

LONELINESS OVERVIEW

"Lonely (1) a. being without companions; lone; b. characterized by aloneness; solitary. (2) unfrequented by people; desolate, a lonely crossroad; (3) a. dejected by the awareness of being alone; b. producing such dejections, "the loneliness night of the week." (*The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, 1992)

If the ultimate goal of most religions is union or "at-one-ment," vertical and horizontal communion, divine and human companionship, then loneliness is "hell on earth." Theological images of hell speak more to this age in terms of isolation and alienation than fire and brimstone.

Human beings are social creatures; therefore the lack of social connection is an aberration, a basic human lack. Loneliness is a human malfunction. It is a painful thing to suffer from loneliness.

Of course loneliness can be felt at several levels. Traveling alone to a new country, arriving at a new school, leaving family or friends all instill in us temporary feelings of loneliness. Then, there is the loneliness that lingers; and we may feel lonely, as they say, even in a crowd of people, a party when everyone else seems to be with friends. We have to set our minds on getting through this lingering loneliness.

A death, divorce, a sudden departure of a friend or favorite teacher/pastor/colleague may produce a deeper loneliness that won't go away. Loneliness is part of the grief process that may last longer than expected. Some of it is a natural part of life; sometimes we may need help in working out of such loneliness.

Then, there is a deep and chronic loneliness that leads into depression, and needs to be treated as such. Most of us do not know, and can hardly empathize with, such raging and clinging loneliness.

Loneliness is also different throughout our life stages. It is difficult for parents and other caregivers to understand the loneliness of a child. Yet, it's estimated that 1 in every 33 children suffer from childhood loneliness and depression—up to 2.5% of children and 8.3% of adolescents in the U.S. Changes in eating or sleeping habits, persistent sadness, withdrawing from friends and activities, and poor school performance may be signs of this condition. Along with this may come rebelliousness toward rules and authority.

Causes of such childhood conditions may be the death, divorce or prolonged absence of a parent or family member, friend, or favorite teacher. Some children

experience scorn or rejection from a caregiver. Chronic illness of parents, or when children are in the hospital for a long time by themselves, may bring about childhood loneliness and depression.

Adolescence is a time for working out one's identity. This is effectively accomplished only with peers. Relationships are especially vital to teenage establishment of self-image and confidence, identity, values and boundaries, interests, opinions and personal vocation. As young people push away from "family identity" to establish their own identities, peers become their temporary and transitional family. Along with family, friends are the most important part of a teenager's life. Without friends they are lost. Loneliness is therefore threatening to teenagers in a critical and poignant way.

College and university students, especially in their first two years, may experience loneliness and depression to life-threatening degrees. They are still working out identity issues and beginning to face the task of relational intimacy as a life task. In addition they have just left home and may feel dangerously "on their own." You will notice that many of the Internet resources on Loneliness come from universities trying to protect their students from problems involving painful feelings of loneliness.

Suicide attempts and "successful suicides" are most common at three stages of life: (1) early adolescence in school years, (2) later adolescence at colleges/universities, and (3) old age when loss of family/friends' support and terminal diseases heightens loneliness and despair.

Loneliness can be treated. We can adjust our lives and find better coping mechanisms when loneliness seems overwhelming. It is important to hear the stories of those who have overcome loneliness. It is critical to find the right support. Most important, if you have questions about your own or another's lingering loneliness, consult a dependable counseling service.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. What song or songs do you think of that speak of loneliness?
2. All of us have felt lonely but to many different degrees. When did you feel most lonely?
3. Did you ever have a family member or friend who was experiencing distressing loneliness? How did you respond? What was the outcome? Should we blame ourselves for another's loneliness?
4. How did you react to this article? What impressed you? With what do you take exception? What needs further elaboration?

5. How and where could this article (and related articles) be profitably discussed?

IMPLICATIONS

1. Loneliness is a universal struggle, not for all of us, but for many around us. If we do not experience painful loneliness ourselves, it is difficult to know what others are going through.
2. Religions generally, and the Bible in particular, teach care for the lonely and provide remedies for loneliness. Consider, for instance, "When (or "if" in some translations) my father and mother forsake me, the Lord will take me up." (Psalm 27: 10) The psalmist also speaks of being forsaken by a closest friend. And "loving kindness" is taught throughout the Jewish and Christian scriptures.
3. Those who are lonely need to experience attention, love, and hope which lead to acceptance of life and peace of inner spirit. They must also be determined to work their way out of loneliness and depression to the best of their ability.
4. Connectedness and community ought to be the goal of secular society and faith congregations. Consumerism has robbed us of civic connections; individualism has replaced social capital. Not only to reduce loneliness, but to secure the survival of the human race, we need to turn from consumerist isolation to new goals of a more simple and communal life.