

Are You Lonely?

By MARY ELLEN COPELAND, PH.D.

Many years ago, when I was a young adolescent, an adult in my life said that she dreamed about a great chasm, a chasm so deep that she couldn't see to the bottom of it, with sheer rock cliffs on either side. She was alone on one side of the chasm, looking to the other side. On that other side, people were talking to one another, laughing and appearing to have a good time. She felt totally excluded and felt that there was no way to get to the other side of the chasm.

This vision has stayed with me through my life. There have been many times when I felt like I was on one side of a chasm looking across to a place where everyone else was having a good time. For me it was a very clear description of loneliness.

My studies, and my years of work in the mental health field, have convinced me that loneliness is a key factor in all kinds of mental and emotional distress. In addition, I have found that the incidence of loneliness in this country, and perhaps in the world, is at pandemic proportions. The value of meaningful interpersonal connection in our society is often minimized.

The frenetic pace of modern society and the need to be very financially successful to "just get by" seems to have eclipsed the importance of having good people in our lives who affirm and support us. Many of us have little or no contact with family members or neighbors. Our work situations may increase our loneliness. Some people say they have forgotten how to connect with others, or perhaps they never learned. I feel so strongly about this topic that I wrote a book about it, *The Loneliness Workbook* (Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications, 2000). This column will help you to think about loneliness in your life and give you some ideas on how to relieve it.

What Is Loneliness?

There are many descriptions of loneliness. They often contain words that describe feelings like despair, emptiness, hopeless and longing. Which one of the following descriptions of loneliness feels right to you?

- A feeling of having no common bond with the people around you
- Feeling disconnected from others
- Feeling sad because there is no one else available to be with you
- Feeling uncomfortable being by yourself
- Feeling that there is no one in your life who really cares about you
- Being without friends or a companion
- Feeling like you don't have anyone who wants to be with you
- Feeling abandoned
- Being unable to connect with anyone on either a physical or emotional level
- Feeling left out
- Being alone and not comfortable being with yourself

You may want to write your own definition of what loneliness means to you.

What Would It Feel Like If You Were Not Lonely?

To begin changing any situation or circumstance in your life that is troubling to you, it helps to envision what your life would be like if you accomplished this change. For instance, a woman with a disability who felt lonely and disconnected from others said, "If I had several friends, we could call each other and chat. I could share with them how I 'really feel,' about the sadness of having a disability, about the excitement of developing a new career, and about my separation from my family. They could stop by and visit with me. Perhaps they could even take me out from time to time."

Not feeling lonely may mean that you have a sense of balance in your life between being with others and being alone, and that you feel loved and cared about. This connection is so strong that, even when you are by yourself, you feel bonded to someone, that others are there and will be there in spirit if not in person for you always. You have true friends and close family and the security of having someone there for you when you need them.

Relieving Loneliness

If you are lonely and want to relieve your loneliness, you may want to take some action to create this change. Read and consider each of the following ideas and start working on those that sound right to you. Perhaps you can think of other things you can do to relieve your loneliness.

- **Work on liking yourself.** If you don't like yourself, it is hard to feel that others will like you. This often makes it difficult to reach out to others. In addition, people who hold themselves in high regard are often more interesting and fun to be with. What can you do to raise your self-esteem?

One very simple thing is to work on changing the negative thoughts you have about yourself to positive ones. For instance, if you keep saying to yourself, "I don't like myself," try saying, "I like myself" instead. Say it over and over to yourself. Repeat it aloud whenever you can.

Another thing you can do to improve your self-esteem is to focus on taking very good care of yourself. Eat healthy food. Get plenty of rest. Do fun things that you enjoy. There are many books filled with good ideas on [how to raise your self-esteem](#).

- **Plan ahead.** If you feel lonely much of the time, it may be because you don't enjoy spending time alone. People who don't like to spend time alone are often so desperate to be with others that their neediness causes other people to turn away from them.

To resolve this situation, make plans in advance for time you know you will need to spend alone. Fill the time with pleasant and interesting activities. Look forward to this special time. As you feel more and more comfortable with being alone, you will notice that the time you spend with others will also be more enjoyable.

- **Join a support group.** Support groups are one of the best places to make good friends. It can be any kind of a support group — a group of people who have a certain disorder or disability, people who are working on similar issues, a men's or [women's](#) group, a group for single parents, etc. The list goes on and on. The hardest thing about joining a support group is going the first time. This is true for everyone. Just be determined and go. After you have

gone several times, you will feel much more comfortable. If you don't feel comfortable after you have attended several times, you may want to go to a different group.

- **Go to meetings, lectures, concerts, readings and other events and activities in your community.** Check the newspaper for listings of events that sound interesting to you. Then go. When you have seen the same person several times, you can begin to chat with them about your common interest. This is how friendships and closer relationships begin. As you get to know each other better, you may decide to visit on a friendly basis or get together. Where the relationship goes from there is up to both of you.
- **Volunteer.** Work for a worthy organization or cause that you feel strongly about. You will meet others who share your passion, and perhaps make some new friends in the process. Most communities have an organization you can contact for volunteer organizations. Or you can call the organization directly.
- **Reconnect with old friends.** Most people can think of friends they had in the past that they enjoyed, but with whom they have lost touch over the years. If you can think of one or several people like that, give them a call, drop them a note or send them an e-mail. If it seems that they are as interested as you are in reconnecting, make a plan to get together. Then, if you both enjoy your time together, make a plan for the next time you will get together before parting so you don't lose contact again. Do this every time you get together.
- **Strengthen your connections with family members.** Connections with family members are important to almost everyone. However, due to difficult family issues and lack of time and attention, these relationships may be distant or nonexistent. Renewing and strengthening these connections, if it feels right to you to do so, can enhance and enrich your life.

You may need to be the one to reach out. Invite family members with whom you would like a stronger connection to join you for a meal or a shared activity. Share the good things that are going on in your life. Ask them to tell you about the important and significant issues in their lives. Make a commitment to work together on a strong relationship with each other, one in which you will resolve differences amicably, without estrangement.

- **Make sure that the relationships you have with others are mutual — that you are there for them as much as they are there for you.** Relationships often diminish and disappear if one person is doing all the giving and one is doing all the receiving. I have a friend who has since moved, but who used to call me or come to visit me often. She talked constantly, sharing every detail of her life. I never got a chance to say anything. I felt terrible — disaffirmed and unsupported by her. Finally I told her how I was feeling. She apologized and thanked me for telling her. She said she knew that she does this and that sometimes she notices that people's "eyes glaze over" when she is talking, but it is hard for her to stop. We made a commitment that every time we talk, we would each get equal time to share. It worked. Our relationship survived. We are still in touch by mail, phone and an occasional visit.
- **Seek professional advice.** Do you think you are doing something that turns other people away from you, but you don't really know what it is? If so, you may want to see a counselor and ask her or him to help you discover why you have a hard time keeping friends. A counselor could also help you to resolve the issue.

Getting Close to Five

In all my work, I have come to believe that we each need at least five people in our lives that we feel very close to — family members, neighbors, colleagues, and friends — so that when we would like to be with someone, someone will be available. In each of these close relationships, you love and trust each other, you connect with and support each other in the good and hard times, and, most important, you spend time together doing fun things that both of you enjoy.

If you don't have five people like that in your life right now, make a plan for how you will make some new friends and connections, using ideas from this article and others that come to mind. You may want to make a list of these people, along with their addresses and phone numbers, so that you can be in touch with them when you notice that you are feeling lonely.

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