

Coping with Loneliness

"Loneliness," writes Abigail Van Buren, "is the ultimate poverty."

As humans we are social beings, but sometimes we lose touch with that social part of ourselves—or we don't have enough chances to exercise it. When this happens, we may feel lonely and isolated.

What Loneliness Is—and Isn't

Loneliness is the feeling that we would like more connection, community and companionship than we think we have.

The curious thing about feeling lonely is that it has roots in a measurement. When we feel lonely, we are measuring the amount of social interaction we have against our ideal of desire for how much we would like to have. That "ideal" differs with each individual and can change over time.

We wish that the phone would ring with invitations from our friends. We want our weekends to include activities with people we like. We long for an intimate relationship that's loving, stimulating and fun. We'd rather not eat our meals alone. And when those things don't happen, we may feel lonely.

There are two important distinctions to make when talking about loneliness. The first is that loneliness is different from solitude. If you've ever craved "time to yourself," you know that being alone and enjoying your own company can be a restful, replenishing and even a creative or spiritual experience. Loneliness, in contrast, doesn't "fill us up" the way solitude can. It drains us.

The second distinction is that feeling lonely is different from being depressed. Depression is an ongoing state of feeling low and avoiding

activity. While loneliness can certainly contribute to depression, feeling lonely once in a while is a normal part of being human. It usually ebbs and flows with what's going on in our lives, whereas depression doesn't pass as easily or quickly.

How to Cope When You're Feeling Lonely

When you're feeling lonely, here are some things you can do to comfort yourself:

- 1. Check-in with yourself.** Are you waiting for others to take action instead of doing so yourself? Are you worried about what might happen if you reached out, asked for support or made an invitation? As you explore what you're feeling *underneath* the loneliness, be gentle with yourself.
- 2. Reach out.** Do you have a friend you can call? You don't have to share how you're feeling; sometimes just talking with someone you care about and hearing how they are doing can lift your spirits. (Your reaching out will make them feel cared for, too!)
- 3. Make a move, make a stretch.** Do an activity that nourishes you, such as going for a walk, being in nature or snuggling your pet. Or stretch outside of your comfort zone but without overwhelming yourself. Accept an invitation that sounds fun. Find a book group or a cooking circle. Use your loneliness as an invitation to try something new and meet like-minded people you enjoy.

Loneliness is something we all experience from time to time. But it can also be a call to action, a message that we need more connection in our lives, and that the time has come to seek it out. *

10 Creative Decision-Making Techniques

Most of us have our own way of making decisions. We may carefully consider the pros and cons, consult with experts or ask loved ones. Here are 10 more unusual methods to try.

- 1. Flip a coin.** Then notice your first reaction. If it lands on the "wrong" choice, you'll feel disappointed.
- 2. Role-play.** Let each person or thing represent a different aspect of the decision. What does each perspective have to say?
- 3. Meditate.** When you quiet your mind, the answer may bubble up easily.
- 4. Drawing or collage.** Consider each option pictorially. Your most attractive option may become obvious.
- 5. Use a dartboard.** Like with flipping a coin, notice how you feel when the dart hits its mark.
- 6. Sleep on it.** This is still one of the most effective ways to find clarity.
- 7. Dream incubation.** Write out the issue before going to bed. When you awake, consider any dream to be a possible clue to the answer—or the question behind the question.
- 8. Dance each option.** Which feels better in your body? Which flows through you more fluidly?
- 9. Sing.** Make up a song about the decision. You may be surprised by what comes out of your mouth.
- 10. Use a 5-level rating scale:** e.g., a score of 1 is insignificant in my life, 5 is highly significant. *

A Letter From

Margaret Hood Black



We all experience loneliness at various points in our lives. We desire more connection with others and may not be sure how to go about getting it. If you're feeling lonely, don't despair. The article on page 1 offers some ways for you to reach out and find the human connection you want.

Loneliness can also result from the loss of a relationship or other unresolved trauma, the subject of the article on page 3. Unresolved trauma can wreak havoc on our current relationships, as they obscure our awareness of what's going on in the present. It is possible, however, to untangle unresolved trauma from your relationships. The article offers a three-pronged approach for moving more fully into the present and making room for more connection, intimacy and freedom.

Comparing ourselves or our loved ones to others also can have a detrimental impact on our relationships. In addition, comparison often undermines our self-confidence and our children's self-esteem. Breaking the habit of comparison, as the article on page 4 suggests, is well worth the effort.

Also in this issue, the quiz asks how well you express your anger and the Top 10 offers creative and unusual ways to make decisions.

If you have questions about any of the articles or would like more copies, please don't hesitate to call.

May this season bring you more expression and improved relationships.

How Well Do You Express Anger?

Not only does pent-up anger not feel good, but it's bad for our health, potentially leading to depression, high blood pressure and other stress-related conditions. Learning healthy ways to express anger can help us feel better physically and emotionally and bring more authenticity and intimacy into our lives.

Answer the following true/false questions to discover how well you express anger.



True False

Set 1

- 1. I build up resentments over time, and then let them all out in one big blow up.
- 2. I sometimes cut people out of my life when they make me angry.
- 3. It's unsafe to express anger. I internalize it and then end up feeling depressed.
- 4. If I told someone I was angry at him or her, I'd make myself too vulnerable. The other person would then be angry at me and might end the relationship, or, somehow, I'd pay for it.
- 5. I lose it when I get angry. I've been known to yell, break objects and say horrible things that I later regret.
- 6. I have a tendency to be sarcastic or "leak" my anger rather than be open and direct about my feelings.

Set 1

- 1. Anger lets me know that something isn't sitting well with me. I allow myself to fully feel and acknowledge my feelings.
- 2. I express my anger after I've had some time to acknowledge it and release excess energy. I may beat pillows, whack a tennis ball, go running or rant and rave in my journal. Then I can calmly give voice to my feelings without saying things I'd later regret.
- 3. To prevent resentments from building up, I express my feelings of anger as soon as I can do so calmly.
- 4. I use "I" statements when communicating my anger. That way, I avoid blaming and telling other people what they feel.
- 5. I hold a safe, respectful space for others to express their anger towards me, trusting that honest communication leads to greater intimacy.
- 6. When bad things happen that I have no control over, I find ways to let off steam: I might cry on a friend's shoulder or take 5 minutes to rant about my frustrations.

If you answered true more often in Set 1 and false more often in Set 2, you may wish to learn some more effective ways to safely release and express your anger. Please don't hesitate to call if you'd like support in exploring this further. *

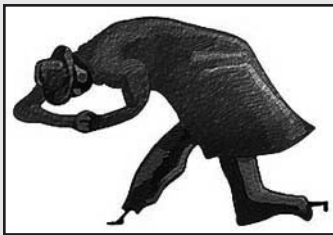
The Impact of Unresolved Trauma on Relationships

Physicians use the word “trauma” to describe an injury that results from a sudden impact. But we can suffer short- or long-term emotional traumas as well. When we lose a key relationship or something that means a lot to us, or when we experience betrayal, abuse or neglect, it injures our hearts. And like a wound to our physical bodies, emotional injuries also require care and attention so that we may heal.

Origins of Emotional Trauma

Our emotional injuries can occur in the present or in the past. In the present, we may face the end of a significant relationship, the death or departure of a loved one, the end of a certain stage in life, such as sending your kids to college, or some kind of abuse or attack.

In childhood we may have experienced an absent or distant parent, a teacher who insulted



our intelligence, appearance or athleticism, or we may have experienced neglect or physical, sexual or emotional abuse. After emotional traumas, we need to

process, grieve and heal. This takes time, and isn't easy. It can be tempting to try and avoid the grief and other hard or uncomfortable feelings. We may even try to gloss over the fact that there's been a trauma at all.

It's All Connected: The Impact on Relationships

Instead of feeling and grieving, people who have experienced emotional traumas may try to numb themselves. They may distract themselves with activities, food, shopping or other addictive behaviors; tell themselves that they just need to “suck it up”; have unpredictable emotional or behavioral outbursts; or put themselves down for having a hard time.

But when we fail to face things head-on, they come out sideways—first, in how we perceive and treat ourselves and then in our relationships with significant others.

For example, if your parents were distant when you were a kid or often left you alone and you felt abandoned, you may have never stopped to

consider how that experience has shaped you. Years later, when your spouse has a habit of coming home late from work, you feel powerless and rejected... without realizing it's connected to your early years.

One way to begin to tease apart this phenomenon is to notice when “this isn't that.” Sometimes a spouse coming home late from work is just that. But, frequently, we fail to notice the connection between a situation that's “triggered” us, and the original trauma at its core.

Resolving the Unresolved

If you have unresolved trauma in your life, you are not alone. Here are some ways to start addressing it:

1. Tell your story. A helpful way to release the hold unresolved trauma has over your current relationships is to tell its story. You can write it yourself in a journal, or ask a trusted friend or counselor to listen and bear “witness” as you share what happened and make the connections between what's happening now in your life and what you've been carrying with you from the past.

2. Consider a broader context. There is a way to think of your experience as more than injury. This is why some people speak of their lives as a journey or a path: it's an empowering way to make new sense of your story and everything you've been through. Maybe there's also a hidden gift in that experience: you are now a survivor, or are stronger, more alive, or more compassionate as a result.



What is the message or “life lesson” for you?

3. Develop emotional resilience. As Emily Dickinson wrote: “The best way out is through.” Like any other skill, emotional resilience develops through practice. Start by noticing and naming your true feelings, whatever they are. Try to identify where your feelings are in your body. Are they in your throat? Your heart? Learn to accept your emotions as information guides and as the first step toward healing.

Unresolved trauma traps us in a place where we play re-runs from our past on top of our current relationships. When you work to heal that trauma, you move more fully into the present, making room for more connection, intimacy, and freedom. ✱

The Danger of Comparisons

"To love is to stop comparing."

—Bernard Grasset

Comparing ourselves and our loved ones to others seems to be ingrained into us. We notice similarities and differences. It's one way we learn to navigate our world.

The trouble comes when we notice differences and then use that information to feel "less than." For instance, rather than noticing someone's success and letting that inspire us to take the risk we've been wanting to take, instead we may despair, believing that we could never have that kind of success ourselves.

So while comparison doesn't have to be a destructive practice, much of the time it is, leading to tumbling self-confidence and harming our ability to be happy in the world. And when we compare our children to others we also run the risk of damaging our relationship with our children as well as their self-esteem.

As Judith Orloff writes in her book



Emotional Freedom, "Comparing yourself to others can preclude a bond of common fellowship and is a barrier to finding true worth." In short, the habit of comparison is a good one to break.

Here are some tips to help you stop comparing yourself and your loved ones to others:

Pay attention. Become mindful of those moments when you are feeling jealously or envy or a sense of inferiority. Awareness of making the comparison is the important first step.

Try to adopt a more realistic view of others. Nobody's life is perfect. The next time you find yourself agonizing over someone else's good luck, try to put yourself in his or her shoes...remember that everyone has struggles *and* moments of happiness.

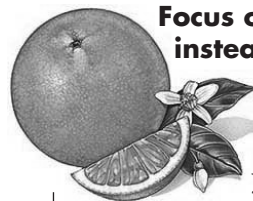
Cultivate gratitude for what you have. Look around and notice the aspects of your life that make you happy. Make a daily list of the blessings in your life.

Give to others what you most desire for yourself. If you want

love, give love. If you want attention, give attention. Helping others is one of the best ways to build your own self-esteem and escape from destructive mental traps.

Redirect, build and affirm.

When you find yourself engaging in harmful comparisons, redirect your thoughts to your positive traits or to the wonderful traits of your loved ones, and then compliment yourself or them. Complimenting children not only builds up their self-esteem, but it helps prevent them from adopting the habit of comparing themselves to others.



Focus on your strengths instead of weaknesses.

Rather than thinking, "I'm fat and she's skinny," celebrate your strengths. Be proud of your uniqueness, special talents and skills.

With awareness and practice, it is possible to cultivate a life that is relatively free of comparison—a life in which you and your loved ones are much happier and content. *

Margaret Hood Black, MA, LPC
Licensed Professional Counselor
P.O. Box 5731
Kingwood, TX 77325
713-562-7819
Margaret is a Licensed Professional Counselor and psychotherapist. Margaret provides couple, individual and group therapy. In addition to working with adolescents and young adults, Margaret has a special interest in marriages, families and women's issues. Margaret has two offices conveniently located at: 1960 & SH 249 (NW Houston) and in Bellair (Galleria Area).
For more information on her services, please feel free to call: 713-562-7819.