

Coping with Loneliness

Almost everyone feels lonely at times. Someone close to you may have died, moved away, or you may simply feel that you have no one to talk to on a regular basis. There may even be times when there doesn't seem to be an apparent reason, but whether you are single or in a relationship, loneliness is a feeling that you may experience at some point.

Loneliness can occur at any age; for example, young people may struggle with loneliness as a result of growing up in the digital age and having to substitute face-to-face interactions with online ones. The [World Health Organization explains](#) that loneliness is a risk factor for mental and physical health issues, just like smoking or obesity. While no one is immune from loneliness, there may be times across your lifespan when you will feel lonelier than others.

The difference between loneliness and being alone

Loneliness isn't the same as being alone—it's healthy to feel comfortable when you're by yourself. Everyone needs time alone to think and enjoy quiet activities, such as reading, listening to music, or taking a walk, as these quiet pursuits can be rewarding. However, loneliness is different from voluntary solitude. Loneliness is the feeling of emptiness or isolation that may arise even when you are surrounded by others, such as being in a room filled with people and still feeling alone. Not being able to communicate the things that are important to you or express your feelings to those closest to you often results in feeling isolated and alone with your thoughts and emotions.

Common types of loneliness

Loneliness can be very mild, where you might feel a sense of aching in your chest or stomach. It can also be severe, causing intense emotional pain and physical symptoms such as crying.

Loneliness may result from:

- being physically isolated from other people—for example, because you work at home or on a different shift from others in your organization.
- feeling that you can't relate in meaningful ways, that you can't share important thoughts and feelings with the people close to you, such as a spouse or friends, or feeling that you have mainly quick conversations instead of deep and meaningful ones.
- living in a new place far from your network of friends or relatives or living with people you cannot connect with or open up to.
- the absence of a specific person or group, such as an ex-partner you still feel emotionally connected to or a close friend you used to see every day.

If you feel lonely at times, try to identify the situations that make you feel this way. You might keep a journal for a week or two and note the times when you feel lonely or when you feel strongly connected to others. This may give you ideas on how you could reduce the times when you feel isolated and increase those times when you feel connected.

If you're single and feel lonely on weekends, consider meeting regularly with a friend for a coffee and a walk. You might join a sports club, an exercise class, or a volunteer group. Check out [Meetup](#) or search for volunteer opportunities online in your location.

If you travel a lot, try and develop stronger contacts in places you visit. Consider attending meetings of the local chapter of an organization you belong to at home. You might also video chat with friends and relatives while you're away.

Signs of loneliness

Loneliness can be hard to recognize. It can be mixed with or masked by other emotions, a busy schedule, or a lot of online connections. For example, you may feel sad following a breakup, even if ending the relationship was the right thing to do, because the person you leaned on for support is no longer there. Knowing that loneliness is contributing to your sadness can help you identify what type of support you need to start to feel better.

Social media may exacerbate your feelings of loneliness. Although it can provide people with meaningful connections and relationships, for many people it is still not the same as having face-to-face contact and being in the physical presence of others.

Some signs of loneliness include:

- wishing you didn't have to spend so much time alone
- getting together with people you don't like just so you'll have company
- feeling that you have nobody to talk with about certain things that are important to you
- worrying about who would help you in an emergency
- feeling that nobody really understands or cares about you
- having trouble making or keeping friends who share your interests and values
- feeling isolated from people or excluded from activities you would like to join
- waiting for people to call, write, or extend invitations, instead of taking the initiative to contact them
- staying at work longer than you need to because you don't know people outside the workplace or don't want to return to an empty home
- spending holidays or other special days alone, especially if you'd prefer to share these with others.

Ways to cope with loneliness

The best way to deal with loneliness may depend on its cause.

Situational loneliness—the kind that results from missing a specific person or group that may last only a short time and go away on its own. If you feel lonely because your partner is away on business, you may know you'll feel less lonely when the person returns. Until then, you might distract yourself with enjoyable activities, including some you can't share with your partner. If you like action movies and your partner prefers romantic comedies, take the opportunity to watch

films your partner wouldn't enjoy. Make popcorn and have a party for one or invite friends over to join you.

Frequent or long-term loneliness requires a more active approach. This type of loneliness increases your risk of many mental and physical conditions, from depression to heart disease. You'll enjoy life more if you don't always feel lonely. Loneliness isn't permanent—you can do something about it.

Here are some tips on how to reduce or avoid feelings of loneliness:

Know that it's OK to feel lonely at times. Remember that loneliness doesn't mean there's something wrong with you—it's part of being human. Giving yourself negative messages about loneliness may make it worse. Instead, try to look at feelings of loneliness as a call to action that can help encourage you to make positive changes in your life.

Find healthy outlets for your loneliness. Consider writing about your feelings in a diary, poem, song, or an unsent letter. This will give you an outlet for your feelings and may help you see things you could do to ease your loneliness.

Learn to enjoy your time alone. Think about the kinds of things you might like to do alone, such as reading a good book, listening to music you love, or taking up a new hobby. You might start with short periods alone that increase as you begin to feel more comfortable and enjoy your activities.

Reach out to others. Take control of your situation by reaching out to others, rather than waiting for others to reach out to you.

Set realistic goals. Set goals you can achieve, such as inviting a co-worker out for coffee or calling a friend or relative you know will enjoy hearing from you more frequently.

Get involved in community activities. Try to find at least one shared activity you can enjoy every week, so you'll always be able to look forward to spending enjoyable time with others. You might take a class, join a spiritual or religious organization, or get involved with a team, club, or volunteer activity.

Make time for in-person conversations. Sending texts or email and making quick check-in calls can be a great way to keep in touch with old friends or reach out to new ones, but most people need face-to-face conversations to feel strongly connected to others. Make time for these, too.

Be understanding and accepting. Loneliness can sometimes result from expecting perfection in your relationships. Accept other people's small flaws or differences as readily as you would like them to accept yours.

Remember that you can be lonely regardless of your relationships. Loneliness has more to do with your feelings than with how many friends you have. You can be lonely in a relationship if you can't talk with your partner about the things that are important to you. You can also have an active social life and feel lonely if your relationships seem superficial to you or don't meet your needs.

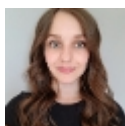
Think about getting a pet. If you feel able and ready for the responsibility, a pet can help to ease loneliness in several ways. In addition to providing companionship, a pet can make it easier to connect with people. For example, if you walk your dog at the same time each day, you may find it easier to get to know neighbors.

Be patient. Friendships don't happen overnight. It takes time to build care and trust. Take advantage of opportunities to build new relationships, but don't be disappointed if they don't develop as quickly as you'd like.

Consider talking with a mental health professional if you can't seem to connect with people. Loneliness may be an indicator that would benefit from the help of a professional. Perhaps they can suggest ways to build strong ties to others, help you understand your own loneliness, or provide guidance on how to manage it. Your assistance program may be able to help you find a therapist or counselor in your community.

Overcoming loneliness can have many physical and emotional benefits. The best way to feel less lonely is to take a proactive approach to reaching out and developing stronger connections to people you know or would like to know.

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