



## Coping With Loneliness (Part 3): Focus on What You Can Change

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The U.S. surgeon general named loneliness a top public health issue in the U.S. (Murthy, 2023). In response, Utah State University (USU) Extension faculty developed four fact sheets to describe some of the most effective ways to reduce loneliness. This third fact sheet describes ways to focus on what you can change. Many people who experience loneliness may feel that some aspects of social connection are outside of their control. However, focusing on what you *can* control can empower you to achieve greater connection. This fact sheet describes both actions and ways of thinking to help you focus on what you can change. These include using social media intentionally, reaching out for support, avoiding unhealthy relationships, focusing on helpful thoughts, adopting a growth mindset, and practicing gratitude.

*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*

### Use Social Media Intentionally

One simple way to focus on what you can control is to use social media intentionally. Social media can be a helpful tool to facilitate meaningful interactions with others. For example, you can use social media to learn about community events, stay in contact with people who live distantly, share information, and communicate with many people. Using social media to facilitate direct interactions can reduce loneliness (Clark et al., 2018).

On the other hand, passive social media use can sometimes heighten loneliness (Clark et al., 2018). People who experience loneliness are more prone to passively browsing social media to cope with emotional distress, and this can lead to unhealthy comparisons. Comparing your social situations with others can heighten the discrepancy between your desired and actual social connectedness (Burnell et al., 2019). Social media can also pressure people to represent themselves inauthentically, which can reduce genuine connection. Furthermore, spending time on social media can sometimes replace in-person interactions which provide much greater psychosocial benefits (Verduyn et al., 2021).

If you are experiencing loneliness, find ways to use social media to facilitate meaningful interactions with others. For example, consider reconnecting with old friends, sharing pictures with family members, or joining online groups. To avoid some of the negative consequences of social media use, try to limit passive browsing on social media, implement alternative coping mechanisms, and avoid social media that leads to unhealthy comparisons or other negative influences.



## Reach Out for Support

When experiencing loneliness, it can be difficult to express your feelings to others because you may fear their judgment. While you cannot control how others respond to you, you can control how you reach out to them. Sometimes people do not know how to support you until you communicate your needs. Try expressing your feelings vulnerably rather than expressing criticism for their lack of support or demanding that they meet your needs.

*Try expressing your feelings vulnerably rather than criticizing others' lack of support or demanding they meet your needs.*

If you feel you lack people to talk to about difficult feelings or topics, consider meeting with a professional. Therapists can help you understand confusing thoughts and feelings, pinpoint your social needs, and suggest ways to increase connections that are specific to your situation.

## Avoid Unhealthy Relationships

When faced with social isolation, it may be tempting to seek out or remain in unhealthy relationships to alleviate loneliness. However, these types of relationships can intensify feelings of loneliness by widening the gap between our desired and actual social connections. It is also important to remember that manipulative relationships can destabilize our emotions, undermine our well-being, and keep us from meaningful interactions with others. Staying in unhealthy relationships can be more detrimental to our overall health than being alone. Remaining in a relationship that lacks genuine connection may cause the same sense of isolation as being alone. Assessing your relationships and determining if you feel genuinely connected will be worthwhile. Practice setting boundaries (focusing on what you will do, not what the other person will do) to ensure your connections are meaningful and beneficial (Hawkey et al., 2008).



## Focus on Helpful Thoughts

When we feel lonely, we are more likely to expect the worst in social situations and interpret social interactions as negative (Cacioppo & Hawley, 2009). As a result, we may tend to see others as threats and act in protective ways instead of ways that lead to positive social interactions. For example, we may act inauthentically or avoid social situations altogether, reinforcing our loneliness. To combat this cycle, you may consider asking yourself how helpful your thoughts are, whether they are serving you or getting in the way of what you want. You can then choose to challenge the truthfulness of unhelpful thoughts or redirect your focus to more helpful thoughts. Our thoughts influence our emotions and behaviors, so choosing to focus on helpful thoughts, rather than ruminating on unhelpful or untrue thoughts, can help you feel better and socially engage in more effective ways.

## Adopt a Growth Mindset

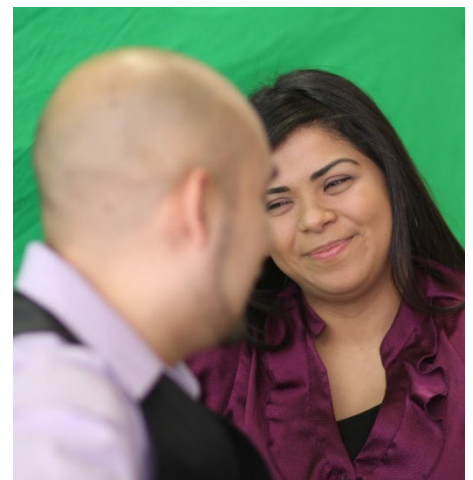
One framework you can use to focus on helpful thoughts is a “growth mindset.” A growth mindset is a belief that abilities and intelligence can be developed through dedication, hard work, and learning. To incorporate a growth mindset regarding your social situation, consider these steps:

1. **Embrace challenges.** View loneliness as a challenge to help you learn and grow.
2. **Cultivate a positive mindset.** Challenge negative thoughts and focus on the positive aspects of experiences.
3. **Seek feedback and growth.** Use feedback as a tool for personal growth in social interactions.
4. **Expand social skills.** Engage in developing skills like active listening and empathy to enhance communication and connections.
5. **Connect with others.** Actively seek social opportunities, attend events, volunteer, or join communities to build relationships.
6. **Be open to change.** Embrace change as a part of personal growth, stepping outside your comfort zone.

Adopting a growth mindset takes time. Be patient with yourself as you navigate and transform loneliness into an opportunity for personal development and connection (Dweck, 2006).

## Practice Gratitude

Another way to foster helpful thinking is by practicing gratitude. Even when circumstances seem bleak, practicing gratitude can help you remember many of the good things you have in life. Research suggests that gratitude is associated with well-being and can be used to face difficult times (Jans-Beken, 2018). As loneliness is the discrepancy between desired and actual social connection, gratitude can help you reduce the discrepancy by acknowledging what you already have. To practice gratitude, consider a daily practice of listing five things for which you are grateful or expressing gratitude to someone in your life.



By focusing on what you can control, you can feel more empowered to create and maintain the types of relationships you want. For more information, see other fact sheets in the Coping With Loneliness series, such as Part 1: Look Inward and Part 2: Look Outward.

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