

“Loneliness”

STORY BY

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You were there—at the parties, family dinners, holiday get-togethers. You may even be there on Valentine’s Day. All those snuggle-cuddle, huggy times when we’re supposed to feel close to people.

Well, some of us do and some of us really, *really* don’t.

It doesn’t matter how many people are around or how many hugs are offered, some people just feel lonely. Maybe you are one of them. Why do your coworkers, even your siblings, gush about how “awesome” it was to be with everyone, to reconnect, feel that unity consciousness...when you felt, well...lonely?

In their book, *Loneliness: Human Nature and the Need for Social Connection*, Dr. John T. Cacioppo of the University of Chicago and co-author William Patrick of Harvard University Press look at the differences in people’s perceptions of loneliness and why loneliness is such an important problem. The first question they address is: Who gets lonely? The answer is obviously, “everyone, sometimes,” but it turns out that the powerful effects of loneliness stem from interplay of three complex factors:

“Loneliness and the feeling of being unwanted is the most terrible poverty.”

— Mother Teresa

We each have our own “level of vulnerability to social disconnection, which means that “each of us inherits from our parents a certain level of need for social inclusion (also expressed as sensitivity to the pain of social exclusion), just as we inherit a certain basic body type and basic level of intelligence.” Some of us come from families that want to have dinner together every Sunday night, come what may. Others don’t see relatives for years and don’t miss them.

Each of us has a unique ability to self-regulate the emotions associated with feeling isolated. “Successful self-regulation means being able to cope with challenges while remaining on a fairly even keel—not just outwardly, but deep inside.” You may be one of the souls who can drift around the world with no problem. If so, you are skillful in self-regulation.

Each of us creates our own mental representations and expectations of others. How we interpret our interactions with others is called social cognition. When we are very lonely, “the ways we see ourselves and others, along with the kinds of responses we expect from others, are heavily influenced by both our feelings of unhappiness and threat and our impaired ability to self-regulate.” This means when we see the world through lonely lenses, our worldview and behavior tends to look like Scrooge before his ghostly visitations—isolated and bitter.

However much connection with others we need, if we feel we’re not getting enough, we suffer. “Safety in numbers” and by extension, feeling connected, was necessary for our survival as a species. Since early humans were more likely to survive when

they stuck together, evolution reinforced the preference for strong human bonds by selecting genes that support pleasure in company and produce feelings of unease when involuntarily alone. We feel both good and secure when we are connected, and bad and insecure when not connected. That's why solitary confinement is considered such a severe punishment and tribes banish only the worst social miscreants.

So, if we come into the world with different needs for social connection, who are the natural social connectors? They are those people with warmth, openness, and an emotional generosity that draws others in. They are *present* with others, in sync with them, and open to what real connection might develop. Cacioppo and Patrick say, "The characteristic most common among those low in loneliness is a full availability to whatever genuine social interaction is appropriate to the moment...They are free to seek out and fully contribute to social situations and relationships."

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Loneliness is bad for your health

So, what if you aren't the social type? What's so bad about that? Nothing, if you're talking about aloneness. Being alone and enjoying one's own company is a strong sign of good, emotional health. The problem is that *loneliness* is a health risk. In his vast research with many colleagues, Cacioppo has found that "it was the subjective sense of loneliness—not a lack of objective social support—that *uniquely* predicted depressive symptoms, chronic health conditions, and elevated blood pressure." It's not how many people we're around. It's how connected we feel to them and others.

The research on loneliness suggests five possible pathways that it may negatively influence health:

- Health habits of lonely older adults are worse than those of socially embedded people of similar age and circumstances. They exercise less and eat a higher percentage of calories from fat.
- Lonely older people report a greater number of stressors in their lives, more marital strife, more run-ins with neighbors—25 percent more social problems overall.
- Lonely people express greater feelings of helplessness and threat, even when objective stressors they encountered were the same as those of non-lonely counterparts. They also found the small social uplifts of everyday life were less intense and less gratifying. Lonely people have a "grin and bear it" stance toward life.
- Loneliness is associated with higher traces of the stress hormone epinephrine. It also affects the body's immune and cardiovascular function. Lonely people are less able to absorb stress-reducing benefits that others derive from the comfort and intimacy of their human contacts.
- Their quality of sleep was greatly diminished.

E.A.S.E. into connection

OK, even if you are now somewhat convinced that being lonely is bad for your health, you don't *presto-chango* become "a natural social connector with warmth, openness, and generosity that draws others in." The spirit may be willing, but how are you even going to get started? Cacioppo and Patrick offer a plan. They call it: EASE your way to social connection

E is for Extend yourself

Withdrawal and passivity are associated with loneliness. They are motivated by the perception of being threatened. The world looks scary when you are lonely. Try a small, simple, social connection, like at the library or grocery store. Say, "Thank you for your help. I liked this book," to the librarian. Ask the manager in the grocery store to help you find something. They are small social signals. Don't take reactions personally if the librarian is grumpy or the manager rushed. Try again.

A is for Action plan

Plan how you'll be around others. Volunteering is a good plan, starting with something that doesn't demand a lot of social interaction, such as helping at an animal shelter or food bank. Don't try to do too much at the beginning. Ask for a task that doesn't require too much people contact at first, like stacking the shelves at the food bank. You'll be around people and you'll be appreciated.

S is for Selection

Loneliness is not about the dearth of quantity of people in your life, but the quality of those relationships. Think about whom would likely be good companions for you based on what you like to do. (Think also about how good a companion you are to others, based on how you respond to them and their needs. Relationships by nature are reciprocal.)

E for Expect the best

Practice what you wish to present to the world. Imagine how you want to be and you'll create meaningful connections.

If you haven't watched *A Christmas Carol* in awhile, you might find it helpful. Scrooge, after his awakening, definitely (E) extended himself, (A) made an action plan (no time to waste), (S) selected carefully to whom he would atone and be generous, and (E) expected the best of himself. He succeeded very well, thank you, and so can you.

Dr. John T. Cacioppo is a professor at the University of Chicago and past president of the Association for Psychological Science. William Patrick is formerly the science editor at the Harvard University Press and founding editor of The Journal of Life Sciences.