

HOME ECONOMICS GUIDE



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Is There A Cure For Loneliness?

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Last fall Mary felt she was adjusting beautifully to Kathy's move. Kathy, her youngest child, went away to college in another city. Just when life looked rosy to Mary again, John, her husband of twenty six years, suddenly died of a heart attack.

Friends were kind. They showed their concern in many ways immediately following his death. And, as the Christmas holidays approached, Mary thought it would help to see Kathy again.

Then a terrible dread swept over her. After Kathy's few days at home, Mary would be alone to face the long winter that lay ahead...and other long winters...one after the other. Alone for her meant the pain she would feel without another close adult. Loneliness.

How Prevalent is Loneliness?

Loneliness is such a painful and frightening experience that people have avoided studying it thoroughly. One survey showed that 26 percent of the people sampled nationally reported themselves as very lonely or remote from other people. In a study of widows, Helena Lapata found that nearly one-half reported loneliness as the leading problem in their lives and 22 percent reported loneliness as an issue for them.

Who are the Lonely?

Though there are many lonely people and many causes of loneliness, loss of a partner by death is the greatest cause. Census figures of 1970 show 12 million widows in the country, not counting those who have remarried. Lapata found that women over age 55 are more likely to report loneliness than other women.

Loneliness is caused by anything that leads to lost contact with those who share one's concerns, such as death, divorce or moving away. There is no time in any-

one's life when loneliness ceases to be a threat. However, aging increases vulnerability to loneliness. Advanced age brings people into situations that risk both emotional and social isolation. With aging, the greater risk of losing a spouse, retirement, infirmity, and depletion of energy can lead to lost contact with friends.

What is Loneliness?

Loneliness is the response to the absence of someone with whom there was a relatively lasting bond of attachment. When there is a loss of a partner through death, divorce or separation, people experience the grief of abandonment.

Is Company a Remedy for Loneliness?

Social activity does not necessarily relieve loneliness. Loneliness is not simply a desire for company. A new friendship does not remedy loneliness automatically. It takes another emotional attachment of a single and intense nature, according to Robert Weiss in his book on loneliness. If that relationship can be established, loneliness ends abruptly.

Is Grief Different from Loneliness?

Loneliness is distinct from grief in that most aspects of grief usually subside as time goes by. Shock disappears, anger and sadness diminish, but loneliness may be expected to continue so long as no new relationship is formed to replace what has been lost.

Loneliness or Depression?

Lonely people have a drive to do away with distress. They seek others. If they find the right ones, they are no longer lonely. Depressed people surrender to the distress. The depressed are unwilling to impose their unhappiness

on others. Their feelings can hardly be reached by relationships.

What about Solitude and Loneliness?

Loneliness is not solitude. Solitude refers to a time used to gain a clear understanding of oneself, to begin to be true to that self. Paul Tillich, a theologian, states that solitude is the glory of being alone while loneliness is the pain of being alone. Weiss says that loneliness is not caused by being alone but by being without some definite, needed relationship. A lonely individual has a sense of utter aloneness in a desolate, barren world. A lonely individual feels empty, dead, hollow.

The “Searching” Behavior of the Lonely Person.

Loneliness is caused by the loss, in some way, of a significant person. With this loss comes the urge to recover the lost object. Typical behavior of a severely lonely person includes a driving restlessness, crying and searching for the departed mate, according to authors John Bowlby, Murray Parkes and others. The person searches, knowing all the while that the search is useless and irrational. The typical searching behavior is as follows:

1. **Motion hyperactivity** is a restless movement in an aimless way, the inability to sit still, the continual searching for something to do while not being able to initiate and maintain normal patterns of activity. There is a rush of speech, especially when talking about the lost person.

2. **Thinking intensely** about the person...preoccupation with memories of the lost one is another behavior pattern. Nineteen of twenty-two widows interviewed in one study were preoccupied with thoughts of their dead husbands during the first month of bereavement. The widow's visual picture of the deceased is usually sharp and clear, indicating an active memory. In the mind of the searcher this clear picture facilitates the search by making it more likely that the missing person will be located, if possible.

3. **Searching behavior** includes paying attention to anything that suggests the presence of the missing person. Searching people usually misidentify someone at a distance who at first seems to resemble the lost one. Nine of the 22 widows described actual illusions of the lost person shortly after the death occurred. Fifteen of the 22 experienced a comforting sense of the presence of the person which alleviated the loneliness during that time.

4. **Searchers give attention to those places and things** in which the person is likely to be associated. Half of the widows said they felt drawn to places or objects they associated with their husbands, such as possessions owned by the lost one or places they used to go together.

5. **Searchers may call for the lost one.** In the study, widows directed their crying to the lost person. “David, where are you? I need you!” Bereaved people may feel and act as if the dead person were still present even

though they believe intellectually this is unlikely. Ordinarily, grief is described as detaching oneself from the lost object. Although people conduct painful searches while attempting to restore the object, according to Parkes, they eventually learn that this is impossible. Then, the once-lonely people go through the process of unlearning their attachment to a lost person.



The Forms of Loneliness—Feelings and Situations

An Administration of Aging study identified some forms of loneliness. If the voices of all the widows in the study were joined together to tell about the forms of loneliness, the essence of their statements could be as follows:

1. “I am no longer an object of love” is often the feeling people have when a husband, adult child, parent or friend dies and is no longer available for interaction. “I was treated by another person as something of worth. I was loved, respected and sexually desired. Now—?”

2. “I can no longer care for and pour out my feelings to the one who died, so who do I have to receive my love?”

3. “I miss John. I am accustomed to interacting with him. He enjoyed so many little things with me. Now there is no one to share those happy things. I need that deep companionship.”

4. “I need another human being in the house, for when I hear sounds of someone moving around I feel better. I feel it gives some organization and meaning to my schedule, to what I do.”

5. “When John was alive, I didn’t have to do so many unpleasant male chores because I could always count on him to do them. Now I feel helpless, frustrated and disgusted when I face those tasks alone.”

6. “I am homesick for the style of life we had, some of the activities we did as a couple because of John’s connections. These activities were so enjoyable.”

7. “I feel a big drop in social status and acceptance now that John is gone and can’t escort me. His occupational associates are no longer a part of my life.”

8. “I feel I am open to more misunderstanding in social situations now than when John was with me. Some of John’s friends seem to expect me to mourn him forever.

“Even the period of grief was awkward. When people don’t quite know what to say to me, I feel isolated and cut off from them. It must be that I confront them with their own death and loneliness so much that they withdraw from me. Some women John and I have known for a long time even seem to be jealous of me when I talk with their husbands. I notice people hardly ever invite unattached women anywhere.

“If I had my life to live over I would be somewhat more independent. I would arrange contacts with others so that his death wouldn’t be so totally disorganizing.”

9. “I have failed to develop skills needed to build new patterns of relationships when old ones become broken, strained, or not available.” Widows who do recover and make close friends indicate this to be a conscious process—developing new lines of connection.

What to do About Loneliness

- The primary remedy for ending loneliness is formation of new relationships that might repair the deficit responsible for the loneliness.

- On a short term basis, learn to tolerate the natural loneliness people must feel. For example, at the time of day that is most lonely, be with a friend who is likely to understand. Sometimes emotional feelings can be written down to express deep feelings.

- Believe things can get better with some effort.

Recognize there is no cause for panic, no need to think that emotional disaster has left your life crippled forever.

- Maintain proximity to a social network. Stay in touch with some people and you will usually be accepted. Generally, proximity makes for acceptance.

- Direct energy to projects, friendships, and groups you care about. In choosing a group, give some thought to the kind that offers adequately attractive and congenial people. Then stay in touch with at least some of them long enough to establish yourself.

- Take the initiative in setting up social occasions with individuals from groups, such as church groups, your spouse’s work group, or special interest groups.

- Develop relationships with others but recognize active search is risky. It usually requires that you move outside your social context and meet others who are acting outside of theirs. Common values and commitments, sufficient to sustain a relationship, are more likely attained with people of similar social backgrounds than with a singles group, according to Weiss. If an attachment figure is encountered in a familiar environment, problems will more likely be avoided.

- Work some. “Work is a natural antidote to loneliness” states Alex Comfort, author of *A Good Age*. Work can not satisfy the place of people in life, but the work setting can introduce people to others.

- Investigate participation in development of senior centers, political or “cause” activities, or an employment organization. Working with others on a project can sometimes bring people together at a satisfying level.

- Volunteer to help those who cannot help themselves—visit someone who will not or cannot go outside. If you are lonely you can try to get some project started. Alex Comfort enthusiastically endorses this as a cure for loneliness.

- Believe there are at least some events that you can control. With a few successful experiences, because of initiative taken, you will be encouraged to act more, to become involved with other people. The remedy for loneliness comes eventually to the individual who reaches out.

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