

Finding Your Way Through



We are built for empathy, connection and love. That's why loneliness hurts so much.

BY ALAN D. WOLFELT, PH.D.



The pandemic has increased our awareness of the problem of loneliness. We were lonely before the coronavirus arose, and we're even lonelier now since routine social distancing, isolation and quarantining became unfortunate necessities in life.

Today, loneliness is a crisis that cuts across cultures, continents and classes. Britain has added a minister for loneliness to its federal government. In the United States, 35% of adults over age 45 report feeling lonely. In one recent Cigna survey, more than half of Americans said they always or sometimes feel that no one knows them well. And young people are lonely, too. Some studies have found that millennials and Generation Z are the loneliest of all.

Human beings are social creatures. While each of us is a capable, autonomous individual, we are not meant to exist individually for very long. Since time began, we've lived in social groups. We are built to interact with and rely on others. We are built for empathy, connection and love.

That's why loneliness hurts. But not only does it wound us emotionally, it causes measurable physical harm. Studies show that lonely people are more likely to get sick, suffer cognitive decline and die sooner. Scientists have learned that loneliness even affects the body on the cellular

level. Social isolation can trigger chronic inflammation, which elevates the risk of heart disease, stroke, cancer and dementia.

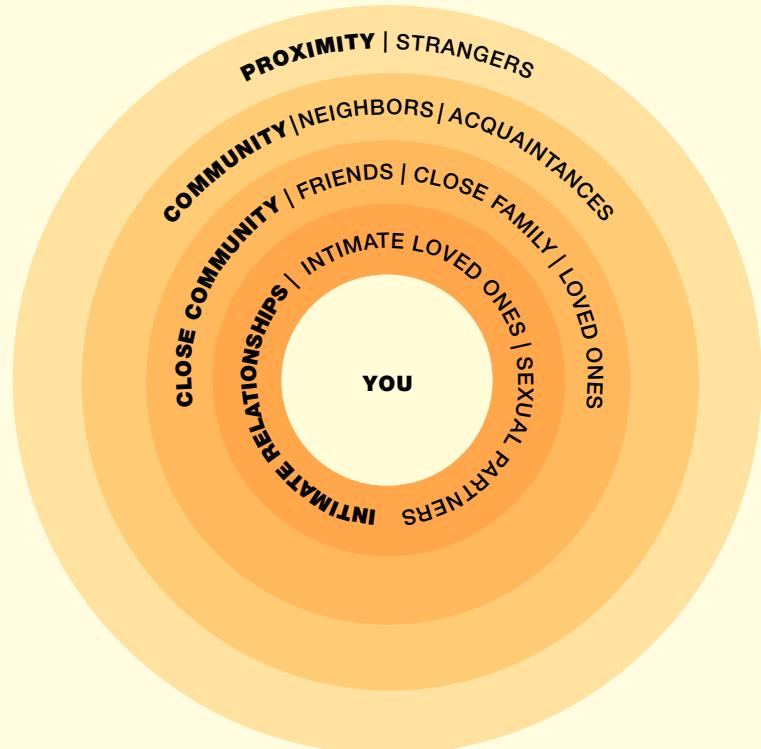
Loneliness is a personal mental wellness challenge, but it's also a public health threat as ominous as any pandemic or global climate danger. If you've been feeling lonely or know someone who has, it's time to take stock and address the problem.

Measuring Your Loneliness

All of us are part of a number of communities and relationships, and all of these together form our circles of connection. Depend-

ing on your life circumstances right now, you may be connected to your immediate family (partner and children, if you have them), your chosen family (close friends), your family of origin (mother, father, siblings), your casual friends and acquaintances, your extended family, your work community, your neighborhood, any groups or organizations to which you belong and the city or town in which you live.

In the Wolfelt Loneliness Inventory that follows, you will score your sense of loneliness in several circles: proximity, community, close community, intimate relationships and you. Any



section with a low score (mostly 1s and 2s) is an area in your circles of connection that would probably benefit from strengthening and perhaps expanding.

Yet keep in mind that each person's need for connection is different. Based on your personality, degree of extroversion or introversion, and life circumstances, you may feel well connected with lots of people in your life or just a few. In general, I would say that it's necessary to have a tribe. That is, it's important to have connections in all of the concentric circles, even if you only have one or two solid entries in each circle. In addition, when it comes to combating loneliness, the most important circles are those toward the center. If your relationships with yourself, intimate others and close community are strong and fulfilling, you are less likely to feel lonely.

Also, don't be surprised if you have a busy work life yet still feel lonely. As one funeral director said to me recently, "I have never been more busy, yet I've never felt more alone." In general, funeral directors and funeral home staff have been overworked during the pandemic, and I know many are also experiencing emotional distress and loneliness. That's because you are being called on to manage the crises of others without sufficient support for your own emotional and social needs, which are naturally heightened right now. If you feel lonely, it's not only understandable, it's also a signal that you need extra help and support.

Finally, don't overlook the fact that *you* are in the center of the circles of connection. Excellent self-esteem and self-care ripple out from the center, naturally engaging and buoying the other circles. Conversely, poor self-esteem and self-care ripple out from the center but have the opposite ef-

fect. They damage and weaken connections in all the other circles. Think of healthy self-love as propelling good vibes through the circles of connection and poor self-love as emanating weak and sometimes even toxic vibes.

Now, I invite you to take inventory of your loneliness.

Before we talk about loneli-

ness scores, I want to emphasize that loneliness is not truly a measurable experience. The scale I've created is meant only to help you begin to understand your loneliness better. If you feel deeply lonely, you are deeply lonely, no matter what your score may say. The same goes for minimal or more occasional loneliness.

THE WOLFELT LONELINESS INVENTORY

	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often
I see other people in stores and places I visit routinely.	1	2	3	4
I am around other people in my daily life.	1	2	3	4
I chat a bit with strangers in public places.	1	2	3	4
PROXIMITY SCORE (out of 12)				
I know my neighbors and talk to them.	1	2	3	4
I feel part of several communities. I participate in groups and share the same interests as other people with whom I socialize.	1	2	3	4
I feel connected to my community.	1	2	3	4
COMMUNITY SCORE (out of 16)				
I feel I have companionship in my daily life.	1	2	3	4
I feel I have meaningful relationships with people I care about.	1	2	3	4
I have people in my life with whom to spend holidays and other special days.	1	2	3	4
I feel other people know me pretty well.	1	2	3	4
CLOSE-COMMUNITY SCORE (out of 16)				
I feel I have people I can talk to about my biggest dreams, worries and losses.	1	2	3	4
I have the amount of physical closeness or touch in my life that I want.	1	2	3	4
I have the amount of sex in my life that I want.	1	2	3	4
I feel I have the best friend(s) I want.	1	2	3	4
I feel I have the partner I want.	1	2	3	4
INTIMATE RELATIONSHIPS SCORE (out of 20)				
I feel good about myself.	1	2	3	4
I treat myself with kindness and compassion.	1	2	3	4
I take good care of myself.	1	2	3	4
SELF-RELATIONSHIP SCORE (out of 12)				
TOTAL SCORE (out of 78)				

With these caveats firmly in mind, on this scale, a score of 19-38 points to severe loneliness, 39-57 moderate loneliness and 58-78 mild loneliness. As mentioned before, any section with a low score (mostly 1s and 2s) is an area in your circles of connection that would probably benefit from strengthening and perhaps expanding. In addition to understanding the degree of your loneliness, the color coding and sections in the scale will also help you discern which areas of your life would most benefit from more connection.

Finding Your Way Past Loneliness

Finding your way past loneliness involves befriending yourself and others. But as you've probably realized, it's not as simple as saying, "I just need to make friends" or "I just need to socialize more."

For one thing, making friends and socializing is difficult for some people, and the more disconnected you are at this point, the more difficult it can be. For another, you may already have friends and social circles yet still feel lonely, especially during this time of isolation and social distancing.

Despite current restrictions, the best way to build bonds with others is through proximity, repetition and quality time.

This may sound totally obvious, but when we're physically near someone frequently, we're more likely to develop a strong relation-

ship with them. Being together in person is best, but when that's not possible – when people live in different communities, for example – it's still possible to maintain close ties through frequent video calls, emails and texts.

But quality time is the other essential factor in the equation. As you may have experienced yourself, you can be around someone every day yet not feel close to them. Perhaps you even live in the same household with others yet feel like you don't have effective, cherished relationships with them.

Emotional bonds are built on quality time. What does that mean? Quality time is time spent with another person or peo-

*The eternal
quest of
the individual
human being
is to shatter
his loneliness.*

NORMAN COUSINS
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ple during which you are focusing on each other, communicating well and empathizing. You can be in the same room with another person, each immersed in your own phone, but this is not

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quality time. But if you sit together in front of the same laptop or TV, watching a favorite show and chatting about it as it plays, that may count as quality time. Similarly, distractedly talking “at” each other while you’re busy with other things is not quality time, but stopping to look each other in the eyes and really give one another undivided attention – that’s the quality time needed to build love and devotion.

Stop for a second and think about the most cherished moments in your life – the ones that not only bring a smile to your

face but also tug at your heart. It’s likely these moments were spent sharing quality time with those you loved the most. That’s one of the most important questions I hope you will keep in mind as you find your way through loneliness: How can I spend more quality time with people I care about?

To create a detailed plan for making better friends with yourself and building stronger connections with others, I invite you to read the full text of my new book, *If You’re Lonely: Finding Your Way*, from which this article is excerpted. With intention and support, you can find your way through your loneliness. You are a worthy person who needs and deserves connection with others. There is help, and there is hope.

I am hopeful about you finding your way through loneliness. In my career, I have worked with many lonely people who have worked to rebuild self-esteem and connection with others. Their lives have been transformed for the better by the concepts and small daily practices covered in *If You’re Lonely*. Yours can be transformed, too. Wishing you a more connected 2021. ■

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Dr. Alan Wolfelt is recognized as one of North America's leading death educators and grief counselors. His books on grief for both caregivers and grieving people have sold more than a million copies worldwide and are translated into many languages. He is founder and director of the Center for Loss and Life Transition and a longtime consultant to funeral service. 970-217-7069; drwolfelt@centerforloss.com; centerforloss.com