

Loneliness

Loneliness is an emotional state in which a person experiences a powerful feeling of emptiness and isolation. Loneliness is not necessarily being alone. We may be alone for long periods without feeling at all lonely. On the other hand we may feel lonely in a familiar setting without really understanding why. The best way to begin to understand loneliness is to examine some of the ways people experience it.

You may feel lonely when:

- you're alone and you don't feel you have a choice not to be;
- you feel that you're lacking attachments you had in the past;
- you are facing changes in your life--a new school, town, job, or other changes;
- you feel there's no one in your life with whom you can share your feelings and experiences;
- your self-perceptions are that you're unacceptable, unlovable, not worthwhile even if others don't share those perceptions.

Misconceptions About Loneliness

There are many misconceptions about loneliness. Individuals suffering from loneliness often believe that:

- loneliness is a sign of weakness, or immaturity;
- there's something wrong with them;
- they are only one who feels this way.

Loneliness can be made more intense by what an individual tell themselves it means. Research suggests that people who think of loneliness as a defect tend to have the following difficulties:

- greater difficulty in taking social risks, in asserting themselves, in making phone calls to initiate social contact, in introducing themselves to others, in participating in groups, and in enjoying themselves at parties.
- less skill in self-disclosure, less responsiveness to others, and a greater tendency to approach social encounters with cynicism and mistrust.
- more likelihood of evaluating themselves and others in negative terms and more tendency to expect others to reject them.

What To Do About Loneliness

It is important not to view loneliness as a defect or as an unalterable personality characteristic and to recognize that loneliness is something that can be changed. It is also important to know that loneliness is a common experience. According to a recent national survey, one quarter of all adults experience painful loneliness at least every few weeks, and the incidence among adolescents and college students is even higher. Loneliness is neither a permanent state nor "bad" in itself. Instead it should be viewed more accurately as a signal or indicator of important needs that are going unmet.

You, or anyone, should take action when important needs aren't being met. Begin by identifying which needs are not being met in your specific situation. Your loneliness may result from a variety of needs. It may involve the need to develop a circle of friends or a special friend. It may involve learning to do things for yourself, without friends. Or it may involve learning to feel better or more content about yourself in general.

Developing Friendships

There are a number of ways to begin meeting your needs for friendship. Consider the following: Remind yourself that your loneliness will not last forever.

In doing the things you ordinarily do in the course of your daily schedule, look for ways to get involved with people.

Put yourself in new situations where you will meet people. Engage in activities in which you have genuine interest. In so doing you will be more likely to meet the kind of people you are interested in meeting, people with whom you have something in common.

Make use of resources. Find out about organizations and activities in the community. Examples are clubs, churches, part time jobs, and volunteer work. Ask for ideas from someone who has been around longer than you have.

Work at developing your social skills. Practice getting to know others and letting them know you.

Don't judge new people on the basis of past relationships. Instead, try to see each person you meet from a new perspective.

Intimate friendships usually develop gradually as people learn to share their inner feelings. Avoid rushing into intimate friendships by sharing too quickly or expecting that others will. Let the process develop naturally.

Value all of your friendships and their unique characteristics rather than believing that only a romantic relationship will relieve your loneliness.