

Loneliness

What This Emotion May Be Telling You

Loneliness is more than being physically alone. You can feel lonely in a crowded room, within a relationship, at work, inside a family or while surrounded by people who care about you. The pain often comes from a gap between the connection you have and the connection you need.

Within depression and emotional distress, loneliness can be both a trigger and a consequence. Low mood can make it harder to reach out, while reduced contact can deepen low mood. Understanding what loneliness may be communicating helps us move beyond simply telling someone to 'get out more'.

Loneliness may be telling you: I need connection, I want to feel understood, I miss belonging, I need safe company, or an important relationship with myself or others needs attention.

What is loneliness?

Loneliness is a subjective experience. Two people can have the same number of social contacts and feel completely different. What matters is not only how many people are around us, but whether our relationships feel meaningful, reciprocal, safe and emotionally nourishing.

Temporary loneliness is a normal human experience. Persistent loneliness deserves attention because connection is a basic psychological and social need.

What might this emotion be telling you?

- **I need meaningful connection.** Contact alone may not be enough; you may need warmth, reciprocity or depth.
- **I want to feel understood.** Being with people who do not understand your experience can still feel lonely.
- **I miss belonging.** You may be longing for a group, community, family role or place where you can be yourself.
- **I need to reach towards someone.** The emotion may be prompting reconnection after withdrawal.
- **I need a different kind of relationship.** Existing relationships may not currently meet an important need.
- **I may need to reconnect with myself.** Sometimes loneliness is intensified by losing touch with interests, identity or meaning.

Different kinds of loneliness

Emotional loneliness can occur when you miss a close, trusted bond. **Social loneliness** may involve lacking a wider network or sense of community. **Situational loneliness** can follow moving, retirement, illness, bereavement, relationship changes or working from home. **Existential loneliness** can involve feeling fundamentally separate or unseen even when relationships are present.

Naming the type can help identify what kind of support is actually needed.

What kind of connection am I missing?

Someone I can talk openly with: _____

A sense of community or belonging: _____

Shared activity or companionship: _____

Physical presence or affection: _____

Understanding from people with similar experiences: _____

Loneliness and depression

Depression often encourages withdrawal. You may have less energy to reply, cancel plans because everything feels too difficult, believe you are a burden, or assume other people do not want to hear from you. Over time, the reduced contact can make those beliefs feel even more convincing.

The cycle can look like: **low mood - withdrawal - less connection - more loneliness - lower mood**. Breaking the cycle does not require becoming highly social. One small, tolerable point of contact can be enough to begin.

When you feel lonely around other people

Being surrounded by people does not guarantee connection. You may feel lonely if you are masking, cannot talk about what matters, feel misunderstood, have to perform a role, or sense that nobody really knows how you are doing.

Ask yourself: **Do I need more people, or do I need more authenticity, safety or depth with the people already around me?**

Loneliness after loss

Bereavement, separation, divorce, friendship endings, family estrangement and changes in health can create a very particular loneliness. You may not simply miss company; you may miss one specific person, shared routines, physical presence or the version of yourself that existed in that relationship.

This kind of loneliness may need grieving rather than immediately filling the space. New connection can help, but it does not have to replace what was lost.

Loneliness and rejection

Past rejection, bullying, exclusion or abandonment can make reaching out feel risky. You may want connection while simultaneously expecting to be ignored, judged or rejected. This creates a painful approach-avoidance pattern: needing people but feeling unsafe with them.

Small, predictable and low-pressure contact can be more manageable than forcing yourself into intense social situations.

A personal reflection

"I thought loneliness meant I needed to be around more people, so I kept making myself socialise. I could still come home feeling completely alone. Eventually I realised I was missing being known. I needed a few relationships where I did not have to pretend I was fine. Once I understood that, I stopped measuring connection by how busy my diary was." - illustrative personal reflection

Loneliness and neurodivergence

Autistic and ADHD people may experience loneliness alongside masking, social exhaustion, communication differences, rejection sensitivity or difficulty finding people with shared interests and communication styles. A person may genuinely want connection while needing significant recovery after social contact.

Connection does not have to look conventional. Parallel activity, online communities, interest-based groups, structured meet-ups, one-to-one contact or spending time with somebody without constant conversation can all be meaningful.

When masking creates loneliness

If people only see the version of you that is carefully adapted to fit in, being liked may not always feel like being known. Masking can protect against judgement, but sustained masking can also create emotional distance.

Safe relationships are places where difference can gradually become more visible without punishment. This does not mean disclosing everything to everyone; it means noticing where you can be more genuinely yourself.

Loneliness in relationships

It is possible to feel lonely with a partner, family member or close friend. Emotional loneliness may appear when conversations become purely practical, affection changes, conflict remains unresolved, one person feels unheard, or there is little shared time.

The emotion may be inviting a conversation about closeness rather than automatically signalling that the relationship should end.

A conversation about connection

I have been feeling: _____
What I miss is: _____
Something that would help me feel closer is: _____
One small thing we could try together: _____

Loneliness at work

Remote work, workplace exclusion, being the only person in a role, difficult team dynamics or feeling different from colleagues can all contribute. Workplace loneliness is not always solved by social events; psychological safety, inclusion, recognition and everyday human contact matter too.

Consider whether you need clearer collaboration, a regular check-in, a mentor, peer support, reasonable adjustments, or stronger boundaries between isolated work and restorative connection outside work.

Social media: connection and comparison

Online spaces can provide genuine community, particularly for people who are isolated geographically or who need identity- or experience-specific support. They can also intensify loneliness when passive scrolling replaces interaction or when curated images make everybody else appear more connected.

Notice how you feel *after* using a platform. Does it leave you supported, informed and connected, or more excluded and depleted?

When loneliness tells you to hide

Loneliness can create thoughts such as 'Nobody cares', 'I am a burden', 'They would be better without me' or 'There is no point reaching out.' These thoughts feel convincing when mood is low, but they are not reliable measures of your worth or other people's willingness to care.

If reaching out feels impossible, reduce the size of the task: send one emoji, reply to one message, sit somewhere with other people, attend a structured group, or tell one trusted person, 'I am having a lonely day.'

Connection without overwhelm

- Choose one-to-one contact if groups are draining.
- Use shared activities so conversation does not carry all the pressure.
- Set a clear start and finish time.
- Plan recovery time after social contact.
- Use text or voice notes if live conversation is difficult.
- Choose people who allow silence and difference.
- Start with frequency that is sustainable rather than intense bursts followed by withdrawal.

Solitude is not the same as loneliness

Being alone can be restorative when it is chosen and meets a need for rest, creativity, sensory recovery or reflection. Loneliness is more likely when aloneness feels unwanted, disconnected or painful.

You do not need to eliminate solitude to address loneliness. The goal is a balance where time alone feels chosen rather than like evidence that you do not belong.

Solitude or loneliness?

Right now, being alone feels: _____
What do I need more of - rest, company, understanding, activity, touch or purpose?

One small way to meet that need: _____

Reconnecting with yourself

Loneliness can sometimes become stronger when life has narrowed around responsibilities, illness, caring, work or survival. Reconnecting with music, nature, creativity, learning, movement, spirituality, pets, hobbies or personal values can restore a sense of companionship with your own life.

This is not a substitute for human connection. It is one part of rebuilding a life that feels inhabited by you.

A small-steps connection plan

My connection ladder

Very easy: _____
Manageable: _____
A little challenging: _____
Something I would like to build towards: _____
Who or what could support me? _____

Supporting somebody who feels lonely

Do not assume the answer is simply inviting them out more. Ask what kind of connection they are missing. They may need listening, practical company, regular contact, shared activity, reassurance, grief support or help finding people with similar experiences.

- Make specific offers rather than saying 'let me know if you need anything'.

- Keep contact consistent even if replies are slow.
- Do not shame cancellations; low mood and anxiety can make connection difficult.
- Invite without pressure and leave the door open.
- Remember significant dates and transitions.
- Take hopelessness and statements about being a burden seriously.

When extra support may help

Persistent loneliness can sit alongside depression, anxiety, bereavement, trauma, social anxiety, disability, chronic illness or major life transitions. A GP, therapist, support group, community organisation or social-prescribing service may help identify both emotional and practical routes towards connection.

If loneliness is accompanied by thoughts of suicide or self-harm, feeling unable to keep yourself safe, or immediate danger, call 999 or go to A&E.; In England, NHS 111 can direct people to urgent mental-health support. Samaritans can be contacted on 116 123.

A seven-day loneliness check-in

- Day 1 - Name the kind of loneliness you are experiencing.
- Day 2 - Identify one person, place or activity that has felt safe before.
- Day 3 - Make one very small point of contact.
- Day 4 - Notice whether social media leaves you more or less connected.
- Day 5 - Spend time with an interest that reconnects you with yourself.
- Day 6 - Ask for one specific form of connection or support.
- Day 7 - Reflect on what helped, what drained you and what you want to repeat.

Books and further exploration

- *Together* - Vivek H. Murthy: human connection and loneliness.
- *Atlas of the Heart* - Brene Brown: language for emotions, belonging and connection.
- *Lost Connections* - Johann Hari: a broad exploration of disconnection and depression; best read as one perspective rather than a complete clinical account.
- *The Gifts of Imperfection* - Brene Brown: authenticity, belonging and self-compassion.

Clinical and source notes

This educational resource draws on established psychological and public-health understanding that loneliness is a subjective experience of insufficient or unsatisfying connection and that persistent loneliness can be associated with poorer mental wellbeing. It also reflects common clinical themes involving depression, withdrawal, grief, social anxiety, belonging, relationship quality and neurodivergent social experiences.

General support principles are consistent with public information from the NHS, Mind and UK loneliness/community-support initiatives. This guide is educational and does not diagnose depression, social anxiety or any other condition.

What this emotion may be telling you

Loneliness is not proof that you are unwanted. It may be a signal that the kind of connection available to you is not the kind you currently need. It can point towards belonging, understanding, closeness, shared experience, authenticity or a need to be remembered and included.

You do not have to solve loneliness by becoming a different person or filling every empty space. Start by asking: **What kind of connection would help me feel more seen, safe or supported?** Then make the next step small enough to be possible.

You deserve relationships and spaces where you do not simply have company - you have a sense that you belong.

Space to Breathe Therapy - Understanding emotions without judging them.