

# WHY LONELINESS MATTERS

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*We live in an era when loneliness and isolation are on the increase. At a time of unprecedented human connection through the Internet, social media and mobile phones, some estimates indicate that 40 percent of adults over the age of 65 will experience loneliness, with the incidence increasing with age.*

Mother Teresa described loneliness and the feeling of being unwanted as the most terrible poverty of all. “The greatest disease in the West today is not TB, AIDS or leprosy; it is being unwanted, unloved and uncared for. We can cure physical diseases with medicine, but the only cure for loneliness, despair and hopelessness is love.”

When was the last time you laughed uproariously? The last time you felt enormously proud of an accomplishment? These experiences most likely occurred when other people were present. To be emotionally well, we need relationships, we need friends; we need a sense of community. You may remember the hit song of years ago ‘Friends and Neighbours’ with the lyrics saying it so well “...when you’ve got friends and neighbours you’re the richest ‘man’ in town”.

While on a study visit to the University of Arizona and during a hospital ward round, I remember reading the medical chart of a frail, elderly lady. On it was written, ‘No medicine to be given’. Instead the instructions were, ‘To be hugged three times a day.’

## **Impact on Health.**

Chronic loneliness has been identified as a health hazard right up there with health risk factors such as smoking, obesity or lack of exercise. When people are socially isolated health risks increase with the possibility of the occurrence of elevated blood pressure, diminished immunity and sleep problems. Chronic loneliness can have an impact on mental health increasing the risk of clinical depression. Studies also show that chronic loneliness aids the onset and progression of Alzheimer’s disease and other forms of dementia.

## **Pointers to help overcome loneliness:**

1. ***One small step at a time.*** Get out and about. You don’t have to be best friends with someone to benefit from interacting with them.
2. ***Stay positive.*** Lonely people tend to expect rejection, which makes it more likely to happen.
3. ***Don’t be embarrassed about the way you feel.*** Talk to a friend, family member, or a counsellor to help you reframe your thoughts about how you perceive others see you.

Perhaps the most effective approach of all to overcome loneliness is to perform an act of Kindness, to go out and help someone. Scientists have shown that an act of kindness by a person produces a highly significant momentary increase in well-being in the doer – such a feeling of well-being is so desperately needed when a sense of loneliness and isolation pervades.

## **Solitude versus loneliness**

Loneliness is not to be equated with solitude. You can be alone without being lonely or you can feel lonely in a crowd. Loneliness is when you are alone, not by choice. Solitude is a glorious time when you are alone by choice, a chance to organize your thoughts, to clear your thinking.