

Loneliness

What is Loneliness?

Loneliness does not necessarily mean being alone. For example, you can feel lonely when you are in a class with three hundred other students, in the middle of a party, or at a sports event with hundreds of screaming spectators.

Loneliness is a painful awareness that you are not feeling connected to others and important needs are not being met, such as the need to develop a circle of friends or a special relationship. People need people. Mutual relationships are essential to health. If you are lonely, you feel the need for warmth, understanding, and long to share your feelings and thoughts with others.

Loneliness can mean:

- feeling that you are unacceptable, unloved by those around you, not worthwhile, even if others don't share these perceptions;
- feeling alienated from your surroundings: lack the attachments that you had in the past;
- feeling that there is no one with whom to share your personal concerns and experiences;
- feeling that you are alone and have no other choice. You find it difficult to make friends and go beyond mere acquaintance.

Why does Loneliness Occur?

Loneliness can develop at any time throughout our lives as children, teenager, adults, and senior citizens feel it, and it may occur sporadically or last for chronic periods of time. Lonely feelings can be attributed to being single or married or elderly, workplace tensions, holidays, life transitions (e.g. moving, college, developmental), or environmental changes. Loneliness can also be attributed to mental health concerns of depression or social anxiety/phobia.

Negative Effects of Loneliness

Lonely people often report feeling depressed, angry, afraid, and misunderstood. If you are lonely you may become highly critical of yourself, overly sensitive or self-pitying, or critical of others.

There is a tendency to engage in behaviors such as the following that perpetuate the problem:

- You perceive yourself in a negative way. You may become overly critical of your physical appearance.
- You blame yourself and others for your poor social relationships. You falsely assume that nobody likes you.
- You do not make any attempt to get involved in social activities. You expect everyone that you admire to like and include you in their activities and conversations. If they do not include you in their social activities you may become more withdrawn, angry, and isolated from other activities.
- You become self-conscious and worry unnecessarily about being evaluated by others, including your lecturers, classmates, and peers.
- You have difficulty in expressing your feelings and in engaging in assertive behavior. You are afraid to stand up for your rights and say "no" to unreasonable requests.
- You avoid taking social risks, meeting people, and new situations. You have difficulty introducing yourself, making telephone calls, and participating in group activities.
- You tend to expect others to reject you.
- You feel isolated, alone, and unhappy about your situation.
- You may tend to see things out of proportion or overreact to situations.

What to do About Loneliness

Loneliness can be overcome. But it depends on you. It is important to know that loneliness is a common experience. Loneliness does not have to be a permanent state of affairs. Instead it can best be viewed as a signal that important needs are not currently being met.

Begin by identifying which needs are not being met in your specific situation. You may need to learn to do things for yourself, without friends, and/or learn to feel better or more content about yourself in general. If you are lonely, do something about it:

Developing Friendships

There are a number of ways to begin meeting your needs for friendship. Consider the following:

- Seek out situations that enable you to get involved with other students. In doing things you normally do in the course of your daily schedule, look for ways to get more involved with people. For example, eat with others, sit with new people in class, find a study or exercise partner.
- Put yourself in new situations where you will meet people. Engage in activities in which you have genuine interest. In so doing you will be more likely to meet the kind of people with whom you have something in common.
- Learn to be assertive. If you are shy, learn to say hello, or start a short conversation with the student who sits next to you in class, on the bus, etc. Get involved in class discussions.
- Learn to enjoy life by developing your social skills. If you see someone that you like, don't just sit there and hope that the person will come to you. Make the first move. Use verbal or nonverbal cues to let the person know that you are interested in getting to know him/her. For example, make eye contact and smile. You can also go over, say "Hi" and introduce yourself.
- Get involved in organizations and activities on campus.
- Find out about organizations and activities on campus. Examples are clubs, churches, part-time jobs, and volunteer work. Ask for ideas from someone who has been around longer than you have.
- Do some volunteer work. Helping others will boost your self-esteem and make you feel good about yourself.
- Don't judge people on the basis of your past experiences. Give your lecturers, and fellow-students and others a chance, and try to get to know them. Remember! There are individual differences in people. Learn to admire and accept these differences.

Developing Yourself

- Think of yourself as a total person. Don't neglect other needs just because your companionship or friendship needs are not being met.
- When you are alone, use the time to enjoy yourself rather than just existing until you can be with others. Whenever possible, use what you have enjoyed in the past to help you decide how to enjoy your alone time now. For example, listen to music or watch a favorite television show.
- Make sure you follow habits of good nutrition, regular exercise, and adequate sleep. Don't let your studies, hobbies, and other interests slide.
- Use your alone time to get to know yourself. Think of it as an opportunity to develop independence and to learn to take care of your own emotional needs. You can grow in important ways during time alone.
- Avoid merely vegetating (sitting around doing nothing) - deal with your situation actively. Recognize that there are many creative and enjoyable ways to use your alone time.
- Keep things in your environment (such as books, puzzles or music) that you can use to enjoy in your alone time.
- Explore the possibility of doing things alone that you usually do with other people (like going to the movies).

In summary, don't define yourself as a lonely person. No matter how bad you feel, loneliness will lessen or disappear when you focus attention and energy on needs you can currently meet and when you learn to develop new ways to meet your other needs. Don't wait for your feelings to get you going--get going and good feelings will eventually catch up with you.

Remember the University is here for you. Contact the SCRS at (773) 702-9800; <http://counseling.uchicago.edu> for more information.

References:

<http://ub-counseling.buffalo.edu/>

<http://www.odos.uiuc.edu/CounselingCenter/loneline.htm>

Lake, T. Dr. (1980). Loneliness. Sheldon Press. London.

