

MEN'S EMOTIONAL WELLBEING

THE LONELINESS NOBODY SEES

Why company and connection are not always the same

REFLECTION 3 • BY MAGGIE LEAROYD



The Loneliness Nobody Sees

Why company and connection are not always the same

"The opposite of loneliness is not simply being with other people. It is feeling connected." Inspired by the work of Johann Hari on connection and belonging.

There is a particular kind of loneliness that often goes unnoticed because it hides in plain sight. It exists in busy homes, crowded workplaces and among groups of friends who have known one another for years. It can be present in long-term relationships, family gatherings and conversations filled with laughter. From the outside, nothing appears to be missing. Yet somewhere beneath the routines of everyday life there can remain a quiet sense of distance that is difficult to explain.

Loneliness is often imagined as the absence of company. In reality, it is more often the absence of feeling known.

Many people move through life surrounded by others while rarely revealing the parts of themselves that feel uncertain, frightened or overwhelmed. Conversations stay within familiar boundaries. Work is discussed. Sport, politics, family plans and everyday events fill the silence. There is warmth, companionship and genuine affection, yet the conversation never quite reaches the place where emotional experience is shared.

This is not a criticism of the friendships that many men build. They are often loyal, generous and dependable. They are built through years of shared experiences, humour, practical support and mutual respect. These friendships matter deeply. Yet for some men there remains an unspoken belief that emotional vulnerability may place those relationships at risk, or simply make others uncomfortable. As a result, thoughts that feel most significant often remain unspoken.

There are many reasons why this might happen. Some people grew up in families where emotions were rarely discussed. Others learnt through experience that openness was met with embarrassment, criticism or silence. Many simply discovered that talking about practical problems felt easier than talking about emotional ones. Whatever the reason, these patterns are rarely chosen deliberately. They develop gradually and become part of the way we relate to ourselves and to one another.

Perhaps this explains why moments of genuine emotional connection can feel so memorable. A conversation that moves beyond everyday routine. A friend who asks a question and waits patiently for the real answer. A colleague who quietly admits that they have been struggling. These moments often remain with us because they remind us that understanding does not require perfect solutions. Sometimes it begins with feeling heard.

Connection asks very little of us beyond authenticity. It does not require impressive words or carefully prepared explanations. More often, it begins when someone feels safe enough to speak honestly and another person chooses to listen without judgement. In those moments loneliness begins to lose some of its power, not because every problem has disappeared, but because it is no longer being carried in complete isolation.

Across the United Kingdom, organisations such as MenWalkTalk have recognised the importance of creating opportunities for connection that feel natural and unpressured. Their community walks bring men together in an informal setting where conversation can develop at its own pace. For some, talking while walking side by side feels easier than sitting face to face. Others simply value being part of a group where silence is comfortable and companionship does not depend upon having the right words.

Perhaps emotional wellbeing is shaped not only by how many people we know, but by how many people truly know us. The difference between those two experiences can be profound. One fills a diary. The other nourishes a life.

Further Reflection

Feeling connected is not measured by the number of people around us. It is measured by the freedom to be ourselves in the company of others.

Perhaps the question is not whether there are people in your life.

Perhaps it is whether there is someone with whom you can simply be yourself.

If You'd Like to Continue the Conversation

MenWalkTalk is a UK charity that organises free walk-and-talk groups where men can connect with others in a relaxed and supportive environment. There is no expectation to share personal experiences, and many people find that walking alongside someone makes conversation feel more natural. Whether you attend to talk, to listen or simply to be around others, the walks offer an opportunity to build connection at your own pace.