

Coping with Loneliness

Almost everyone feels lonely at times. Whether you're single or married, you may miss someone who has died or moved away. Or, you may wish you knew someone whom you could talk with or do things with on a regular basis.

Loneliness can occur at any age. A lot of millennials assume that loneliness occurs most often in older people. But a large study by U.S. and German researchers found that loneliness is most common in people under 30, perhaps because they're more likely than others to substitute online interactions for the deeper relationships that occur in real life. Almost three out of four American adults experience loneliness, according to a 2016 Harris poll. Whether you're lonely a lot of the time or just once in a while, you can do many things to feel less isolated and more connected to other people.

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. Quiet pursuits can be happy and rewarding. But loneliness is different from voluntary solitude—it's the feeling of emptiness or isolation you have when you want to be with others but can't or have too many thoughts and feelings you can't share with others.

Common types of loneliness

Loneliness can be very mild, resembling a dull ache in the heart you feel only at certain times, such as on holidays or Saturday nights, or when your best friend tells you she's getting married and you wonder if you'll see her as often after the wedding. Or, it can be so severe it causes 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 or share important thoughts and feelings with the people close to you, such as a spouse or friends, or feeling that you

have mainly quick online conversations instead of the deeper ones you'd also like to have

- living in a new place far from your network of friends or relatives, or living for financial reasons with parents whom you can't talk with about some things that matter a lot to you
- the absence of a specific person or group, such as someone you used to date or the people you saw every day when you were in the military or at your last job

If you feel lonely at times, try to identify the situations that make you feel this way. You might keep a log or journal for a week or two and note the times when you feel lonely and 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 Sunday afternoons, consider getting a group of friends together on a regular basis for brunch or a hike. You might join a sports club that has Sunday afternoon hikes or volleyball games. Or look for a volunteer project you could do then, such as leading tours at a museum or working in a hospital. A good way to get a sense of what's available in your area is to visit [Meetup](#), an online gateway to offline interest groups around the U.S. and world. You can search Meetup for groups in your community that focus on your interests, such as hiking, movies, Japanese culture, business networking, or LGBT concerns. Or you can post a notice to let people know that you're starting a group. If you're looking for volunteer opportunities, search for them at [Volunteer Match](#).

If you're married and feel lonely on business trips, you might develop stronger contacts in places you visit. Get to know clients and their families better or attend meetings of the local chapter of an organization you belong to at home. You might also use FaceTime or Skype to talk face-to-face with friends and relatives while you're away.

Signs of loneliness

Loneliness can be hard to recognize. It's often masked by other emotions, a busy schedule, or a lot of online connections. For example, you may feel "depressed" when a romance ends. But you may not be clinically depressed as experts define it. Instead, you may actually be lonely, and you may find the feeling easier to overcome if you acknowledge it. Or you may have valued co-workers but few people outside of work with whom you can share deep thoughts and feelings.

Social media can also mask loneliness. You may have hundreds of friends or connections on Facebook, Twitter, or Instagram. But if you rarely or never see them offline or can't talk openly with them when you do, you may still feel lonely.

You may be experiencing loneliness if you frequently:

- wish you didn't have to spend so much time alone
- get together with people you don't like just so you'll have company
- feel that you have nobody to talk with about certain things that are important to you
- worry about who would help you in an emergency
- feel that nobody really understands or cares about you
- have trouble making or keeping friends who share your interests and values
- feel isolated from people or excluded from activities you would like to join
- wait for people to call, write, or extend invitations, instead of taking the initiative to contact them
- stay 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
- spend 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—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 fun 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, and can shorten your life. 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 will make it worse. Instead, try to look at feelings of loneliness as a wake-up call 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 journal, 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. Are you lonely because you wait for others to call, text, email, or extend invitations? You may have to learn how to reach out to others. Be willing to take even a small step to make new acquaintances or strengthen ties to old friends.

Set realistic goals. If you have few close friends, don't try to become the most popular person at work or on your block. 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 every Sunday.

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 house of worship, or get involved with a team, club, or volunteer activity.

Aim to have more than one close friend. Many people are lonely because they expect too much of a partner or one or two close friends who may not always share their interests or be able to meet their needs. A good way to avoid this situation is to develop a diverse group of friends from different areas of your life, such as school, work, and other activities.

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 everybody needs face-to-face conversations to feel strongly connected to others. Make time for these, too.

Be willing to overlook small flaws or differences. Loneliness can result from expecting perfection. Accept other people's small flaws or differences as readily as you would like them to accept yours. Every friend doesn't have to share all your views or be your "soul mate."

Avoid relying too heavily on social media. Facebook and other sites can help you keep in touch with friends and former co-workers or classmates. But spending too much time online can lead to isolation. Limit your time on social media so it doesn't become the sole focus of your social life. And always take safety precautions. Never give out personal details that could compromise your identity, and if you want to get together with someone you've met online, meet in a public place and let someone know where you're going.

Remember that you can be lonely even if you are in a relationship or have a lot of friends. Loneliness has more to do with your feelings than with how long you've been married or how many friends you have. You can be lonely in a marriage if you can't talk with your spouse about the things that are important to you. And you can 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. 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 caring 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 therapist or other counselor if you can't seem to connect with the people you'd like. Loneliness may be a sign of a deeper problem that would benefit from the help of a professional who can suggest ways to build strong ties to others. Your employee assistance program (EAP) 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.

© TELUS Health 2023



Alexandra Mezey

Life Coach

Alexandra Mezey, LICSW, has a master's degree in social welfare, completed postgraduate training in family therapy and advisement for Employee Assistance Professional certification. She has worked as a therapist and life coach, and as an EAP counselor, helping people with issues across the lifespan.

For confidential advice and support: [Get Help Now](#)