

LINE ON LIFE

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Alone During the Holidays? *

David A. Gershaw, Ph.D.

Loneliness is a serious problem in the United States today. Especially during this holiday season – with its emphasis on family and friends being together to share happy times – this loneliness may be more profound. What is loneliness? Who tends to be lonely? What can be done to reduce loneliness?

First of all, just because you are alone does not necessarily mean that you are lonely. Some people prefer a life of solitude, finding that privacy energizes them and frees them from the "nuisance" of undesired interpersonal relationships. On the other hand, **loneliness** is a feeling of emptiness and longing, of anxiety tinged with sadness, of wanting an attachment but not having it.

Most of us have gone through temporary loneliness. Even though it is unpleasant, it is bearable as long as it seems likely to end soon. For most people, being temporarily lonely usually motivates them to overcome this loneliness – doing things such as calling friends or joining a new group or club. In contrast, **chronic** (long-lasting) **loneliness** is more likely to cause a state of *sad passivity*. This state will lead to activities that will not overcome the loneliness – crying, watching a lot of television, drinking or using drugs and/or overeating.

Literally millions of Americans are chronically lonely. The silent epidemic of loneliness does not strike only the elderly, the divorced, the widowed, the abandoned and the handicapped. Although these people are the prime target for this dreaded condition, many young adults also suffer from chronic loneliness. This is probably a major reason for the popularity of singles' bars and computer dating services. Lonely young adults use these activities in an attempt to find companionship.

Often adolescents are lonely people in our society. The rising rates of teen suicides and runaways seem to support this. Even in midlife, adults – whose careers call for geographic moves every several years – may suffer from a sense of loneliness and isolation.

Not everyone separated from those who care about them suffers from loneliness. The chronically lonely tend to have certain **personality characteristics** that seem to cause or maintain the feelings of loneliness. Lonely people seem to be more negative, self-absorbed, self-critical and less responsive to others. Even if involved with a number of other people, their **negativity** may lead them to be dissatisfied by dwelling on the deficiencies in their relationships. They pessimistically emphasize what is missing rather than what they have. (Like the analogy of the half-full glass of water, they see their lives as "half-empty" rather than "half-full.") Because of this, they have unrealistic expectations

about interpersonal relationships. If any intimate relationship is not perfect – and this is true of all relationships – they are more likely to "*blow up*" the imperfections and perceive the whole relationship as a "*failure*."

Being **self-critical** leads them to blame themselves for their loneliness. They see their own personalities and attractiveness in a negative light. This low self-esteem essentially dooms them to make only half-hearted efforts to overcome their isolation. To add to this, most lonely people – like those who are shy and self-conscious – **lack social skills**. Even if they were to gain these social skills, they still might have problems. Lonely people are so **self-absorbed** – concerned with their own problems – they would find it difficult to communicate with others.

Lonely people need to repeatedly try to make changes in their lives.

As a lonely person, what can you do? As with other disorders, loneliness is best dealt with in its early stages. There are many different strategies to overcome loneliness, but they all involve two common features. First, they are **action-oriented**. In other words, you need to do something constructive. Don't wait for someone to come along and rescue you from your unwanted solitude. Most lonely people are afraid to communicate with others, because they are afraid of failing. They try a few times, but quit trying if these initial efforts are not successful. You need to persist in your efforts, even in the face of early failures. (Just think what would happen if, as infants, we quit trying to walk because we fell down on our first attempts. As adults, we would still be crawling wherever we went!)

The second aspect of these strategies requires attention to **communication skills**. You need to know what to say and when to say it. Most of us get these communication skills through "*trial and error*" as we grow. However, some people are so afraid of making an "*error*," they don't even make a "*try*." Later – after others have developed their social skills – they still don't know how to form or maintain relationships.

One specific method that can help you to develop a social relationship is to concern yourself with making the *other* person comfortable. *All* people have some anxiety in developing new relationships. Rather than being concerned about *your* anxiety, concentrate on reducing the anxiety of the other person. If you like people who make you feel less anxious – more comfortable – others are likely to have similar feelings about you as you make them feel more comfortable.

The beginning of a New Year is seen as a time to make significant changes in our lives. Make a resolution to change and follow it up with effective action. If this seems too difficult to do alone, get some professional help. It will make the next year a happier one.

* Adapted from Masters, Johnson & Kolodny's *Human Sexuality*, Little, Brown & Company, 1985, pages 319-320.