



One is the Loneliest Number: Reflections on Feeling Alone

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Loneliness is a fundamental aspect of being human, deeply ingrained in the human experience. This article explores why human beings need social connections in order to thrive, and how loneliness differs from solitude. Like many emotions, loneliness is a state of mind that signals a need for change, an expression of the need to reconnect with others and also with ourselves. The paper offers evolutionary and psychodynamic-systemic explanations for loneliness and explores the different “colors” of loneliness, including transient versus chronic, as well as interpersonal, contextual and existential. The article further suggests that loneliness has become a present-day pandemic, a silent malaise hiding in plain sight. It discusses the contributing factors leading to feelings of loneliness, a major one being the societal shift from *Gemeinschaft* to *Gesellschaft*—the transformation from rural-based societies to more modern industrial ones. The article illustrates the negative impact loneliness has on people’s physical and mental health and concludes by exploring various societal and personal measures that can be taken to overcome loneliness.

Key words: Loneliness; Solitude; Evolutionary; Psychodynamic-systemic; Pandemic; *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*; Physical and Mental Health; Transient versus Chronic Loneliness; Interpersonal, Contextual, and Existential Loneliness; Action Steps.

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There is nothing outside of yourself. Look within. Everything you want is there.

—Rumi

The greatest thing in the world is to know how to belong to oneself.

—Michel de Montaigne

The strongest man in the world is he who stands most alone.

—Henrik Ibsen

Preamble

Nadine, a senior executive in the fashion industry, was troubled by her lack of social life. Even though she seemed to lead a very glamorous life with many acquaintances, the reality was quite different. She felt extremely lonely. When pressed, she confessed, “I don’t really feel like anybody understand who I am,” or “There are very few people I truly feel close to.” Often, Nadine wondered whether it was unavoidable to feel this way.

Nadine always had this sense of loneliness. She speculated that her difficult childhood might have contributed to her feeling this way. Her father’s abandonment of the family when she was just 11 years old deeply traumatized her mother, leaving Nadine to assume the role of caretaker not only for her younger brother but also for her depressed mother. At the time, she felt there was nobody she could truly rely on, making her feel

that her life didn't matter to others. Given Nadine's troubled upbringing, it was not surprising that she adopted a rather pessimistic outlook on life.

Nadine chose to work in the fashion industry in the hope that it would help her build relationships. However, the reality turned out to be quite different. Despite the seemingly glamorous nature of her work environment, her organization turned out to be cutthroat. It was a real challenge to survive in this environment, and Nadine had to project an extremely tough exterior. Despite it all, she managed to claw her way up the ranks. Sadly, it was not an environment to create meaningful friendships; instead, Nadine was compelled to build opportunistic alliances. As a result, her work environment only exacerbated her negative view of humanity.

Added to this, Nadine's romantic life left much to be desired. Any semblance of a love life she had was short-lived. Although she once got married, she promptly asked for a divorce due to what she described as incompatibility in character. Reflecting on her marriage later in life, Nadine believed it had been a miserable experience that had made her even more wary of people. Consequently, other romantic relationships were similarly transient in nature.

The way Nadine lived her life didn't allow her to build real friendships, leaving her feeling profoundly lonely. Often it seemed as if her loneliness compounded upon itself. Typically, after a hard day at work, Nadine had very little energy left to reach out to others. Her lack of self-esteem also made establishing relationships with others

increasingly difficult. But she wasn't prepared to mention to other people that she felt lonely, as she felt embarrassed or even ashamed about it. Nadine preferred to keep her feelings of loneliness private, and, in her darker moments, even imagined that they were tied to some kind of personal inadequacy or deficiency.

There were times, however, that Nadine thought it was much better to be alone, believing that it prevented anyone from hurting her. Yet, she also wondered whether she had developed an aversion to people. She recognized that her loneliness led to frequent anxiety, depressive thoughts, and, despite her denial, struggles with alcohol. Despite the trajectory of her life, Nadine seemed resigned to believe that loneliness was her destiny, convinced that nobody would ever love her.

The loneliness conundrum

The English poet John Donne famously wrote, "No man is an island", while the American playwright Tennessee Williams remarked that "We are all sentenced to solitary confinement inside our own skins, for life." Despite these seemingly contradictory perspectives, it is evident that human beings need social connections to thrive. As a result, throughout history, loneliness has been a phenomenon extensively explored by writers, poets, and philosophers. It has been defined as the distressing emotional state experienced when there is a discrepancy between the interpersonal relationships we want to have, and those that we experience. In essence, it concerns the gap between the level of connectedness we want and what we actually have. When experiencing loneliness, we imagine that our connections with others are inadequate or unfulfilling, leading to feeling

excluded, isolated from others, or lacking intimacy. This sense of isolation is further intensified by feelings of rejection or abandonment from others.

It is worth noting that we can have many connections and still be lonely. In that respect, loneliness is very much a subjective experience, varying from person to person. We might feel deeply alone in a crowd, with friends, or even in a marriage. Therefore, loneliness should not only be linked to the number of connections but also to their quality. Some people may feel lonely when they are by themselves, while others may be perfectly happy spending significant time on their own.

Solitude

Feelings of loneliness are quite distinct from feelings of solitude. As the German-American philosopher Paul Tillich acutely noted, “Loneliness expresses the pain of being alone and solitude expresses the glory of being alone.” There are people who like to be alone without feeling lonely at all. These individuals enjoy their own company while still maintaining positive social relationships they can turn to when they feel the need to connect. In other words, they engage in social interactions but balance them with periods of solitude.

For these people, the silence of solitude helps them remain connected with themselves. There are moments where it becomes necessary to take a break from others and indulge in some “me time”. Spending this time alone allows the mind to refresh. In fact, solitude could be a gateway to original thought and creativity.

A search for origins

The question remains: Why does loneliness have such an impact on people's lives? Why is it such an important theme?

The evolutionary point of view

It is clear that humans are wired for social connection. As social beings, the need to belong is as fundamental as the need for water, food, shelter, and safety. Homo sapiens evolved to thrive in social settings, as we are brought into this world extremely helpless. As infants, we are dependent on care for far longer than any of the other primates. Therefore, it is unsurprising that the human brain, having evolved to seek safety in numbers, registers loneliness as a major threat. In fact, our Paleolithic ancestors would have been at a great disadvantage if they had been isolated from a group. Consequently, in situations of isolation, parts of the human brain that monitors danger—including the amygdala, the core of the neural system that processes fearful and threatening stimuli—will go into overdrive, triggering the release of “fight or flight” stress hormones. This behavioral pattern indicates that humans rely on safe and secure social surroundings to survive and thrive. It is no wonder that when we register social isolation or loneliness, we feel threatened, prompting a strong desire to reconnect. Therefore, feelings of loneliness should be looked at as a helpful and adaptive response to being socially disconnected, providing our species with the motivation to rejoin social groups. This has always been a response pattern essential for survival.

The psychodynamic-systemic perspective

From a psychodynamic-systemic point of view, these reactions underscore the importance of developmental processes, in particular the role of basic attachment behavior. Here, we refer to the bio-social bond between caregiver and infant. Essentially, infants need to develop a relationship with at least one primary caregiver for “good enough” emotional and social development. In other words, all infants possess a biologically driven need for interpersonal intimacy, a need that stays with them from infancy throughout life. This bond can manifest in various forms, ranging from secure to anxious or avoidant. Hence, if the attachment process during early development turns out to be dysfunctional—if there hasn’t been a strong emotional bond between infant and caregiver—it will affect the creation of meaningful future relationships. In cases of dysfunctional attachment, the infant may undergo a traumatic experience, resulting in a traumatized attachment pattern, mindset, and behavior—all of which will contribute to future intimacy problems. In other words, if primary caretakers fail to establish a secure base or help infants internalize positive imagery of the significant people in their lives, it becomes more difficult for infants to establish close relationships. This dysfunctionality in the development of a secure attachment base can stem from parenting style, traditions, mental health issues (including personality disorders), and abusive family environments.

Children with insecure attachment patterns often behave in ways that makes them feel rejected by their peers, hindering the development of their social skills. These individuals tend to be less optimistic about the outcomes of social interactions (even hostile upon entering social encounters). This lays the groundwork for enduring feelings of loneliness.

Thus, at the core of all loneliness is a deep and powerful yearning for connection with a lost self. It is a longing for an attachment relationship that never materialized, resulting in discomfort with themselves and others. Consequently, the evolution of attachment relationships during critical early stages of development determines feelings of belonging, integration into social networks, and participation within a community.¹

The many colors of loneliness

Loneliness can be expressed in various ways. Some people react to loneliness by withdrawing, while others become irritable and angry. Typically, those experiencing loneliness tend to withdraw, avoiding social events and feeling apprehensive about engaging with others. They may feel overwhelmed in busy public places, at work events, or at parties. They may also find it hard to try new things. Nadine's experience is a good example; she found it difficult—and even shameful—to discuss her feelings with others. These individuals fear that they will not be understood and worry about burdening others with their concerns.

Transient versus chronic loneliness

Most of us will experience loneliness at certain points in our lives; it is part of being human. Moreover, feeling lonely, at times, isn't necessarily a bad thing. Indeed, it can even be considered a positive reaction—a healthy aversive emotion that motivates us to strengthen our social connections. It is a mental state signaling a need for change, a warning sign that our life has become unbalanced.

¹ John Bowlby (1983) *Attachment*. New York: Basic Books.

There can be many causes for this mental state, from overworking to feeling displaced after moving homes, or, most dramatically, experiencing the loss of a loved one. When confronted with these circumstances, loneliness can remind us that some form of action needs to be taken, highlighting our fundamental need for human connection. These feelings may motivate us to strengthen existing relationships or initiate connections with new people.

Therefore, in small doses, experiencing loneliness—similar to pangs of hunger or thirst—can serve as a healthy signal that we may be lacking something essential. When we find ourselves in this mental state, it forces us to reflect on our lives. Consequently, this transient feeling may help us redefine what’s really important in our lives. However, the situation changes when these feelings become chronic. Persistent loneliness can lead to negative mental and physical health issues.

For this reason, long-term, chronic loneliness can be quite harmful. This form of loneliness—as we saw with Nadine—doesn’t push people to take constructive action. While transient loneliness typically motivates people to improve relationships with others, chronic loneliness tends to have the opposite effect. Instead of action, it can lead to even greater inaction. It may also create a state of hypervigilance concerning other people’s motives, leading to a destructive cycle of negativity and distrust. This state of mind can contribute to excessive cynicism and suspicion of others, hindering the creation of positive interpersonal relationships. In this regard, chronic loneliness can become self-reinforcing. This kind of loneliness has been linked to an increased risk of depression, dementia, self-

harm, and suicide. Ultimately, those struggling with chronic loneliness don't have a good relationship with themselves.

Interpersonal loneliness

Apart from transient and chronic loneliness, there is also *interpersonal loneliness*, which is the type of loneliness most people have as a reference point, and also the way the media portray it. When people experience this form of loneliness, they feel socially isolated and cut off from significant others, lack intimate relationships, and imagine that they have no real friends or people they can trust. As previously mentioned, personality factors related to attachment patterns contribute to these feelings. In other words, interpersonal loneliness originates from within. It is deeply personal, rooted in a person's character and their inability to form meaningful connections with others.

Contextual loneliness

Another type is *contextual loneliness*—a kind of societal loneliness where people feel systemically excluded because of specific characteristics or backgrounds. Individuals experiencing contextual loneliness may lack a wider social network or a sense of community, feeling disconnected from mainstream culture. This form of loneliness is disproportionately felt by minority and underserved communities and is related to the loss or lack of a social identity. Prejudiced attitudes and discriminatory practices further contribute to this type of loneliness. However, it extends beyond race, class, and gender preference, affecting all who are systemically excluded by society. This

includes individuals who don't conform to mainstream beauty standards, people with disabilities, and even the elderly.

Existential loneliness

This form of loneliness, on the other hand, can be considered part of the human condition, connected to questions like “Does my life have any meaning? Is there a purpose to my life? How do I fit into the universe?” It underpins much spiritual and religious work. It differs significantly from feelings of lacking companionship or being systematically excluded. Existential loneliness has always been a central and inevitable aspect of every person's journey. We all come into the world alone, travel through life separately, and ultimately die alone. In essence, existential loneliness is part of our journey through life, rooted in the paradox between our conscious desire to find meaning in life and the isolation and nothingness of the universe. Naturally, fears related to mortality are intertwined with this type of loneliness, including the fear of disappearing from the earth, the fear of being forgotten, and the fear of dying.

A present-day pandemic

In contemporary society, there seem to be more forces driving us apart and fewer forces bringing us together. As Nadine's case illustrates, we can feel quite lonely even when surrounded by many people. Indeed, it is paradoxical that, despite being connected more than ever through our devices and social media, the experience of loneliness persists and even grows. Social media can bring people with mutual interests together while also amplifying disagreement and segregating people into

increasingly divisive echo chambers. Moreover, scrolling through carefully curated photos of other people often intensifies the feeling of missing out, further contributing to loneliness. Despite having many social media followers or online connections, many individuals don't necessarily feel connected to people who really know them or would help them in times of trouble. Instead, many of these online communities have turned into havens for loneliness.

As Nadine's story demonstrates, the lonelier we feel, the more it shapes our thought processes, making it increasingly difficult to overcome. While it is evident that being embedded in strong supportive networks is beneficial for our general wellbeing, our modern world is grappling with a pandemic of loneliness, a phenomenon exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic. Loneliness has turned into a modern-day malaise—a silent plague or invisible affliction.

Given its destructive nature, it is important to recognize the grave consequences the loneliness pandemic can inflict on mental health, physical health, and collective wellbeing. Leaders need to make greater efforts to acknowledge the loneliness and isolation many are experiencing. It warrants the same level of attention given to other critical public health issues such as smoking, drinking, drug abuse, and obesity.

Contributing factors

The crucial questions arise: Why does loneliness haunt us? Why are we in this situation? Various factors appear to play a role, with a major one being societal transformations. In

present-day society, change has become the order of the day, and many of these societal shifts have impacted our ability to engage with others.

From a social organizational perspective, we have observed a transformation from *Gemeinschaft* to *Gesellschaft*. German sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies introduced these ideal types of social organization, representing a transition from more communal, rural societies (where personal relationships are defined and regulated by traditional social rules), to more associational cosmopolitan societies (where human relations have become more impersonal).² These *Gesellschaft*-oriented societies appear to offer less opportunities to create deep social connections.

The transition from *Gemeinschaft* to *Gesellschaft* has been characterized by a rapid pace of industrialization, the growth of the consumer economy, an increasingly materialistic outlook on life, and the declining influence of religion—a transformation that have been colored by the dramatic impact of social media. In these increasingly impersonal societies, we have built barriers between ourselves and our neighbors, fueled by identity politics, racial divides, and class disparities, all of which have compounded feelings of isolation and loneliness. In addition, household numbers have been shrinking due to a shift from extended to nuclear families. For the first time in human history, large numbers of people across all ages, places, and political persuasions have chosen to lead solitary lives. Factors such as high divorce rates, falling birth rates, and longer lifespans—where

² Ferdinand Tönnies (1887/ 2017). *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft*. München/Wien: Profil-Verlag.

women are often outliving their husbands—have also contributed to this increase in single-person households.

In the past, people tended to stay rooted in one place as their employment was quite localized. Nowadays, job changes and relocations occur more frequently, often resulting in individuals moving away from family and friends. Additionally, the pervasive use of technology has profoundly changed how we work and interact with each other. The rapid rise in remote work and associated technologies, for example, has had a disruptive effect on meaningful face-to-face connections.

In addition to societal changes, various personal factors can contribute to feelings of loneliness, such as illness or disability, employment status, financial circumstances, retirement, divorce, or the loss of a loved one. For instance, illness or disability can alter a person's self-perception and how they relate to other people, leading to feelings of isolation or loneliness. Unemployment can evoke feelings of embarrassment, while financial problems can trigger shame, a loss of identity, and considerable stress. Retirement and divorce often entail the loss of one's original support network, contributing to feelings of loneliness. Naturally, the death of a loved one also invokes a profound sense of loneliness.

Another demographic particularly prone to loneliness is migrants. Feelings of loneliness in this group often stem from a loss or lack of a social identity. An inability to identify with

or belong to the more “valued” societal groups results in limited access to social and psychological resources, including being part of a social network.

As we saw with Nadine, chronic loneliness tends to be more intrapsychic in nature, stemming from a person’s developmental history and contributing to a low sense of self-esteem. People like Nadine often believe that they are unworthy of the attention or respect of others, which can exacerbate their chronic loneliness.

Some figures

It is estimated that one in two people experience a measurable level of loneliness. For example, one study found that 9% of adults in Japan, 22% in America and 23% in Britain always or often feel lonely, feel that they lack companionship, or feel left out or isolated.³ Naturally, there are differences based on factors such as gender, marital status, or age. For instance, women appear to be more willing to express feelings of loneliness compared to men. While they may not necessarily feel lonelier than men, they may be more comfortable acknowledging their loneliness. Generally speaking, individuals who are married or living together experience less loneliness. Having a partner appears to be especially important for older people, as they generally have fewer (but often closer) relationships than younger people. However, there seems to be no clear link between age and loneliness.

³ <https://www.economist.com/graphic-detail/2018/08/31/loneliness-is-pervasive-and-rising-particularly-among-the-young>

Younger people transitioning into adulthood often experience many uncertainties, including navigating intimate relationships, career choices, and the complexities of separating from their parents, all of which can contribute to feelings of loneliness. Older individuals may also experience intense feelings of loneliness as they age, particularly as they begin to lose family members and friends. Nevertheless, while age can be a factor, loneliness isn't exclusively a phenomenon of the elderly. It can occur at any stage of life.⁴

Physical and mental health issues

There is no denying the impact of the loneliness pandemic on our mental, physical, and societal well-being. Chronic stress resulting from feelings of loneliness can keep our bodies in a perpetual low-level fight-or-flight mode, leading to serious wear and tear. The physical ramifications of loneliness can be devastating, including an increased risk of heart disease, having a stroke, and, particularly among older adults, an increased likelihood of developing dementia. Some have claimed that loneliness kills more people than cancer, while others have asserted that the heightened risk of

⁴ Keming Yang and Christina Victor (2011). Age and loneliness in 25 European nations, *Ageing & Society*, 31(8), 1368-1388, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0144686X1000139X>

mortality from loneliness is comparable to smoking 15 cigarettes a day or being an alcoholic.⁵⁶

In addition to the negative effects on our physical health, loneliness and feelings of isolation significantly contribute to mental health challenges. Sustained feelings of loneliness can spur depressive reactions, increasing the risk of premature death. Loneliness could also prompt people to adopt unhealthy lifestyle behaviors, such as developing eating disorders, engaging in drug abuse, smoking, or alcoholism. It can also result in sleep deprivation and prolonged feelings of anxiety. Furthermore, lonely people may be less motivated to seek preventive care, follow medication protocols, or practice self-care. The relationship between loneliness and ill health is reciprocal: loneliness leads to ill health, and vice versa.

It's not surprising that those who live to a ripe old age often exhibit positive health behaviors, including maintaining solid social connections. The capacity to connect to other people—the physical and psychological benefits of connection—is part of what has enabled them to live longer lives. Reduced loneliness is associated with a greater likelihood of living longer.

⁵ John D. Cacioppo, L. Elizabeth Crawford, Louise Hawkley, and John Ernst (2002). Loneliness and health: Potential mechanisms, *Psychosomatic medicine* 64 (3), 407-417; Julianne Holt-Lunstad, Timothy B. Smith, and Tyler Harris (2015). Loneliness and social isolation as risk factors for mortality: a meta-analytic review, *Perspectives on psychological science* 10 (2), 227-237; Julianne Holt-Lunstad (2017), The Potential Public Health Relevance of Social Isolation and Loneliness: Prevalence, Epidemiology, and Risk Factors, *Journal of Public Policy & Aging Report*.

⁶ Nicole K. Valtorta, Mona Kanaan, Simon Gilbody, Sara Ronzi, and Barbara Hanratty (2016). Loneliness and social isolation as risk factors for coronary heart disease and stroke: systematic review and meta-analysis of longitudinal observational studies, *Heart*, 102(13), 1009-16. doi: 10.1136/heartjnl-2015-308790.

Loneliness also affects our ability to work effectively. For example, younger people who grappled with loneliness and isolation during the Covid-19 pandemic found it very difficult to focus on their schoolwork or perform efficiently in their jobs. Similarly, older people who experience loneliness are more prone to feeling unwell at work and may feel like they are unable to work efficiently or perform to the best of their abilities.⁷

What can be done about it?

While the loneliness pandemic is widespread and has weighty consequences for our individual and collective health and well-being, the obvious antidote is social connection and fostering community. While loneliness can lead to destructive outcomes, the ability to form connections can be very healing. Perhaps one of the most constructive outcomes of the Covid-19 pandemic is that it has highlighted the need for human interconnectedness. Even though the pandemic brought about unprecedented levels of uncertainty, fear, and anxiety in the world, it also made clear the importance of finding effective coping strategies to promote wellbeing and mental health.

Societal considerations

If we truly want to be healthy, happy, and fulfilled, it may be necessary to restructure the way we interact with people. We can begin by placing greater emphasis on social connection and valuing self-care practices—being more intentional about checking

⁷ Hakan Ozcelik and Sigal Barsade (2018). No Employee an Island: Workplace Loneliness and Job Performance, *Academy of Management Journal*, 61(6), <https://doi.org/10.5465/amj.2015.1066>.

whether our social needs are being met. A society where its people are more connected tends to fare better in terms of population health, community safety, community resilience, civic engagement, and prosperity.

A number of societal interventions can be implemented to cultivate a culture of connection. It is clear that we need more policies, strategies, and programs that prioritize connectivity. For example, we may need to reassess our relationship with technology and ensure that our digital interactions enhance rather than detract from meaningful connections with others. Those in leadership positions should endeavor to design social infrastructures that facilitate connection, such as investing in public transportation, parks, community centers, libraries, as well as other public programs. One possible intervention is to set up living communities that make it easier for people to get together. Most important, however, is to cultivate a societal culture that values connectivity and places civility at the forefront.

A personal perspective

On a personal level, all of us have the power to address our loneliness. Often, we find we are lonely because, psychologically, we have been building walls instead of bridges. As the French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre aptly noted, “If you’re lonely when you’re alone you’re in bad company.” Indeed, spending time alone can be quite a growth experience. We should perceive feelings of loneliness as an opportunity for introspection, an incentive to understand ourselves better. It may be beneficial for us all, at certain points in our life, to carve out time and mental space to re-examine our lives. Learning to be

comfortable with solitude can ultimately enhance our ability to build meaningful, intimate relationships.

If we use our solitary time wisely, we can acquire greater self-awareness and self-knowledge. This may help us better understand who we are and why we do what we do. Essentially, loneliness can push us out our comfort zones and to embark on a journey that we might otherwise avoid in our busy lives. It can provide a pause for us to better understand our inner thoughts and understand why we feel isolated.

Besides embarking on this journey, there are other steps that we can take to deal with feelings of loneliness:

- When we feel lonely, it's essential to reach out to our networks, even if we may be reluctant to take this initiative. Spending time talking to family and friends, whether by phone, email, or social media, is often the remedy we need when feeling imprisoned by loneliness. Strengthening our current relationships can be as simple as reconnecting with a friend or family member we have not spoken to in a while. In addition to trying to improve our existing relationships, we should also make the effort to build new connections. While this may be challenging, especially as we age, the benefits are substantial. There are a variety of ways to expand our social circles, such as joining groups centered around common interests, professional organizations, or attending relevant conferences. Ultimately, we need to invest in our social well-being.

- Online communities can be valuable refuges during bouts of loneliness. For instance, creating an online Meetup group for people with similar interests is just one way to foster connections. Despite its drawbacks, the internet is home to many groups that allow instant connection from the comfort of our own space. Participating in support groups, WhatsApp forums, or online chat groups can offer a supportive and safe environment for communicating with others who are experiencing similar emotions.
- While somewhat unconventional, having a companion animal can significantly alleviate loneliness. Pets provide constant companionship, comfort, and unconditional love, which can have therapeutic effects on mental health.⁸ Petting an animal releases chemicals that promote well-being and a positive mood, thereby reducing feelings of loneliness. In addition, pet owners benefit from doing specific daily activities to care for their animals, prompting them to get out of the house and potentially meet others with similar interests, facilitating easy entry into conversations and interactions.
- While the common assumption is that seeking support is the best remedy for loneliness, managing these feelings should not be a one-directional activity. It is not just about receiving attention; it also involves giving back to others. Thus, one effective step to take—though initially challenging—is not only to seek help but also to reach out and help others. Intentional acts of kindness and generosity can

⁸ <https://www.uclahealth.org/programs/pac/about-us/animal-assisted-therapy-research>

be very beneficial, boosting our sense of self-worth and breaking down feelings of loneliness. Engaging in community service or similar altruistic activities present great opportunities to meet people and form new friendships and meaningful connections while also finding a sense of purpose. Regularly practicing gratitude and altruism can serve as antidotes to a mindset that views new encounters as threats.

- If previous efforts to alleviate loneliness haven't been sufficient, it may be time to seek professional help. A professional can provide support in dealing with feelings of low self-esteem and negative thought patterns that prevent us from creating meaningful relationships. When feeling lonely, hopeful thinking and making plans for the future can encourage efforts to better connect with others. Whether through individual therapy or group interventions, a mental health professional can offer valuable support and guidance. Online therapy is also a viable option, as it provides convenient access to professional help whenever needed. It is important to recognize that, just like any medical condition, feelings of loneliness will only worsen if left untreated.

The prison of human experience

Throughout history, certain experiences remain constant, and loneliness is among the most significant. It is undeniably one of the most daunting experiences, like being imprisoned within oneself. When trapped in this emotional prison, it can swiftly spiral downward, plunging one into a state of despair.

For many, it will always be a challenge to learn how to be alone without being lonely. Even those in a committed relationship or with an active social life will feel lonely at times. Fortunately, for most, these feelings of loneliness are transient, mere fluctuations in life's ebb and flow. However, loneliness can escalate beyond control when fueled by trauma, illness, loss, the effects of aging, or the substitution of human interaction with technology. Undoubtedly, all of us need a social circle and intimate connections to navigate life's complexities.

When experiencing loneliness, it is crucial to avoid self-blame as it only perpetuates feelings of shame, low self-esteem, and guilt, further deepening the sense of isolation. This attitude toward loneliness may discourage us from connecting with others. While personality traits play an important part in contributing to loneliness, many social and cultural phenomena also play a key role. Accepting that loneliness is a universal part of the human experience, like thirst or hunger, can offer a more constructive perspective.

Even though loneliness affects so many of us, it lacks the attention afforded to other disorders. This attitude needs to change. We need to make more of a conscious effort to combat loneliness, considering the detrimental effects it has on our well-being and behavior. However, we shouldn't expect things to change overnight. Like many endeavors, altering our perspective takes time and patience.

As a closing reflection, we might view loneliness not only as a warning sign but also as a blessing in disguise—a chance to engage in personal growth. In this light, a quote from the American actor Robin Williams resonates: “I used to think that the worst thing in life was to end up all alone. It’s not. The worst thing in life is to end up with people who make you feel all alone.” Loneliness does not stem from lacking people around us, but from being unable to share what truly matters with others.