



Coping With Loneliness (Part 1): Look Inward

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Experiencing loneliness sometimes is part of the human experience. It reminds us of our need to connect with others (Murthy, 2020). However, when experienced long-term, loneliness can lead to detrimental impacts on physical, mental, and emotional health. For this reason, the U.S. Surgeon General issued an advisory in 2023 naming loneliness as one of the most pressing public health concerns in the U.S. The report states that loneliness “is associated with a greater risk of cardiovascular disease, dementia, stroke, depression, anxiety, and premature death. The mortality impact of being socially disconnected is similar to that caused by smoking up to 15 cigarettes a day” (Murthy, 2023, p. 25).

This “Coping With Loneliness” fact sheet series addresses the most effective ways to enhance connectedness:

- **Part 1 – Look Inward**
- *Part 2 – Look Outward*
- *Part 3 – Focus on What You Can Change*
- *Part 4 – Support Others Who Experience Loneliness*

As grim as this sounds, there is hope. Studies show simple interventions can improve feelings of connection, including improving social skills, identifying opportunities for social interaction, and addressing negative thoughts about yourself and others (Cacioppo & Hawkley, 2009). In a series of four fact sheets, Utah State University (USU) Extension faculty compiled some of the most effective ways to enhance connectedness. This first fact sheet describes ways of looking inward that can reduce loneliness. These include identifying sources of loneliness, increasing acceptance, practicing mindfulness, seeking solitude, practicing self-reflection, and practicing self-care.

Identify Why You Are Lonely

Loneliness has been defined as the discrepancy between one’s desired and actual social connection (Cacioppo & Hawkley, 2009; Peplau & Perlman, 1998). There could be several reasons you may experience a discrepancy between the connection you want and the connection you have, including relationship loss, life changes, identity-based marginalization, relationship stress/conflict, physical or mental health issues, and more.

It may also help to identify which type of loneliness you are experiencing. Researchers (Cacioppo & Hawkley, 2009) have categorized loneliness into three dimensions:

1. **Intimate**, or the perceived absence of a close confidant.
2. **Relational**, or the perceived absence of quality friendships or family connections.
3. **Collective**, or the perceived absence of meaningful social groups.

Once you identify the type of loneliness you are experiencing and the underlying reasons you feel lonely, you can determine which strategies are most relevant to your situation. It is important to know that the relevance and efficacy of each strategy suggested in these publications depends on why you are experiencing loneliness.

Increase Acceptance

Given that loneliness is the discrepancy between actual and desired social connections, people experiencing loneliness can reduce this discrepancy by either increasing their connectedness to match their expectations or lowering their expectations to match their reality. This second approach, accepting one's current social circumstances, is an often-overlooked way to reduce loneliness. Acceptance can help you reduce the distress that comes from being dissatisfied with what you have. Acceptance can also foster emotional rest and gratitude for the social connections you already have. In addition to accepting current social circumstances, people can cope with loneliness by accepting their emotional experiences of loneliness. Accepting that your emotions come and go can help you cope with distress, reduce mental health issues, and inform you of your relationship needs (Teoh et al., 2021).

Practice Mindfulness

Mindfulness can promote acceptance of your social situations and emotional experiences. "Mindfulness is awareness that arises through paying attention, on purpose, in the present moment, non-judgmentally" (Kabat-Zinn, 2003, p. 145). Previous studies have found that mindfulness interventions can reduce loneliness and improve social connectedness (Lindsay et al., 2019; Teoh et al., 2021). People can live more mindfully through practicing mindfulness informally, such as generally trying to live in the moment, and formally, through meditative practice. Research studies show that practicing guided meditation daily is one of the most effective ways to increase mindfulness, cope with emotional distress, and reduce loneliness (Basso et al., 2019; Teoh et al., 2021).

Seek Solitude

We often equate the subjective, distressing experience of loneliness with the objective state of being alone. However, being alone does not need to come with sadness, anxiety, and fear of loneliness. Being alone can sometimes provide opportunities to reflect, rest, and regulate our emotions (Nguyen et al., 2017). We call this experience *solitude*, or



the state of being alone that is associated with deliberate and peaceful self-reflection. Solitude can lead to rejuvenation, self-understanding, creativity, and life satisfaction (Long & Averill, 2003).

To cultivate solitude, consider viewing your moments alone as valuable opportunities for self-reflection and personal growth. A recent study found that lonely individuals experienced greater benefits of solitude when they framed being alone as an opportunity to enhance their well-being (Rodriguez et al., 2023). Practices that can help you experience solitude include mindfulness, self-reflection, journaling, spending time in nature, prayer, rest, and many others.

Frame time alone as a valuable opportunity for self-reflection and personal growth.

Practice Self-Reflection

Use times of solitude to increase self-knowledge (Murthy, 2020). Loneliness can cause us to question our value and worth, obscuring how we see ourselves. To gain clarity on our values and understand our responses to the world, considering certain questions can be illuminating. Try reflecting on these questions:

- What do I love doing and why?
- What causes me to feel dread? How do I respond to stress?
- What am I most grateful for?
- What do I want most?

Engaging in meditation practices can facilitate introspection when pondering these questions.

Personality Awareness

An increased awareness of our emotions, thoughts, and behaviors can help us identify how we may contribute to negative interactions with others. For example, if relationship conflict is driving your loneliness, a deeper understanding of your reactions and how you contribute to conflict can empower you to know how to change your relationship.

Exploring aspects of your personality can help you understand your interpersonal interactions. For example, understanding your attachment style could help you respond in healthier ways to difficult relationship experiences. Personality assessments can help you increase self-awareness, such as:

- [Myers-Briggs Type Indicator® \(MBTI®\) personality profiles](#)
- [Susan Cain's introversion/extroversion quiz](#)
- [Elaine N. Aron sensory processing sensitivity test](#)
- [VIA Character Strengths Profile test](#)

Greater self-awareness can help you foster more genuine connections.

Practice Self-Care

Self-reflection can empower us to practice the type of self-care we need. Feeling lonely and unseen can blind our internal sensors to the point that we forget to be compassionate toward ourselves. We might try to make ourselves into someone we think will be socially accepted. When we fail to live up to values that are not our own, it's very easy to engage in negative self-talk, which worsens the problem. Make it a practice to be aware

of your negative self-talk and make it a habit to treat yourself with compassion instead. Find ways to incorporate your interests, passions, and values into your routine. Learning to befriend ourselves provides a foundation for forming meaningful connections with others (Murthy, 2020).

Looking inward can provide clarity and prepare us for healthier relationships with others. To learn more about finding and strengthening relationships, see *Coping With Loneliness (Part 2): Look Outward*.

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