

Loneliness

Loneliness is a common problem although, as it is often seen as shameful, it can be difficult to talk about. I once went to a workshop on the subject and found I didn't want to tell anyone which workshop I was in for fear of what they would think of me. When I saw other workshop participants arriving I thought 'Why are these confident, talented, outgoing people coming here? Are they here to gloat and tell the answers or wanting to help?' I learnt an important lesson: that loneliness is not exclusive to the quiet person in the corner but outgoing people can feel lonely too. Loneliness is not the same thing as being alone. Being alone doing an enjoyable activity can feel far more pleasant than being surrounded by people but not feeling comfortable with them. Most books say loneliness is of two types- short term, situational and long term, chronic. It's normal to feel lonely in a new job, new ecclesia, new country, new school or at a gathering or ecclesia where we don't know anyone. We hope that, in Christadelphian gatherings, this feeling only lasts a few minutes till people get talking and feel they've known each other for ages. This is more likely to happen where there are smaller numbers and a job to do than in larger, more formal meetings.

Chronic loneliness involves a feeling that 'I never have belonged or had friends and I never will. There's something wrong with me. Nobody likes me. It's hopeless.' Maybe even 'I don't want to live'. This does sound very like depressive thinking and I think loneliness and depression are closely connected. The cause and effect can work both ways i.e. chronic loneliness can cause depression but loneliness is also a symptom of depression. Part of depression is not being able to see the positive things in life including not recognising friendship, love and concern even if it's under one's nose. Depression brings a feeling of being cut off and disconnected from people and as the depressed person tends to withdraw it's easy to assume they want to be left alone when they are actually desperate for help. It's not possible to be a mind reader but it can be worth persisting beyond the first 'go away' when trying to help.

Some may experience loneliness from childhood due being part of the small Christadelphian community and feeling different at school. Not being allowed to join in extra curricular activities because parents want to avoid Sunday problems can limit opportunities to make friends. Some young people grow up in isolation far from any ecclesia and others may still feel alone if their family belongs to an ecclesia with a small or no Sunday school or if the pupils are of widely different ages. When these young people are old enough to go to camps and youth weekends this can be hard without a group of friends to go with.

Different members of the same ecclesia can feel out of it for different reasons- the single person may feel most activities are family orientated, while the mother with young children notices she misses the Bible class discussions and that many other events that have no crèche. Having honest friendships with those whose circumstances are different is invaluable for increasing understanding and helping us realise that others have problems too. Those who have 'come into the Truth from outside' often say they feel out of it surrounded by many large Christadelphian extended families and hearing from the platform statements such as 'as we all learnt in Sunday School...' etc.

Is Jesus the answer to loneliness?

I've thought a lot about this question and still feel I have to say 'yes and no'. First why 'no'? Let's get the negative out the way first. Faith does not take away the need for friendship or

stop the hurt of rejection; bullying, bereavement or homesickness. Finding faith, accepting Christ and being baptised does not make social problems miraculously disappear. If an unhappy lonely teenager (or person of any age) gets baptised and expects to suddenly change and become more popular, there is likely to be disappointment ahead!

Having said that, Jesus does help- a lot! How? By helping us to hang on and survive the bad times - being able to talk to him can be a big comfort. Knowing there is meaning in life and the hope of the Kingdom helps us not to give up. The biggest factor is his love, love that is there 'just as I am'. Yes, we all need to change. That is a big part of Christian life but we are loved before and while we change. As Romans 5 states "Christ died for us while we were yet sinners," not for us in our better moments but at our worst. This is in great contrast to what people tend to offer – *'if and when you change you might be accepted.'*

Getting through lonely times.

Pray- keep talking to God and Jesus. Read scripture that comforts you and other positive books. Appreciate those who care and are friendly. Don't worry if they are not in your age group or the 'in' people. Sometimes when feeling lonely we feel the need to be with the "life and soul of the party" types, which often doesn't work. It's probably much better to try befriending other quieter people and look out for others who are on their own. Spend time with those you find it easier to relate to – maybe older people or children. Try to find something to do , wash up, visit the care homes, join a campaign- activity is a helpful distraction and you may meet friendly people while doing it. If meeting people face to face is hard, write or e-mail. The internet can be a big blessing to those who are very shy or isolated and enable friendships to be built up with brethren and sisters and CYC members around the world. Never give up! Things can and do change – though often not as quickly as we would like. Don't expect too much of yourself or others- try to take little steps- one day at a time.

Helping others

Be aware, look out for people who may be out of it and on the fringe. If talking in a group after meetings, try not to stand in a closed circle but leave space for others to come and join in – a group sitting around a table can be particularly unapproachable. It's best not to be too quick to rush in and try to fix what we see as someone else's loneliness. Others don't necessarily want the same amount of company as we do. Give support and love before you give advice- advice is more likely to be listened to that way! When feeling the urge to give advice, think 'could I do or have I done what I'm advising this person to do'. It's not fair to tell someone else they should be prepared to go to camp by themselves if I'm too scared to walk into a fraternal on my own. Rather than just telling someone they need to get out more, invite them to join in with activities you're involved in, offer lifts and company. Be sensitive as others may not want to admit to feeling lonely and most do not want pity. Don't assume you can't help someone because you're in a different age group or have different circumstances; anyone can care and take an interest. You may not be able to go to the youth weekend but knowing someone will take an interest in how they got on may help a younger person take that step. Have faith- Jesus can help your brother or sister. Pray for them and tell them so. Remember you don't have to understand or know all the answers to be kind. If a lonely person happens to be single don't assume they want you to match make or that they are bound to be lonely unless they find a partner! Don't assume married people can't be lonely. Avoid assumptions in general. Don't underestimate the value of little things, a kind word or sending a postcard can mean a lot. Encourage everybody even if you don't think they need it – you may be wrong.

Resources:

Overcoming Shyness M Blaine Smith- Very readable. Written by a Christian and a pastor – concentrating on practical common sense rather than theory.

Love Beyond reason- John Ortberg- ‘moving God’s love from your head to your heart’

Dare to Connect - Susan Jeffers

How to Start a Conversation and Make Friends Don Gabor

Joe Richardson 2002