

A LINE ON LIFE

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Have You Ever Been Lonely? *

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To answer the question in the title, essentially everyone has been lonely at times. Everyone has some mild feelings of loneliness. However, national surveys indicate that as many as 25% of adults have recently felt severely lonely. What is loneliness? What causes it? How can we deal with it?

Loneliness occurs when anyone lacks either an emotional attachment to one special person or a network of friends and companions. You do not need to be physically isolated to be lonely. Just because you are *alone* does not necessarily mean you are lonely. In contrast, you can be very lonely in the middle of a crowd of acquaintances. Essentially, loneliness stems from a *lack of social relationships*.

Psychologist Robert Weiss identified two distinct types of loneliness. **Emotional isolation** results from the loss or absence of an intimate emotional attachment that provides a sense of comfort and security — like a dating partner or a spouse. The second — **social isolation** — results from the loss or absence of a network of social ties. Even with a partner to meet emotional needs, a socially lonely person feels cut off from friends and coworkers. These people can provide a feeling of companionship and sense of identity. To keep ourselves from feeling lonely, we need *both* types of relationships.

Folk wisdom suggests that the elderly are lonelier than younger adults and teenagers. However, most surveys show the opposite to be true. Loneliness is more common among teenagers and young adults, and appears to decrease in older age groups. Probably the main reason why young adults are so vulnerable is that they confront so many social changes. Moving away from home, going to college, starting a new job — all involve adjustments to new social situations. This can lead to loneliness. Young adults often leave behind the familiar worlds of high school, home town and family to venture out into new social worlds on their own. College students — especially those who go away to college — are the group most likely to suffer from loneliness.

A 1985 study investigated 400 students during their first year of college. They filled out detailed questionnaires during the summer before college and the fall, winter and spring of their first school year. Most students reported that the transition to college was the most difficult move they had ever experienced. Old friendships and romances tended to wither. Those that continued were rated "*less satisfying*" in the spring than the previous summer. The same was true for pre-college friendships. Even so, most students quickly found a new group of casual acquaintances. Loneliness peaked in the fall, but as satisfaction with new social relationships increased, loneliness declined steadily during the freshman year.

For those who feel lonely, we can offer some advice. First, *loneliness is not a sign of weakness*. It is a basic need for intimacy and social connectedness that all people share. Similar to physical pain, loneliness is a useful warning that something is wrong. It tells us that we need to pay more attention to our social life.

Second, psychological studies indicate that — given some time and effort — *most people successfully overcome loneliness*. Moving to a new city, suffering the end of a love affair, or being house bound due to illness can all produce loneliness. Most people respond to the challenges and re-establish satisfying social lives. Patience and persistence pay off for most people most of the time.

**Loneliness can be situationally caused,
but some people are isolated,
because they lack social skills.**

Beyond situational factors, some people have **personal characteristics** that make them feel lonely. Some lonely people need to *improve their social skills*. At the University of Tulsa in 1985, a study observed how students act when they meet a new person. First, students were tested for their degree of loneliness. Next (supposedly as part of a completely different study), subjects were asked to spend five minutes "*getting acquainted*" with another college student. Unknown to the students, they were matched in pairs. One person in each pair was high in loneliness, while the other was low. Their five-minute interactions were videotaped.

In the taped interactions, lonely students acted in a more self-focused and unresponsive way. Lonely students asked fewer questions of their partner, talked more about themselves (but disclosed less intimate information), and arbitrarily changed the topic more frequently. This behavior leads others to perceive lonely students as "*difficult to get to know*."

Especially during holidays — when many family members and friends come together to celebrate — those who are lonely are more likely to believe they are the only ones who are alone. However, loneliness is a relatively common problem. Loneliness can be changed, if lonely people learn the needed social skills. However — once these skills are learned — people need to accept the social risk in using the skills they have learned.

In developing a relationship, there is always a risk of rejection. Once a relationship has been established, rejection is less likely. However, if we don't take some risks, we can never develop relationships that help us feel wanted, needed and loved.

* Adapted from Zick Rubin & Elton McNeil's *Psychology: Being Human*, Harper & Row Publishers, 1987, pages 475-479.