

**HEALTHY MINDS**  
**A WEEKLY COLUMN ALL ABOUT MENTAL WELLNESS**  
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**Loneliness**



The American novelist, Thomas Wolfe, in his 1941 novel *The Anatomy of Loneliness*, “The whole conviction of my life now rests upon the belief that loneliness, far from being a rare and curious phenomenon, peculiar to myself and to a few other solitary men, is the central and inevitable fact of human existence.”

Loneliness is a complex mixture of feelings that we get when we do not meet our intimate and social needs. For some it is a fleeting feeling; for others it stays with us constantly. People who are lonely often are socially withdrawn, have little trust in others or in themselves, feel little control over their destiny, and are often dissatisfied with their relationships, when compared with those individuals who are not lonely. Some differentiate SOCIAL loneliness as an unpleasant experience caused by a poor social network, from EMOTIONAL loneliness, which is the lack of close personal attachments. Sometimes just one close friend or romantic partner is enough to make a big difference.

One psychologist (K. Rook) defined loneliness as “an enduring condition of emotional distress that arises when a person feels estranged from, misunderstood, or rejected by others and/or lacks appropriate social partners for desired activities, particularly activities that provide a sense of social integration and opportunities for emotional intimacy” So we see that lonely people feel that way because they don’t have sufficient interpersonal relationships, or because they have no deeply intimate ones. Unlike lonely people who want more social contact, people who are shy want to avoid social situations. Being shy, however, can lead to being lonely. Loneliness should not be confused with solitude, or wanting to be alone, or with grief, which is sadness caused by separation. However shyness and loneliness both have thinking, feeling, and acting components. The thinking (cognitive) component is driven by the thought that you are separate and isolated from others; the feeling (affective) components are the negative feelings of sadness, anger, and depression; the acting (behavioral) component involves actions such as avoiding others. In some ways, it seems, loneliness is similar to depression.

What are the causes of loneliness? Besides shyness, there is also social anxiety, that tense feeling that some people experience in social situations, especially new ones. Looking further back into an individual’s history, we may find that shy and lonely people both have poor social skills, display anxiety, display too much pessimism, or lack having social networks, such as not belonging to a community; certain social situations such as divorce, breakup of friendships, unemployment, retirement, moving to a new location, hospitalization, and imprisonment, can all lead to loneliness.

Having poor social skills can be a big factor, such as an unwillingness to take social risks, unwillingness to assert their rights to others, and just being socially clumsy. In older

people, being homebound or lacking transportation or having places to congregate with their friends (such as a senior citizen center) can lead to increased isolation and loneliness. Those who need care, as well as the caregivers themselves, can also develop a strong sense of loneliness.

In old age, many individuals become desolate from the recent separation of a loved one. Since women live longer than men, on the average, widowhood is the condition most related to loneliness in old age.

Sometimes the best way that we can break the grip of loneliness is to find a location or contact a person or group that appeals to us, and take little steps to make contact.

**TIP OF THE WEEK:** A recent study has shown that smokers who have attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) are more prone to nicotine addiction than non-smokers, and are more vulnerable to environmental influences such as having parents or friends who smoke, which influence them, in turn, to begin or continue smoking.

Also, many thanks for those of you who have sent me letters and emails, all of which have been encouraging and enlightening.