

HOW TO

cope with loneliness



**Mental
Health
Promotion
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Mind
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How to... *cope with loneliness*


“ Everyone said university would be great, but for me it was torture. I felt miserably shy and alone, as if I was on one side of a glass wall and everyone else was on the other. ”

“ I suppose it's what is known as a 'mid-life crisis'. Nothing had changed in my life; I have a wife I love, two wonderful children, a job I enjoy. Then a month or so after my 40th birthday, I went into some god-awful hole, and felt as lonely as hell. ”

“ Mostly I'm OK. It's Christmas time that it hits me worst, as that's when he died. Then I stare at his empty chair and feel swamped by an awful, aching loneliness. ”

“ Loneliness has become the great taboo of the Western industrialised world. It is to our epoch what leprosy was to the 14th century. ”
Edward Pilkington, in *The Guardian*

*What exactly
is loneliness*



Loneliness is one of our greatest dreads. Most of us have felt it. Most of us have feared it. At the same time, loneliness is a subject that is rarely talked about. This booklet aims to challenge this taboo, outline the causes of loneliness and what you can do to overcome it.

To feel lonely is to be overwhelmed by an unbearable feeling of separateness at a very deep level. To some degree, it is a totally normal emotion, a part of growing up. At birth, we all start the process of separation, the growth towards becoming individuals. Also, from our earliest months, as awareness of our separateness dawns upon us, the parallel need to seek relationship begins.

It is a balancing act, a see-sawing between the search for intimacy and an acceptance of isolation which continues throughout life. However smoothly this passage from birth to mature adulthood goes, there are bound to be times in all of our lives when this process of

Is loneliness
also a sign of
our times

growing up, of becoming separate selves, feels difficult; times when we feel anxious, abandoned, unloved, insecure, when, in other words, we feel lonely.

The particular stresses of modern life do tend to make people particularly vulnerable to loneliness. High unemployment, a rising divorce rate and the fact that people move away have caused many to suffer the ache of loneliness. About a third of the population now live alone, and when it comes to retirement, many elderly people have no close family to turn to for companionship.

At the same time, moralising attitudes towards certain sections of society, such as single mothers or those who are long-term unemployed, can increase someone's sense of isolation. They may come to feel that the loneliness, which has been caused by their circumstances, is somehow their own fault.

Why do some
people choose
to be alone

The old cliché that it is possible to feel lonely in a crowd is also painfully true. There are those who are constantly surrounded by people, yet still feel desperately lonely. Many of those who seek help for overwhelming feelings of loneliness have an active social life, a busy job, a stable relationship or marriage and a family.

In our busy, extroverted culture, with its emphasis on togetherness, we tend to lump loneliness together with aloneness and solitude, and think of them all in a negative light. For many people, the word lonely conjures up an image of someone sitting alone in a bed-sit. Yet being alone is not the same as being lonely. There are plenty of loners who are totally happy in their own company and who choose solitude as a way of life.

Solitude has been helpful to a number of well-known

How to... *cope with loneliness*

*Does loneliness
mean different
things to
different people*

writers, philosophers and composers. The author Dr Anthony Storr argues strongly that relationships can't be the be-all and end-all in life. He believes that the concerns, hobbies and creative interests developed over a lifetime by ordinary people can be an important source of stability and contentment.

Circumstantial
loneliness

'Spend some time wandering around the foyers of the Barbican Centre, the London home of the Royal Shakespeare Company, or that of the Royal National Theatre on London's South Bank (where I frequently do my rambling to sample voices) and you hear all around you the same upper-class voices boring into your head. They sound demanding, belittling and frankly self-important. To me all these "cultivated" voices are saying one thing. "The right to speak is mine and mine alone."' Patsy Rodenburg. *The Right to speak*. Methuen 1992

'During depression, the world disappears. Language itself. One has nothing to say. Nothing. No small talk, no anecdotes. One's real state of mind is a source of shame. So one is necessarily silent about it, leaving nothing else for subject matter.' Kate Millett. *The Loony Bin Trip*. Virago 1990

'I woke up one morning and realised there was nobody there - that I no longer existed. I'd always been a mother and now that role was over I was completely empty.'

We live in a society in which there are massive inequalities and in which many people are bound to feel excluded. People who don't feel they have a voice are bound to feel powerless, disregarded and lonely.

Loneliness is not one single, simple thing. There are both different degrees and causes. Broadly speaking, it is possible to talk about three different kinds of loneliness: circumstantial, developmental and internal.

Divorce, bereavement, retirement and unemployment are common causes of loneliness. If the partner or work which boosted a person's self-esteem and made life meaningful suddenly disappears, everything can feel hopeless and futile.

A change of circumstances may be intentional. Moving to a new area or starting a family, for example, can be exciting and positive. Yet, people often find that to

Developmental
loneliness

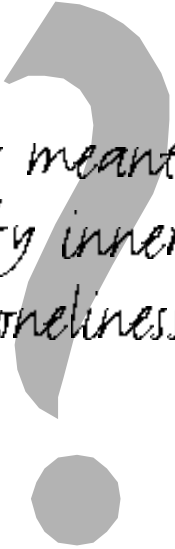
begin all over again in a new environment can be very painful. Similarly, the house-bound mother with her first baby can feel acutely isolated.

Single parents are also particularly vulnerable to loneliness. Many people say that when a relationship ends, they seem to lose friends as well as their partner, while the stress of bringing up children single-handedly can make it difficult to find any time for a social life.

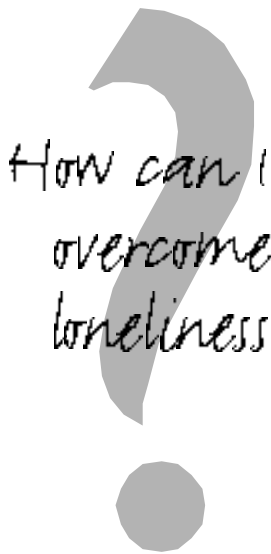
It's a similar picture for elderly people. Retirement, the death of a spouse or close friends and a move to a new home may come all at once, and feel overwhelmingly bleak. Additionally, illness, increasing disability and a fear of going out alone make many elderly people feel like prisoners in their own homes. The people who look after elderly or disabled family members may also become very lonely. Such carers may not be able to call their time their own; exhaustion easily sets in, and social life and friends can gradually fade away (see Mind's booklet *Understanding Caring*, details on p. 10).

To be labelled mentally ill can be distressing and potentially very isolating, not least because public opinion can be so hostile towards those with a psychiatric label. Someone with a diagnosis of schizophrenia, for example, will have to cope with very distressing symptoms, but will also be up against a widespread misconception that people with this diagnosis are likely to be violent.

The very nature of some mental health problems reinforces this isolation. Someone with agoraphobia may be house-bound and cut off from the normal channels of socialising. Feelings of panic at the thought of socialising and meeting new people may be more common than you think. A survey of mental health problems in the USA found that social phobia was the third most common problem, after depression and alcohol dependence. People who are anxious and depressed or trapped in addictive behaviour may have low self-esteem and feel guilty and worthless. This can lead them to shun



What's meant
by inner
loneliness



Learning to be with others

Assert yourself

company and cut themselves off from their families and friends.

People with a physical disablement are similarly disadvantaged and stigmatised. Mobility is often a problem and many disabled people find themselves excluded from access to large numbers of social activities. People who are HIV positive or who have AIDS are likely to encounter prejudiced attitudes. Being treated as 'different' by others often makes people feel even lonelier.

Being discriminated against or subjected to racist attacks causes black and minority ethnic people to feel alienated and isolated.

A person's sexual identity can also cause loneliness. 'Coming out' as gay or lesbian is still very stressful as is reflected in the increased suicide rate among gays and lesbians. Some adult survivors of sexual abuse may find any kind of intimacy with others impossible.

At the end of the booklet, there are some practical suggestions on how to tackle feelings of isolation and details of support and pressure groups for specific situations (see Useful Organisations p. 9-10).

Developmental loneliness often overlaps with changes in personal circumstances. From birth onwards, we are constantly learning to balance our need for intimacy with our need for separateness. At various stages in life, we reach milestones that we have to pass through which often accentuate these needs and make us feel vulnerable to feeling of insecurity and loneliness. Adolescence, young adulthood, the 'thirty-something' stage, mid-life crisis, menopause and older age are often connected to outer as well as inner changes. It's important to remember that these are phases that will pass, and although change can feel painful, it can also bring with it new awareness and possibilities.

Start talking

For some people, feelings of loneliness are more constant and appear unrelated to any outer event or time of life. It is impossible to generalise about why someone might feel constantly lonely. Often such a person feels unable to like themselves or be liked by others. They may have little self-esteem and lack self-confidence. The roots of profound loneliness may come from having been unloved as a child, so that as an adult one continues to feel abandoned and unlovable in all relationships, including the relationship with oneself. It may come from a fear of being hurt, causing people to cut themselves off, consciously or unconsciously

Share interests

Those who are vulnerable to this constant inner loneliness often seek people out to avoid having to face their own company. Others may react in the opposite way, hiding away on their own and perhaps drowning empty feelings with drink in order to avoid facing a world of people they feel unconnected to.

Volunteer

If you feel that this describes your situation, it's important to remember that many others feel the same way, and there are understanding people to talk to who can help you try and deal with these feelings (see Mind's booklet *Understanding Talking Treatments*, details on p. 10 and Useful organisations on p.9-10). If the feelings of loneliness are so overwhelming that you have suicidal thoughts, remember that you can pick up the phone at any time of night or day and talk to someone from the Samaritans.

It is possible to overcome loneliness if you are really determined to do so. To help yourself, you will need to give a lot of time and energy to thinking about the reasons for your feelings and what positive steps you can take.

Learning to be alone

If you are someone who panics when left alone and



Can talking
therapies
help

Useful
organisations

constantly seeks others out in order to avoid inner loneliness, it might be worth spending some time learning how to feel relaxed in your own company. Spending time alone may involve facing difficult feelings which relentless socialising keeps at bay. It may also enable you to focus on the kind of person you really are and what you really want to do.

Some people find that activities such as yoga, meditation and keeping a journal help them to relax and replace anxious busyness with a calmer sense of themselves. It is worth spending time concentrating on something that really interests you and which you can enjoy as an end in itself. Focus on the pleasure it gives you and the fact that periods of time spent alone can be rewarding. Once we can face ourselves, our relationships with others will be helped, as we can reach out with less of a hungry need, more of an ability to give.

If you have the opposite difficulty and spend a lot of time alone as you feel uncomfortable with others in a social situation, the following suggestions may be useful.

If your difficulties in relating to other people are to do with setting boundaries in relationships, saying 'no' and expressing your feelings, you may find assertiveness training helpful. Social skills training may also be appropriate. To find out about local classes, ask at your library. Most adult education institutions offer them, as do some universities and colleges of education. For further information, see Mind's booklet, *How to Assert Yourself*, details on p. 10.

If you are really out of practice at meeting people, it's important to take small steps first and not launch headfirst into an intense involvement with one person. Make the most of every opportunity for social contact, however slight. Talk to the shopkeeper, don't snub the fellow passenger who tries to start a conversation with you.

Ask questions. Be curious.

You may find it easier to relate to others through the medium of shared interest. Consider what you most enjoy doing, whether it's reading, going for country walks, going to the cinema, playing chess or playing the flute. There are very many local groups and societies which cater for a wide range of interests and taste. Share something new. Consider whether there are new skills you would like to acquire. Joining an evening class at beginners' level will put you on the same footing as everyone else. Getting to know new people can become part of the process of learning something new.

If you have spare time on your hands, think about whether you could spend a few hours working as a volunteer. Is there a group of people whose interests you feel are particularly worth fighting for, or a political cause you would like to become involved in? For information on local groups, cultural societies, sports organisations, evening classes, voluntary groups and political parties, ask at your local library. Local and national newspapers and magazines will often have listings pages giving details for friendship clubs, public talks and workshops, so it's worth casting an eye over these.

Further reading and
order form

Sometimes, people so fear being alone that they will cling to unsatisfactory relationships and situations rather than risk the consequences of letting go.

Women who experience domestic violence, for example, often conceal the violence inflicted on them, preferring to stay in a relationship, however unhappy it makes them, than be left alone. Others have such a diminished sense of self-worth, often as a result of abusive experiences, that they find it impossible to believe that people might accept and like them.

Many people find that by talking to a counsellor or a psychotherapist they find the strength to face and change a situation they felt defeated by. They may for the first time acquire a sense of self-acceptance and find relating to others enjoyable.

Age Concern

Astral House, 1268 London Road, London SW16 4ER,
tel. 020 8679 8000, fax: 020 8765 7211, e-mail:
ace@ace.org.uk,
website: www.ace.org.uk

Alcoholics Anonymous

PO Box 1, Stonebow House, Stonebow, York, YO1 7NJ,
tel. 01904 644026, London helpline: 020 7833 0022

British Association for Counselling

1 Regent Place, Rugby, Warwickshire CV21 2PJ,
tel. 01788 578328, fax: 01788 562189, textphone:
01788 578328, e-mail: bac@bac.co.uk, website:
www.counselling.co.uk

For a list of counsellors in your area, send an A5 SAE.

Carers National Association (CNA)

20-25 Glasshouse Yard, London EC1A 4JS, tel. 0207
490 8824, minicom: 020 7251 8969, carers line:
0808 808 7777,
fax: 020 7490 8824, website:

Mind works for a better life for everyone with experience of mental distress

For details of your nearest Mind association and details of local services contact Mind's helpline, MindinfoLine, 8522 1728 from within London or 0845 766 0163 outside London. Mon-Fri 9.15 am - 4.45 pm. For interpretation MindinfoLine has access to 100 languages via Language Line. Typetalk is available for people with hearing or speech problems who have access to a minicom. To make a call via Typetalk dial 0800 959598, fax. 0151 709 8119.

Mind Cymru	Third Floor, Quebec House, Castlebridge, Cowbridge Road East, Cardiff CF1 9AB
Northern Mind	Pinetree Centre, Durham Road, Birtley, Chester-le-Street, County Durham DH3 2TD
North West Mind	21 Ribblesdale Place, Preston PR1 3NA
South East Mind	First Floor, Kemp House, 152-160 City Road, London EC1V 2NP
South & West Mind	Pembroke House, 7 Brunswick Square, Bristol BS2 8PE
Trent & Yorkshire Mind	44 Howard Street, Sheffield S1 2LX
West Midlands Mind	20/21 Cleveland Street, Wolverhampton WV1 3HT

Northern Ireland Association for Mental Health
Central Office, Beacon House, 80 University Street, Belfast BT7 1HE
tel. 02890 328474

Scottish Association for Mental Health
Cumbrae House, 15 Carlton Court, Glasgow G5 9JP, tel. 0141 568 7000

Mind (National Association for Mental Health), 15-19 Broadway,
London E15 4BQ, tel. 020 8519 2122, fax. 020 8522 1725

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**Mind**
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Disabled Living Foundation

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fax: 020 7266 2922, minicom: 020 7432 8009,
e-mail: dlfinfo@dlf.org.uk, website: www.dlf.org.uk

Gingerbread

16-17 Clerkenwell Close, London EC1R 0AA, tel. 020 7336 8183,

e-mail: office@gingerbread.org.uk, website:
www.gingerbread.org.uk.

National network of self-help groups for single parents

Keep Fit Association

Astra House, Suite 1.05, Arklow Road, London SE14 6EB,
tel. 020 8692 9566, fax: 020 8692 8383, e-mail:

kfa@keepfit.org.uk, website: www.keepfit.org.uk

London Lesbian and Gay Switchboard

4th Floor, Sophie House, 32-35 Featherstone Street,
London EC1Y 8QX, tel. 020 7608 1233, e-mail:

lgbp@lgbp.freereserve.co.uk

National Phobics Society

Zion Centre, Royce Road, Hulme, Manchester M15 5FQ,
tel. 0161 227 9898, e-mail: natphob.soc@good.co.uk,

website: www.phobics-society.org.uk

Relate

Herbert Gray College, Little Church Street, Rugby,
Warwickshire CV21 3AP, tel. 01788 573241, website:

www.relate.org.uk

For details of local branches of Relate, look in your
telephone directory

Samaritans

0845 7909090

Stress Management Training Institute

Foxhills, 30 Victoria Avenue, Shanklin, Isle of Wight

PO37 6LS, tel. 01983 868166, fax. 01983 866666, e-
mail: admin@smti.org, website: www.smti.org

Advice on relaxation techniques and referral to a teacher

Women's Aid Federation

PO Box 391, Bristol BS99 7WS, tel. 0117 944 4411,
helpline: 0845 7023468, fax. 0117 924 1703,
website: www.womensaid.org.uk

Support, information and advice to women experiencing domestic violence. Referral to other sources of help and refuges