



## THE ESSENCE OF LONELINESS

### GOALS

1. Recognize the categories of loneliness.
2. State the many feelings that are symptomatic of loneliness.
3. Understand the difference between loneliness and aloneness.
4. Recognize the behaviors associated with loneliness.
5. Know the methods of nursing people who are lonely.
6. Know the mental and physical outcomes of being lonely.
7. Recognize ways to overcome loneliness.

### KEYWORDS FOR APPLICATION

1. Loneliness
2. Isolation
3. Social Loneliness
4. Emotional Loneliness
5. Solitude
6. Aloneness
7. Zoom Fatigue
8. Corona 19
9. Cardiovascular Disease
10. Suicide
11. Depression
12. Alzheimer's
13. Alcoholism
14. Blood Pressure

The word "lonely" originated in 1600 and meant solitary and unfrequented. By the early 1800s, the derivation was used to express the want of company and the comment, "Lonely Hearted."

One descriptive explanation of the lonely feeling went like this:

*"I feel like a freak of nature—not even part of the nature of man. I am so vulnerable. No one likes me—not wanted, not understood—just a blank piece of paper with no writing. Darkness surrounds me, and I shrink into nothing. The more-lonely I feel, the more I need to be lonely."*

## CATEGORIES OF LONELINESS

Categorically, loneliness has five (5) categories:

ISOLATION: How much social contact vs. loneliness (a consequence of few relationships)

SOCIAL LONELINESS: An unsatisfied sense of connection with others

EMOTIONAL LONELINESS: Lack of intimacy or attachment

SOLITUDE: Relationships are satisfactory—(*lonely you want to be, the isolation you have as an outcome*)

## THE MEANING OF “LONELINESS”

Vivek H. Murthy, MD (19<sup>th</sup> Surgeon General of U.S.), in his book entitled, TOGETHER: THE HEALING POWER OF HUMAN CONNECTION IN A SOMETIMES-LONELY WORLD, identifies loneliness as a public health concern. He states that it is the root cause and contributes to many epidemics sweeping the world from alcoholism, drug abuse, violence, depression, and anxiety.

Dr. Murthy claims loneliness is common during medical school and residency. There is a feeling of isolation while trying to deal with a patient’s health problems. These feelings contribute to burnout in medical school and during medical residency programs.

Consider some of Van Morrison’s lyrics, “Meaning of Loneliness,” as it tries to tell us the frustrations, pain, and the personal meaning related to loneliness.

“Lost in a strange city  
Nowhere to turn  
Far cry from the streets that I came from  
It can get lonely when you’re traveling hard---  
But you can even be lonely standing in your own back yard.”

“Nobody knows the existential of dread of the things that go on inside  
Or someone else’s head, whether it be trivial  
Or, something that Dante said---  
But baby, nobody knows the meaning of loneliness!”

“No matter how well you know someone, you can only ever guess  
*How can you ever really know somebody else?---*  
*It takes more than a lifetime just to get to know yourself!*  
Nobody knows the meaning of loneliness!”

“I have to say a word about solitude  
For the soul it sometimes they say can be good  
And I’m partial to it myself, well I must confess  
Nobody knows the meaning of loneliness.”

## **DIFFERENCE BETWEEN LONELINESS AND ALONENESS—KNOWING THE DIFFERENCE**

Loneliness is emotional suffering with feelings of separateness and being disconnected. It reflects a state of insecure attachment with challenged bonding. There is a feeling of inadequacy, not having enough, and a sense of incompleteness, insecurity, and inferiority. Often there is an underlying feeling of envy, greed, and jealousy. You often see it in individuals who aggressively hold on to possessions—e.g., money, property, and the desire to have control and power over others.

*It is the quality of your association with others (not the quantity) that helps to curtail loneliness.*

Aloneness (unlike loneliness) is common in eastern and western meditative environments. These systems of meditation encourage positive and reflective thoughts while being alone. Included are positive thoughts of self-reflection and degrees of wholesome experiences. Mindfulness, as an example, is based on aloneness, which increases a sense of well-being.

## **SEEING LONELINESS**

Loneliness—all around us, we see loneliness! People are without homes and not enough to eat. Residents are isolated in nursing homes and hospitals. Family members are peering through windows to see their hospitalized beloved spouses and grandparents. Patients dressed in robes are pressed against the window, trying to say goodbye as the virus takes its toll. Spouses, families, and, yes, even nurses are left feeling alone in their pain as they see the emotional cost of the CORONA19 virus on the lives around them.

Today, a lonely person is known to be free from other's openness and judgment. It is an escape physically or mentally to a place of felt-safety. Sometimes there is an irrational fear in the self about caring *for* others and self-doubt *about* others. A feeling of darkness seems to surround the person as they shrink into nothingness. It is most often related to how other people make a person feel. The sentiment is stated as always feeling hungry with no place to eat. This furious cycle causes a person to be afraid of being alone, yet needs to be alone. It is a vicious self-absorption cycle. There is an increase in stress and heightened fear.

Life on the lonely streets in tents also is a reminder of homelessness and loneliness. And—people evicted from their dwellings find themselves alone on the street. Loneliness has worsened during the pandemic with dire consequences and perspective. And, so it goes on and on—a scenario for tears.

In January 2020, Cigna found 61% of adults were “lonely.” Even Zoom has had its impact regardless of the attempt to relieve our loneliness! Overuse of Zoom is now called “Zoom fatigue” due to its frequent use during the increased stress caused by COVID 19.

Loneliness is deadly! In a book from 2008, “Loneliness: Human Nature and the Need for Social Connection” by William Patrick, it was stated that 20% of early deaths were an outcome of loneliness. Today, 50% are more likely to die prematurely than those with healthy relationships. To help this problem, Britain now has a minister for loneliness as of 2017. Minnesota now identifies an optional legal death cause as “COVID 19 Social Isolation.”

The availability of social media has not helped. You can have 5100 and more (too many to count) friends on social media and still feel lonely.

## **NURSING THE LONELY**

As nurses, we, too, feel pain—enough to last our lifetime. Out of our desperation, we can also feel alone and share the sadness displayed by many others. As nurses, we experience others' pain as we see the insatiable sadness, isolation, and the need to comfort grieving families. We, even as professionals, try to shelter ourselves from all the pain we see and hear. Sometimes we feel alone in what seems like a never-ending challenge.

Even though the word “lonely” did not occur during a study with health care providers, the comments indicated *loneliness* as they dealt with another person's health problems. Upon reflection of the many similar statements of “alone” feelings, it was obvious that aloneness feelings are a new epidemic and a common happening with isolated people of the world.

“Compassionate Care” visits to health care facilities are now under consideration. The visitations (with an emphasis on outdoor visits) would be used for patients who lack family contact, therefore experiencing a sense of loneliness. The concept allows one visitor per patient/resident to assist with mental, physical, or social well-being if the nursing staff deems it necessary. Visitors must have proof of being negative for COVID 19.

## **OUTCOME OF LONELINESS**

Research at Brigham Young University (BYU) has shown that aloneness feelings cause shortness of life span—similar to 15 cigarettes a day, an increase in obesity, and a sedentary lifestyle.

Signs that indicate a shortening of life span include:

- \*Cardiovascular disease and stroke
- \*Increased blood pressure
- \*Increase in cholesterol levels
- \*Depression and suicide
- \*Increased stress levels
- \*Decrease in memory and learning
- \*Increase in feelings of loneliness
- \*Antisocial behavior
- \*Poor decision-making
- \*Alcoholism and drug abuse
- \*Alzheimer's disease progression
- \*Altered brain functioning
- \*Altered perceptions

## TACKLING AND OVERCOMING LONELINESS

As a nurse, when you feel alone, it is hard to think that anyone cares about you—then how can you care for others! As a nurse, the desire to resolve personal feelings of loneliness is the same as many patients/residents feel during health problems.

Consider a beneficial role by helping a patient/resident better understand themselves. Tackle loneliness using four (4) steps with possible clarifying questions.

1. Identify the emotion.

What are you doing that shows and identifies loneliness?

What do you think the reason is as to why I feel lonely?

Does a certain person make you feel lonely?

Do you feel an emotional connection with someone/something?

2. Try to understand the change in thoughts.

What was the incident/happening that started these feelings of loneliness?

How long have you felt lonely?

(Emotional intelligence is the basis of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy)

3. Take the initiative.

How about establishing social relationships?

4. Encourage feelings.

What physical action(s) elicit positive feelings?

Loneliness can become a normal part of our lives. It takes the help of a special person to help combat such feelings of despair. Consider the following specifics when helping someone overcome loneliness.

\*Encourage awareness that other people DO care about you!

\*Talk positively about what a person loves to do—aspirations—people loved and appreciated!

\*Go places and do things with other people (e.g., go places, eat out, meet and talk with friends!

\*Realize that you are not alone!

\*Be assured that people do care about you!

\*Talk about things you love to do—your work, your aspirations, people you love—and why!

\*Participate in small or get involved in activities—even a tiny amount!

\*Get a pet. Take care of a pet!

\*Learn to appreciate “alone time” by doing an activity alone that increases mental and personal talents!

\*Reconnect with family and friends—call on the phone, write letters, send pictures!

\*Write a journal regularly about feelings and a positive plan to resolve negative/alone feelings!

\*Do meditation in a quiet spot!

\*Concentrate on breathing with no distracting thoughts!

\*Increase attention to personal feelings, hearing, smelling, feeling, and other body senses!

\*Pay attention to emotional feelings!

- \*Find things to do!
- \*See a professional!
- \*Appreciate alone time!
- \*Be kind to yourself and love yourself!
- \*Reconnect with family!
- \*Do meditation exercises in a quiet spot!
- \*Pay attention to your body senses—smelling, breathing, tasting, hearing, feeling!
- \*Recognize emotional feelings!
- \*Volunteer!
- \*Do likable “stuff”!
- \*Concentrate on others!
- \*Think about and help others!
- \*Redirect negative thoughts to positive thoughts!

#### **LAST THOUGHT**

When it comes to personal feelings of loneliness—IT STARTS WITH YOU (OR ANY LONELY PERSON),  
KNOWING YOURSELF AND YOUR FEELINGS!

**AUTHOR: Carolyn R. Taylor, Ed.D. M.N. R.N.**