

LONELINESS – the problem and suggested solutions

A Contribution by a Sister

And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, and have been called according to his purpose.

Romans 8, 28.

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Strategies for Change:

1. Supporting verses

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God.

For just as we share abundantly in the sufferings of Christ, so also our comfort abounds through Christ. If we are distressed, it is for your comfort and salvation; if we are comforted it is for your comfort, which produces in you patient endurance of the same sufferings we suffer. And our hope for you is firm, for we know that just as you share in our sufferings, so also you share in our comfort.

... But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead.

2 Corinthians 1

2. Definitions:

- You are lonely when you're 'sad because of having no friends or company'.
- Loneliness is a state of feeling cut off from and longing for others, due to lack of contact (physically, emotionally).
- Loneliness is a state of mind.
- Loneliness is the opposite of togetherness.
- Being alone can be loneliness or it can be solitude.
- Loneliness is only unbearable when you think it's unchangeable!

3. Causes of Loneliness

- Bad weather
- Being alone
- Being without a purpose
- Being with the wrong person/people
- Bereavement
- Boredom
- Disability
- Failure to inform 'people'
- Failure to plan
- Fear
- Geographical isolation
- Illness
- Inactivity
- Lack of discipline
- Lack of family members
- Lack of faith/awareness
- Lack of intimacy
- Lack of true friend(s)
- Living alone
- Self-centredness
- Status – single, widowed, divorced, orphaned
- Substance abuse

4. The experience of loneliness - this is what it's like!

First List

When I am lonely I feel ...

- Angry
- Ashamed
- Anxious
- Cut off
- De-motivated
- Doubtful
- Excluded
- Forgotten
- Fragile
- Friendless
- Frustrated
- Isolated
- Lazy
- Negative
- Neglected
- 'Paralysed'
- Sad
- Sorry for myself
- Unsociable
- Unwanted

Second List

But I want to feel ...

- Calm
- Proud
- Peaceful
- Free/active
- In touch/grafted in
- Motivated
- Certain
- Included
- Remembered
- Strong
- Involved
- Great!
- Capable
- Positive
- Pampered
- Energised/industrious
- Happy/cheerful

- Pleased for myself
- Sociable
- Wanted

5. How do we think God wants us to feel? First list or second list?

Know this - it is possible to move from loneliness to 'togetherness' on your own.

The glory of solitude can eclipse the pain of loneliness. We are always in the company of the LORD God and our Saviour Jesus Christ. They are dependable.

The LORD is abounding in love and full of compassion for his children. Jesus is with us constantly. More than anything else, they want us to feel their presence.

I don't believe that God creates horrible, uncomfortable circumstances for us, (Jer 29, 11) but I know he uses these times for our good. In times of trouble, and that includes our times of loneliness, God is hoping that we will draw closer to him. God wants to see our faith both in the happy times and in the sad times.

We need to show God our faith as we go through testing times, and draw closer to the LORD and his Son.

Get with God and regain all those warm feelings we want so badly.

Instead of staying in a dark place decide to venture into the light! Get with God.

'God is light, in him there is no darkness at all. If we claim to have fellowship with him yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live by the truth. But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin.'

1 John 1

So if we make the decision to move from loneliness to togetherness we will find that togetherness is in fact fellowship.

'The way to having a true friend is to be a true friend.'

Jesus had twelve disciples but he only had a few close friends. This can be our model.

A man of many companions may come to ruin, but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother.

Proverbs 18, 24.

In my Life Application Bible there is a long note on this verse. It includes:- Instead of wishing you could find a true friend, seek to become one.

6. A Case of Loneliness

After a few spells of being alone, say several consecutive evenings without company, or what seems like a long Saturday alone doing all the household chores, the 'alone-ness' gets to you.

Your self-talk goes into negative mode and you trick yourself into thinking all kinds of rubbish. You are suffering from loneliness. You revert to 'victim mentality' blaming others for your loneliness – after all, 'If someone just called in or invited me out I wouldn't feel like this!'

If we fail to plan we plan to fail.

Solutions to loneliness lie in a plan.

7. Strategies for Change

'Change your mind about loneliness!'

How can we progress to a life without loneliness?

If we look at the list of causes of loneliness there are a lot of clues! Whatever our circumstances we have to take responsibility for ourselves. That's why there are so many books in the SELF-HELP category.

We can be proactive in meeting the challenges of life, applying our faith both in God's Word and Spirit. God feeds the birds but he doesn't drop the food into their mouths.

8. Plan A

Supporting verses:-

Many O LORD my God, are the wonders you have done.

The things you planned for us no-one can recount to you;

were I to speak and tell of them they would be too many to declare.

Ps 40, 5.

(Jesus said) ... I have come that they may have life and have it to the full.

John 10, 10.

And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus.

Eph 2, 6.

Introduction

You can prevent yourself from becoming lonely. Do you want to?

As with physical ailments I believe that prevention is better than cure. And I also believe that it is possible to be alone and never to be lonely. I would not have gone on holiday on my own if I'd thought I was going to be lonely.

We need to be good to ourselves.

We can take ourselves out to visit a friend or church member. We can invite someone or a couple to call in. We can have an arrangement for a sister to call us on a particular evening, or a weekly slot when we phone an old neighbour, for example.

We need to be creative with our time so that we are not alone day after day or evening after evening.

Why not review your diary on a regular basis, say on a Saturday evening. Then on a Sunday at the Meeting you can try to fill it up for the following week. This might sound scary and out of your comfort zone, but it won't be for long, and the results will be taking you out of the lonely zone!

Prevention Ideas:

For everyone:

- Join a class: dancing, painting, swimming, yoga.
- Do a course – at college or on-line.
- Take up a new hobby: golf, cross-stitch.
- Brush up on your skills, computer, internet, cooking.
- Research your family tree.
- Spend an evening each week cooking or baking.
- Start a book-club.
- Go to coffee mornings.
- Sign up for voluntary work.
- Reorganise the loft-space or garage.
- Have a movie evening every week.
- Buy an interactive games console for solo Scrabble, ski-ing- yoga.
- Write a book.
- Write your memoirs.
- Put all your old photos in an album.
- Train for a sponsored event.
- Sort out things that could go to a charity shop.
- Crossword puzzles.
- Take a bubble-bath.
- Visit the hairdresser or beauty therapist. Or have them visit you!

Especially for Disciples:

- Personal Bible Study.
- Volunteer for CIL work.
- Volunteer as a CBM tutor.
- Offer your foreign language skills as a translator.
- Write to someone in isolation, in a home, someone who is ill or elderly – everyone needs a little encouragement.
- Write a newsletter for your church, or to the 'lost sheep'.
- Develop your ministry by reconsidering your skills and being creative in using them for the Lord.
- Join a committee.
- Organise a fund-raising event e.g. coffee morning for the neighbours.
- Write a Bible class – or similar.
- Write about your conversion.
- Phone a church member you haven't seen in a while.
- Start an evergreen class i.e. afternoon class for older members, or a toddlers group if you're involved with that age-group.
- Read some 'self-help' Christian books: authors such as Joyce Meyer or Joel Osteen.
- Start writing a journal.
- Start using a prayer diary.

9. Drastic Action

Introduction

Prepare to be inspired: I have called this section 'drastic action', but it could equally be called Divine Intervention!

These are all major life-changing ideas requiring the LORD's guidance, big changes, big commitment and prayerful decision-making!

Examples:

Get married: 'My Dad was very lonely after my Mum died, he said he just wanted to find a lovely lady to marry, and then he found M.'

Share a house with another single person. Linda and Mavis had met several times on singles holidays and at events, where they shared their feelings of loneliness. Then it occurred to them that they could share a home together instead. They haven't looked back, and have had many great times together over the last 13 years.

Jenny was dreading the autumn and winter, with the dark evenings and poor weather conditions. She had long since given up driving, so she would be alone a lot. She asked to be put on the waiting for a room in a residential home, and within a couple of months she moved in. Jenny is beginning to enjoy the company there and the new routines.

Kathy lived in a university city and was happy to provide a student bed-sit, so she swapped her lonely life as a widow, for evenings as an art critic, with her students, who were all keen to read the Scriptures with her too!

Lots of people who live alone have a pet to keep them company. My Dad enjoyed the company of a budgie; cats are wonderful creatures - they certainly respond to care and attention, and give you the feel-good factor; dogs are great animals and walking your dog will get you outside and meeting other dog-owners. Pets need their owner, and it's nice to be needed.

World travel – I only know of University-age students/graduates who have done this but why not if you are fit and healthy, and your bank balance allows. Have a year out, or a month out. (In the UK there is new legislation for sabbatical leave.) Visit people on your Christmas card list that you haven't seen for some time. Most people have a few old friends or family members who live abroad, or even those friends who live up and down the country could be visited.

(Real names avoided)

10. Plan B

Introduction

(Activity Two)

Defeating loneliness also requires effort, planning, decisions, discussion, movement, care, consideration and negotiation and all these take time. Plan B is a journey from loneliness to solitude, or from loneliness to togetherness / company/ sharing / fellowship; or from sadness to glory.

Supporting Verses:

Do you not know? Have you not heard? The LORD is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He will not grow tired and weary and his understanding no-one can fathom! He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak. Even youths grow tired and weary and young men stumble and fall; but those who hope in the LORD will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles, they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint.

Is 40, 28+.

Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you. 1 Pet 5, 7.

I can do everything through him (Jesus) who gives me strength. Phil 4, 13.

11. Treating the Problem – A First-Aid Kit

(This next Section could be made into Activity Three)

When we have physical symptoms of an illness most of us are able to alleviate our suffering.

We already have a plan of medical procedures: a selection of medicines and pills, disinfectant, plasters and the like. Accidents in the home are an inevitable part of life. It's funny how the few accidents I have always seem to happen when I am alone. One day I sliced into my finger with a knife; it was stinging and bleeding. I had to deal with it myself – there and then, immediately. I elevated my hand and went straight to the first-aid kit. I found a plaster, got it ready and applied it carefully, having wiped away the blood. Good result, pain eased, bleeding stopped and I managed all of that on my own, quite calmly.

For a lot of us living alone, or being single, loneliness could be an inevitable part of life. But it doesn't have to be! We can have a simple plan just like we do for little medical emergencies. We can put together a 'first-aid' kit for attacks of loneliness. When I cut my finger I had a very positive 'self-talk' running through my head. I didn't stand there with blood dripping from my finger saying to myself 'If only family were here this wouldn't have happened!' I didn't blame anyone else I know for the fact that I had to administer first-aid to myself. I quickly got myself out of the tricky mess, sensibly and carefully. We can handle loneliness the same way.

So what will we have in our first-aid kit for loneliness? There are going to be some classic items, good for all of us, and guaranteed to bring relief. Let's plan to succeed!

I like this banner from the duty-free shop at Gatwick Airport: Whatever the question ... the answer is CHOCOLATE!

Well, what about this one: Whatever the problem ... the answer is PRAYER! We need to go to our Father and tell him that we sometimes get to feel lonely, how we feel so sad and sorry for ourselves, how our mind plays tricks on us, taking us from bad to worse, and we can't help thinking of all the 'if onlys'. We can tell the LORD that we are ashamed, anxious and angry about our loneliness, and we can ask him for hope, healing and help to tackle it! We can pray for a greater awareness of the Lord Jesus' presence. We can pray for a greater measure of grace. We can pray for success in overcoming loneliness.

When we put prayer in our new kit we are also putting in hope, healing, help, awareness and grace, and bringing the Lord Jesus Christ alongside us.

When it comes to medical emergencies we will bring to mind ABE: airway, breathing, circulation. Or RICE: rest, ice, compression and elevation! Or if we were on fire we would remember 'stop, drop, wrap and roll!'

At decision times we may ask ourselves 'What would Jesus do?' Similarly we can have a few verses to combat loneliness. 'The Lord is my helper – I will not be afraid.' 'I am with you always, even until the end of the age.' 'Put your help in God, for I will yet praise him, my Saviour and my God.' Or we could echo these words of Jesus: 'I am he that lives. I was dead but I am alive for evermore.' And if we apply this last one to ourselves, thinking back to life before the Lord found us, compared to this life we now have with our place in God's kingdom assured – such meditation is sure to lift our spirits. We could recite a mantra, such as:-

- I might be alone but I'm not going to feel lonely!
- I might be alone but I am deciding to be happy.
- I am alone but I have lots to do and the Lord is with me.

I'm not where I want to be, but thank the Lord I'm not where I used to be!

Remember happiness is a decision! So decide to be happy and keep smiling.

We could try this tested therapy of Bible recitation. Read aloud from the Scriptures – the Psalms maybe - over some soft background music. This works wonders. You will be transported to a better place. The LORD will carry you and comfort you.

'The eternal God is your refuge and underneath are the everlasting arms.'
Deut 33, 27.

My Bible version (The Life Application Bible) has a list of Psalms for 'when you feel ... Alone': 9, 10, 12, 13, 27, 40 and 43. Add your own to the list. One of my favourites is Psalm 139 – full of awesome facts and wow factor. This is applying our faith. When we seek God we find him. With faith it is possible to please God, we come to him believing that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him. [Heb 11, 6 adapted]. We are rewarded with comfort, strength, peace, purpose and a whole lot of other blessings.

Did you know that it is impossible to think two thoughts simultaneously! So, if we use our mantras, suitable Bible verses or slogans we will keep those negative, nagging thoughts at bay.

Remember this:

He is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us.

Eph 3, 20.

Affirmations are also a great comfort. For example, I remind myself that:

- My life is not a life of religion, it is a life of relationship, rich and deep.
- I am a daughter of the Living God – our Father.
- I am able to call the Creator of the Universe: Abba!
- I am able to call the LORD God Almighty – 'Father'.
- My life is lived in the presence of the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and in the company of his only begotten Son, my Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ.

These affirmations are also useful when you are lonely in a crowd, for example, in the workplace if you are the only Christian.

What about singing hymns? The apostles sang in their prison cell. My Grandmother sang hymns very quietly, almost under her breath as she went around the house doing the chores, or on her way to the shops. She lived on her own for 29 years after the death of my grandfather, and as far as I know she never complained about being lonely! When we use affirmations or sing a spiritual song we will also be praising our wonderful God, the Father, and strengthening our faith. Our love for the LORD will be deepened.

Why not bless yourself with a few words of encouragement? When my Dad was old and disabled I would hear him say to himself 'Go on Jimmy, you can do it!' It wasn't easy for him to put on a calliper and the high boots it required. My guess is that he hadn't suddenly started to encourage himself. I suspect that he had long since had positive self-talk. He had been a marine-aviator serving in the North Pacific in 1945.

Now the kit contains: prayer, hope, healing, help, awareness, grace, mantras, verses, music, recitation, faith, affirmations, singing and self-talk.

The Psalmist suggests that we count our blessings. This is another sure way to give yourself a lift. You could even get paper and pencil out and write all the blessings down. It's a great idea to include actual blessings by name in our prayers of thanksgiving so that these spring to mind readily. In my prayers I regularly thank the LORD for 'my beautiful home that is immeasurably more than all I asked or imagined, and for having my son and daughter living here with me!'

So just stop and think about all the wonderful things God the Father is blessing you with, and about all the ways the LORD God Almighty is working in your life.

If you were to write out your prayers – like a letter to the LORD – in a special notebook, when you are feeling low you can read them and once again they will be heard in heaven and you will be drawn in under the shadow of his wings.

You might remember being told to think about all those people who are less fortunate than yourself. This isn't what we want to hear when we are suffering. But what about this sad fact: Every 17 seconds a child dies in a developing country because of lack of clean water supplies. Think of the parents!

This has added counting blessings, reading, prayers and thinking of others, to our kit.

Any of these 'items' can help you when you're alone, you just have to 'take them out of the box'.

12. What can be done to help lonely people

*Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfil the law of Christ!
Gal 6, 2.*

*Lord, Help me to see the needs of others and to empathise with them.
Amen.*

13. Brainstorm

(Activity Four:)

pray love fellowship with embrace encourage reassure affirm invite to dinner or to events take out visit write email text send a gift listen to them phone keep in touch appreciate them send a card

When it comes to helping the lonely the most important thing – and something we can all do – is prayer. It is so easy to take the lonely to the LORD in prayer, and you only have to give up a little of your time to make a big difference.

Even the lonely can pray for other lonely brothers and sisters, friends or relatives! We must pray that people who might be lonely will receive comfort, but we can also pray to be involved in their comforting. We might need to ask for ideas and for the opportunity to relieve loneliness.

Look out for brothers and sisters who you know spend a lot of time alone and might be lonely. Don't leave single people off your invitation list.

14. Activities for an Awareness Day

Activity One:

For those who have experience of loneliness, take yourself back to a time of loneliness and remember some of the feelings you had.

For those who have not experienced loneliness imagine being alone on an island and the sky is full of dark clouds. How do you feel?

Work in pairs.

Share some of these feelings with your partner.

Activity Two:

If I asked you to move across to the other side of the room, what would that involve?

Discuss and write down the whole process with your neighbour.

- Look over to the other side to see where you could aim for.
- Gather up your books, bag and coat.
- Discuss going with someone.
- Get up
- Plan your route.
- Get going
- Watch out you don't bump into anyone
- Look out for anyone who might need your help
- Negotiate over the chair
- Sit down and get comfortable

A Thought - John McCarthy, Terry Waite, Brian Egan

These men were held hostage for approx five years. They suffered real loneliness. I went through the list of Causes of Loneliness and these men could have ticked most of them. So are you really that lonely???

15.A recent example

I had not been invited anywhere for Sunday lunch in a long time! It niggled me a bit. But applying some of my own advice I decided it was actually time that I invited some folk to lunch. I had been making all kinds of excuses mainly along the lines that I could never put on the sort of spread that some of my brothers and sisters do! But I finally bit the bullet and sent my Sister an invitation by text. The next evening she called me up to say that she and her husband would really like to come for lunch but they would only need something light to eat because their daughter and her fiancé were joining them in the evening for a meal.

I breathed a sigh of relief and offered to do quiche and salad, which she was very enthusiastic about. I was pleased and the thought of their visit after the meeting gave me a little lift as I arrived. Lo and behold, before I even sat down a sister approached me to invite me to lunch the following Sunday. 'Take a step of faith and the LORD blesses you!' – I thought to myself.

I needed company – that couple needed a break from their routine and a change of scene!