

COMMUNITY

Facebook versus face-to-face

The question of loneliness

"Loneliness is the most terrible poverty."

— Mother Teresa of Calcutta



HOMEFRONT
CONSTANCE
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We have all felt lonely at some time, whether missing a partner, good friend or close family member. We know that empty internal feeling that gnaws at our being.

For most of us this experience is short-lived. We strive to seek something purposeful or someone meaningful to connect with and fill this emptiness. The depth of this feeling is often intolerable, if it lingers.

Let's explore a few ways loneliness presents itself. One example is of Katie. Katie's husband travels often for lengthy periods of time. Katie busies herself in the beginning of his absence yet, as the weeks progress, she finds herself impatiently longing for his return. Upon his return and re-acclimation into the home, her loneliness dissipates.

Unlike Katie, whose loneliness is short lived, John goes home to an empty environment nightly. He lost his wife two years ago and achingly grieves

her. He seldom invites anyone to his home, because he lacks the energy it takes to fully engage with them.

And then there is Tom and Hanna, who have been married for five years. They are often two ships passing in the night, with little to no communication. Both feel a lack of connection with each other and as a result are extremely lonely. They have upheld this pattern for so-o-o long, they are each at a loss as how to reverse it and reconnect.

Think again of the times you felt lonely. Was it following a breakup? Beginning a new job? Being home alone? Observing other people moving ahead while you're held back?

Loneliness can be likened to being an immigrant in a new-found country. You are aware of others yet feel alien.

Recently, I attended a workshop that previewed the impending diagnostic manual for clinicians. The speaker began by illustrating the importance of human attachments, relationship connections, and problems that occur when we don't connect, beginning in infancy.

As expected, loneliness was a major factor resulting in poor or little relationship connection. Chronic loneliness was

considered an important underpinning to depression and other mental health issues.

What is loneliness?

Loneliness is a difficult state, marked by isolation. Loneliness often feels embarrassing, harsh, and dark, as if something or someone is missing. Loneliness is not about feeling alone, it is about feeling disconnected.

How does it differ from solitude?

Unlike loneliness, which is marked by a state of isolation, solitude is a state of being alone and can lead to self-awareness. It is a positive situation in which one engages more fully with oneself.

And, is loneliness more pervasive today?

How frequently do we walk the streets and see someone walking alone, talking on a cell phone? Or, sitting alone in a café, talking on a cell phone? Or, being in a crowd, alone, text messaging?

Research suggests the average person on Facebook wants 302 friends. This has become the new and interesting social network.

One used to think of a social network as people within a community you actually saw and spent time with them. Loneliness used to be perceived as a lack of personal relationships, yet now we can be alone, face a computer and

believe we are part of a social network.

I am aware of people who spend many days e-mailing people and never see a soul. Has Facebook become a quick fix to offsetting loneliness? Or, a false sense of community?

As can be expected, the remedy for loneliness is to extend oneself and work to connect with others. It may be extremely difficult in the beginning.

John, in the above example, is someone who might struggle the most to engage in old or new relationships. Yet it is in the presence of another that loneliness begins to wither. However, simply being in the presence of another is limiting, as seen in the example of Tom and Hanna.

Therefore, I would recommend slowing down and giving someone your uninterrupted attention. Turn off the television, shut down the computer, shut off the cell phone and make the effort to fully communicate, share and engage with another.

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