

# Isolation/Loneliness

A very common experience on campus is for students to feel quite lonely or isolated, even though there are thousands of other students here every day. Loneliness is a feeling that no one enjoys and if it occurs often enough, it can really impact our life satisfaction and mood. For many students who are struggling with depression, isolation and loneliness can be a big contributing factor. We all have a strong biological need to feel a sense of connection with others and when this need is not met, feelings of loneliness are our mind's and body's way of telling us something is wrong. Remember, no one is exempt from feeling lonely at times.

There are several circumstances that can increase the likelihood of feeling isolated on campus. These include:

1. Being a first year student.
2. Moving out of your parents' home for the first time.
3. Living alone, rather than with roommates, or in residence.
4. Coming to university as an international student.
5. Being very shy/socially anxious.
6. Having very large and formal classes.
7. Being a graduate student and working only on your thesis or dissertation.
8. Never having a lot of friendships in the past.
9. Feeling unsure how to initiate a connection.
10. Having a history of failed relationships/friendships.
11. Holding unrealistic expectations regarding friendships or intimate connections.
12. Believing that everyone already has enough friends.

Although feeling lonely and isolated can be a very painful experience, these feelings in turn can motivate us to pursue the connection we need and want. Some of the following strategies can help to move you in a positive direction.

Strategies:

## 1. Engage In Life Activities

The best way to meet people is to lead a busy and active life. This can include any number of activities like: sports, hobbies, clubs, volunteering, night life and work, to mention a few. We can, however, engage in these activities and still not meet people, if we don't make some effort to talk to others. You may need to step outside of your comfort zone to make this connection. Shared activities you enjoy can give you a common basis for this connection. As well, when we have an active life, we just don't feel so lonely, even if we are not able to meet anyone new.

## 2. Develop Your Communication Skills

In forming connections with others, we rely a lot on our communication skills, which fortunately can be something we can develop with practice. Use any opportunity you can to practice your communication skills, rather than avoid interactions because you are unsure of what to say, or are afraid to say the wrong thing. There are also opportunities to build your skills by taking workshops, seminars, or groups that can better teach you some of these skills. Use daily activities like going to a store, waiting in a line-up, taking a bus, sitting on a bench, or visiting a museum/art gallery, to learn to chat with strangers. Most people are receptive to this, and you can practice in any social situation.

## 3. Don't Wait For Other People To Initiate Contact

Overcoming isolation requires you to initiate contact with people, since putting this in other people's hands leaves you very powerless. Too often, people feel that they are tired of trying and just give up, feeling that it is up to others to make the effort. Unfortunately, this thinking just doesn't make sense, nor will it get you what you want and need. Initiating connections can mean having to deal with potential feelings of rejection, but not initiating runs even less chance of getting what you want. Realize the more often you try, the higher the probability of success.

## 4. Learn The Art Of The Smile

Smiling is totally underrated as a way to increase your level of connection with others. There is nothing like a big smile to invite others into our personal space and our lives. Non-verbal communication is a very powerful way to engage others and say to others that you will be open to them and they are unlikely to be rejected by you. Meeting people in the morning with a smile says to them, I am happy to talk to you and enjoy your presence.

## 5. Practice Good Eye Contact

As important as the smile is good eye contact. Eye contact allows us also to really focus on the non-verbal cues the other person is sending out to us and research says these cues are more powerful than the verbal messages we communicate. As the saying goes, "the eyes are the window of the soul". So, if we avoid eye contact (as many shy people do), we can't feel that deep sense of intimacy we all want.

## 6. Use Some Judicious Self-Disclosure

Finding true connection with others means that you will need to learn to open up to others and disclose some personal information about such things as your true feelings, interests, beliefs, goals, dreams, experiences, etc. This is hard, because many people are fearful that they will say too much, and/or people may reveal this information to others. This, of course, is a risk, but the alternative is severely limiting how close we can get to others, since only honesty and

openness will give us meaningful connection. The best way to reduce the risk of getting hurt is to slowly and judiciously increase the level of self-disclosure as we build trust in the other person. You could still get hurt, but the odds of this are much reduced.

7. Go On-Line

Going on-line today has the potential for many kinds of connections whether it be through e-mails, chat rooms, forums, dating websites, or gaming opportunities. Particularly for people with social anxiety, it can be easier to put yourself out there in this more anonymous forum. Remember, however, to take this connection beyond the web at some point, and potentially meet in a safe and mutually comfortable location. Many successful relationships today have started on-line, as long as you are being smart about who you choose to develop a connection with.

8. Strive For Personal Happiness

Why is personal happiness important to alleviating feelings of isolation? Because, if we are happy, we tend to attract people, since others are more likely to want to share our joy. It is a rare circumstance that people will be drawn to others who are moody, unfriendly, or unhappy. This, however, doesn't mean we have to be happy all of the time, since no one is, and this wouldn't be very real. Also, when we are personally happy, we are much less likely to feel lonely, since we have many things that are a positive focus of our attention. People become part of our happiness, but are just one of many potential aspects of it.

9. Remember that Loneliness Is In Part A State Of Mind

We can be with a dozen people and feel very alone, or be on our own and feel blissful solitude; it is all a matter of perspective. Our beliefs about ourselves, our world, our connections and our expectations all influence how much loneliness we experience. Take some time to really analyze your beliefs and expectations and see how they might be contributing to your sense of isolation. Are your expectations unrealistic, or are your feelings more about dissatisfaction with yourself? Many negative feelings are generated by irrational or unhelpful beliefs, which need to be challenged.

10. Challenge Any Pessimistic Or Negative Thinking

Part of what can keep us disconnected from others is the way we think about ourselves, our relationships, our past, and our hopes for the future. Pessimistic or negative thinking can undermine any hope we have of making connections in the future. Examples of some typical negative self-talk might include:

- a. Why bother trying to reach out, it always ends up the same way anyway.
- b. No one can ever really be trusted, so I don't want to be hurt again.
- c. People only want to use you for what they can get.

- d. All men (or women) are just the same anyway.
- e. Everyone already has their own friends, why even try?
- f. People will never like me, I'm too shy/boring/depressed.
- g. I don't really need any friends; they take more time than they're worth.
- h. I can't handle any more "failure" as far as my relationships go.
- i. People are too busy these days to make friends.

11. Realize That You Don't Need A Million Friends

Understanding that it's not about the number of friends you have, but the quality of these relationships, may take some of the pressure off of you, in terms of your sense of isolation. Even one really close friend can meet a lot of our emotional needs, if we are emotionally healthy ourselves. In today's world of Facebook, having 100 "friends" may be something to brag about, but you can still be lonely, because you may not have the true connection you need. Facebook can be a way to stay connected with people, but it is not a substitute for even one very close real life connection.

12. Stop Focusing On Past Failures

Many people stop trying to get close to others, because they consider past relationships that ended as "failures", rather than valuable learning experiences. Also, just because a relationship doesn't continue on, doesn't mean anyone is at fault. If you analyze the interaction and figure out how you might improve a similar relationship in the future, this is helpful. But, if you just use it as another way to beat yourself up, you need to stop. The past doesn't have to predict the future, if you can treat each relationship as an adventure. Keep working toward healthy connections.

13. Treat Yourself Well

It's quite true that how we treat ourselves is likely how we will let others treat us. If you are your own best friend, you are likely going to be expected to be treated well, and will set healthy boundaries when you are not. With healthy boundaries, we are more likely to have healthy relationships. If you have felt used in past relationships, you are more likely to shy away from these in the future. It would be true to say that we very much teach people how to treat us. By treating yourself well, you are telling the world that this is how you expect to be treated.

14. Build Your Self-Esteem

The better we feel about ourselves, the more confidence we have, and the more other people will be attracted to us. The more we love ourselves, the more we feel worthy of the love of others. Feeling connected then, in turn, tends to build more self-esteem. Limited social connection on the other hand can make us feel incompetent as a person. There are many

things we can actively do to build our own self-esteem. Please refer to the handout on our Mental Health Centre website for ideas about building healthy self-esteem.

15. Contribute To Someone Else's Life

Giving to others in some meaningful way can often transform our feelings of loneliness and give us a greater sense of life meaning and purpose. This could involve such activities as volunteering in a hospital or nursing home, getting involved in fundraising, volunteering at the Sexual Assault Centre, Safewalk, the Food Bank, or something as simple as giving blood. The act of giving can help restore our spirit. As well, these activities can in turn provide us with other forums to meet people.

16. Get a Pet

It is amazing how much a pet can alleviate loneliness for many people. Pets can truly give us unconditional positive regard, sometimes even more than our human companions. Pets don't judge or criticize us, and typically, only want our companionship and nothing more. If you currently have a pet, you probably already know this, but if you don't, perhaps this is an option you might want to try.

17. Don't Manage The Loneliness With An Addiction

One of the dangers of feeling lonely is that these feelings may be so strong that we may do anything to try to alleviate them, including various kinds of addictive behaviors. This might include such things as drinking, doing drugs, gambling, shopping, eating, working, gaming, watching television or any other behavior taken to excess. These choices can be powerful distractions to our negative feelings, but they don't address the underlying reasons for our isolation, and often in the long term exacerbate these feelings.

18. Join A Support Group

Support groups are a great way to develop new connections and ultimately meet your social needs. Such groups can develop out of common issues like depression, addiction, adoption, public speaking, anxiety, eating disorders or social anxiety.

By sharing something in common with others, you already have a basis for some connection and then can build on this within or even outside the group. All support groups advocate open communication, which will increase the possibility of really getting to know the group members well.

19. Seek Out Counselling

If you have tried the above strategies and still are struggling to get the connection you need, don't be afraid to seek out counselling. Some people who are isolated have difficulties

trusting other people, and this is likely a result of past relationships that have failed or been negatively impactful in some way. Through counselling, you can reprocess these experiences and potentially come to a better place, where you are more open to new relationships and are willing to work on building trust again, or any obstacles that are preventing you from connecting with others. Seeking counselling is a healthy choice, not a weakness. The counselling relationship alone can build your trust in people and strengthen some of your relationship skills.

20. Accept Your Loneliness

Since loneliness is an inevitable part of the human condition during periods of our life, we need to accept this reality. We can't get our social needs met all the time, since our relationships are continually changing and evolving. Many life situations can affect how much connection we will get at any moment in time, especially during major life transitions such as moving, leaving our parents' home, starting in a new post-secondary institution, or living alone for the first time. However, if feelings of loneliness become chronic, then acceptance of this is not likely to be the best strategy and all the preceding strategies make sense to utilize.

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