



For better
mental health

How to... cope with loneliness



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“““

“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 fortieth 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.”

“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*

Loneliness is one of our greatest dreads. Most of us have felt it. Most of us have feared it. Yet, it is a subject that is rarely talked about. This booklet outlines the causes of loneliness and what you can do to overcome it.



What exactly is loneliness?

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's a balancing act, a see-sawing between the search for intimacy and an acceptance of isolation that continues throughout life. However smoothly this passage from birth to mature adulthood goes, there are bound to be times in our lives when this process of growing up, of becoming separate selves, feels difficult; times when we feel anxious, abandoned, unloved, insecure. In other words, when we feel lonely.

Modern lifestyles

The particular stresses of modern life tend to make people particularly vulnerable to loneliness. Changes in employment practice, a rising divorce rate, and the fact that people move away, have caused many to suffer the ache of loneliness. A considerable number of people in all age groups now live alone.

Feeling unwelcome

Negative attitudes towards single mothers, and to those who are long-term unemployed or who have mental health problems, can increase a person's sense of isolation. He or she may come to feel that the loneliness, which has been caused by their circumstances, is somehow all their own fault.

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

The importance of solitude

In our busy, extroverted culture, with its emphasis on togetherness, we tend to classify aloneness and solitude as the same thing, and to think of them both in a negative way. For many people, the word lonely can conjure up an image of an isolated figure in a bed-sit. Yet being alone is not the same as being lonely.

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There are plenty of loners who happily choose solitude as a way of life. Solitude has been helpful to a number of well-known 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. Some people need to be alone to allow creativity to blossom.

Social exclusion

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



What are the most common causes?

"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."

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

You may have chosen to change your circumstances. Moving to a new area or starting a family, for example, can be exciting and positive. Yet, people often find that to begin all over again in a new environment can be very painful. Divorce, bereavement, retirement and unemployment are common causes of loneliness. If the partner or the job that boosted your self-esteem and made life meaningful suddenly disappears, everything can feel hopeless and futile.

Single parents

The house-bound mother with her first baby can feel acutely isolated, but single parents are particularly vulnerable. 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 for a social life.

The elderly

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. In retirement, many elderly people have no close family to turn to for companionship. Additionally, illness, increasing disability and a fear of going out alone may make elderly people feel like prisoners in their own homes.

Lone carers

The people who care for 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 *How to cope as a carer*. Details of this and other booklets mentioned here can be found under *Further reading*, on p. 14.)

Mental distress

To be labelled as mentally ill can be distressing and potentially very isolating, not least because public opinion can be so hostile towards anyone with mental health difficulties. 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 violent.

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The very nature of some mental health problems reinforces this isolation. Someone with agoraphobia may be stuck at home and cut off from the normal social outlets. Feelings of panic at the thought of being sociable and meeting new people is much more common than people 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, depressed, or trapped in addictive behaviour, may have low self-esteem and feel guilty and worthless. This can lead them to shun company and cut themselves off from their families and friends. (See *Understanding depression*, *Understanding anxiety*, *How to increase your self-esteem*, and *How to cope with panic attacks*, details on p. 14.)

Physical disability

People with a physical disability are similarly disadvantaged and stigmatised. Mobility is often a problem and many disabled people find themselves excluded from access to a large number of social activities. People who are HIV positive or who have AIDS are likely to encounter prejudice.

Discrimination

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. (See *Useful organisations*, on p. 12.)

Why does it seem worse at certain times of life?



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 feelings of insecurity and loneliness.

Adolescence, young adulthood, the 'thirty-something' stage, mid-life crisis, menopause and old 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.

Why do some people feel this way, all the time?



"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*

For some people, feelings of loneliness are more constant and appear unrelated to external events or time of life. It is impossible to generalise about why someone might feel constantly lonely. Sometimes, a person feels unable to like themselves or to 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, they continue to feel abandoned and unlovable in all relationships, including the relationship with themselves. Sometimes, people cut themselves off, consciously or unconsciously, because they are afraid of being hurt. (See *Further reading*, on p. 14.)

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Those who are vulnerable to a constant inner loneliness may try to avoid being on their own, and will seek out other people 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, so that they don't have to face a world of people they feel unconnected to. If you feel that this describes your situation, it's important to remember that many others feel the same way, and that there are understanding people to talk to, who can help you overcome these feelings. (See p. 11.)

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 Samaritans (see *Useful organisations*, on p. 12).



How can I overcome it?

It's 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 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 the difficult feelings that 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.

Techniques like yoga, meditation, and even just keeping a journal, can help you to relax and replace frantic activity with a calmer sense of yourself. (See *Further reading*, on p. 14, for details of Mind booklets on these subjects.)

It's worth spending time concentrating on something that really interests you, 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 you can face yourself, your relationships with other people will improve. You will be able to reach out to others with less of a hungry need and more of an ability to give. You will find you have more interest in them and the world around you, which they will respond to.

Learning to be with others

If you spend a lot of time alone, because you feel uncomfortable 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 under *Further reading*, on p. 14.)

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

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Local interest groups

You may find it easier to relate to others through the medium of a 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 that cater for a wide range of interests and taste.

Joining a class

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.

Volunteering

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 page listings giving details of friendship clubs, public talks and workshops, so it's worth casting an eye over these.

Can talking therapies help?

Sometimes, people are so afraid of 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, perhaps as a result of abusive experiences, that they find it impossible to believe that people might accept and like them.

Talking to a counsellor or a psychotherapist allows people to safely explore and understand their problems, and to find the courage and 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. For more information about talking treatments, see *Useful organisations* (overleaf), or Mind's booklet *Understanding talking treatments* (see *Further reading*, on p. 14).

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Useful organisations

Mind

Mind is the leading mental health organisation in England and Wales, providing a unique range of services through its local associations, to enable people with experience of mental distress to have a better quality of life. For more information about any mental health issues, including details of your nearest local Mind association, contact the Mind website: www.mind.org.uk or Mind *infoline* on 0845 766 0163.

Age Concern Cymru

1 Cathedral Road, Cardiff CF11 9SD
tel. 029 2037 1566, web: www.accymru.org.uk

Age Concern England

Astral House, 1268 London Road, London SW16 4ER
information line: 0800 009 966, web: www.ageconcern.org.uk
Advice and information for the elderly

British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP)

BACP House, 35–37 Albert Street, Rugby CV21 2SG
tel. 0870 443 5252, web: www.bacp.co.uk
See website or send A5 SAE for details of local practitioners

Carers UK

20–25 Glasshouse Yard, London EC1A 4JT
carers line: 0808 808 7777, web: www.carersonline.org.uk
Information and advice on all aspects of caring

Contact the Elderly

15 Henrietta Street, London WC2E 8QG
freephone: 0800 716 543, web: www.contact-the-elderly.org
Organised gatherings for frail, elderly people who live alone

Gingerbread

7 Sovereign Close, Sovereign Court, London E1W 3HW
advice line: 0800 018 4318, web: www.gingerbread.org.uk
Advice for lone parents

The Keep Fit Association

Astra House, Suite 1.05, Arklow Road, London SE14 6EB
tel. 020 8692 9566, web: www.keepfit.org.uk
Helps people to have safe, effective exercise

London Lesbian and Gay Switchboard

PO Box 7324, London N1 9QS
helpline: 020 7837 7324, web: www.llgs.org.uk
Advice and information service

National Phobics Society

Zion CRC, 339 Stretford Road, Hulme, Manchester M15 4ZY
tel. 0870 770 0456, web: www.phobics-society.org.uk
Counselling and helpline for those suffering from anxiety disorders

Relate

Herbert Gray College, Little Church Street, Rugby CV21 3AP
tel. 0845 456 1310 or 01788 573 241, web: www.relate.org.uk
Offers counselling for adults with relationship difficulties

Samaritans

The Upper Mill, Kingston Road, Ewell, Surrey KT17 2AF
helpline: 08457 90 90 90, web: www.samaritans.org.uk
24 hour helpline for people in distress or despair

Women's Aid

PO Box 391, Bristol BS99 7WS
helpline: 0808 200 0247, web: womensaid.org.uk
National domestic violence charity

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Further reading

- The assertiveness workbook: how to express your ideas and stand up for yourself at work and in relationships* R. J. Paterson (New Harbinger Press 2000) £12.99
- Confidence works: learn to be your own life coach* G. McMahon (Sheldon Press 2001) £7.99
- How to accept yourself* Dr W. Dryden (Sheldon Press 1999) £6.99
- How to assert yourself* (Mind 2003) £1
- How to cope as a carer* (Mind 2003) £1
- How to cope with doubts about your sexual identity* (Mind 2003) £1
- How to cope with relationship problems* (Mind 2003) £1
- How to cope with the stress of student life* (Mind 2003) £1
- How to cope with panic attacks* (Mind 2004) £1
- How to deal with anger* (Mind 2003) £1
- How to deal with bullying at work* (Mind 2001) £1
- How to improve your mental wellbeing* (Mind 2004) £1
- How to increase your self-esteem* (Mind 2003) £1
- How to look after yourself* (Mind 2004) £1
- How to stop worrying* (Mind 2004) £1
- How to survive family life* (Mind 2002) £1
- How to survive mid-life crisis* (Mind 2002) £1
- Making sense of cognitive behaviour therapy* (Mind 2001) £3.50
- Overcoming low self-esteem* M. Fennell (Robinson 1999) £7.99
- Overcoming social anxiety and shyness: a self-help guide using cognitive-behavioural techniques* G. Butler (Robinson 1999) £7.99
- The Mind guide to physical activity* (Mind 2001) £1
- The Mind guide to relaxation* (Mind 2004) £1
- The Mind guide to yoga* (Mind 2001) £1
- Understanding anxiety* (Mind 2003) £1
- Understanding depression* (Mind 2004) £1
- Understanding talking treatments* (Mind 2002) £1

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

Mind does this by:

- advancing the views, needs and ambitions of people with experience of mental distress
- promoting inclusion through challenging discrimination
- influencing policy through campaigning and education
- inspiring the development of quality services which reflect expressed need and diversity
- achieving equal civil and legal rights through campaigning and education.

The values and principles which underpin Mind's work are:
autonomy, equality, knowledge, participation and respect.

For details of your nearest Mind association and of local services contact Mind's helpline, *MindinfoLine*: **0845 766 0163** Monday to Friday 9.15am to 5.15pm. Speech-impaired or Deaf enquirers can contact us on the same number (if you are using BT Textdirect, add the prefix 18001). For interpretation, *MindinfoLine* has access to 100 languages via Language Line.

Scottish Association for Mental Health tel. 0141 568 7000

Northern Ireland Association for Mental Health tel. 028 9032 8474

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