads forth the prisoners with singing.”

Psalm 68:4-6