

Loneliness

Loneliness is the most pressing issue in society today, and for that reason, counselling too, writes **Jeff Weston**

This article was supposed to be about unconditional positive regard (UPR). Although I had seen its effectiveness in the counselling room, part of me believed it risked weakening clients for the real world, giving them an unrealistic template of how humans behave. It then dawned on me that most of my clients are lonely. Not in an obvious way, necessarily. But because their faith in humanity has been dented, and they seemingly have nowhere to turn. Their voices unacceptable in normal circles. Their thoughts suppressed. The worry and despair in their heads churning daily but with no outlet.

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Loneliness, to my mind, is the most pressing issue in society today, and for that reason, counselling too. I must give it a stage therefore and push UPR aside for now. Family issues. Separation. Divorce. Loss. Bereavement. Empty nesting. Alienation. Working while in our 50s and 60s. Not being listened to. The expectations of others. They all impact our position in the world, our nervousness, our disposition, our fear of tomorrow, our physical isolation now.

Loneliness leads to anxiety and depression

In simple terms, L=A+D (Loneliness leads to Anxiety and Depression). And anxiety and depression encompass a hell of a lot. They are in the habit of trampling us, mangling our thoughts, pulling us down, making us feel weak. They ‘...[add] stressors to the bucket... until one day [we] overflow...’¹ Georg Lukacs, after being ditched by his partner, famously wrote: ‘Now my “ice-age” has returned.’² I cannot think of a better metaphor. That feeling of everything being cold, inaccessible, harsh, different and perhaps dangerous. Of life

and nature building a solid wall so that its finer elements may no longer be touched or treasured. It’s exclusion of a kind – the world freezing around you, not showing grace or warmth.

Loneliness is the same. You cannot just open a door and find good company. You cannot instantly fuel the needs within you or find answers to your plight. Loneliness is a stake through your foot in many respects. It’s inertia – a physical response to the suffering of your mind, a psychosomatic bludgeoning of stability and normality. When we’re lonely, we’re shaken and buffeted by the world. We become scared, unfulfilled, forlorn and abandoned. Some people let it grip them fully and find refuge (or oblivion) in drink, drugs, incessant gaming or poor diets to offset the emotional emptiness they feel. Others see through the sham and temptation of those temporary highs and try to fight

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what they believe to be a bump in the road or stalling of their life.

Loneliness can be debilitating and draining, however. It can paralyse and sap you. It can make you feel that absolutely no one cares. Unless there's a deal to be had. Unless you put on a front. Unless you pretend. And that's the point with loneliness. You've often been authentic, real, yourself, but not accepted. You've chosen not to 'play the game' anymore but rather grow up and be forthright.

Clients have often come to me and been bamboozled by the false merriness of the world, but also its sensitivity. They've considered themselves mean, difficult, angry, or just plain upset due to their predicament. They have, in a lot of cases, been unable to find '[their] tribe'³ and such a jam or situation is hard. We all wish to be part of something (even if very loosely). We all need anchors of some kind.

Most people commit to a life of work and play. Some beautifully complicate things by wanting more. I would go so far as to say that the latter group are invariably lonelier, simply because they need to focus and cannot have the typical interruptions of daily life (random phone calls from friends and spontaneous evenings out) alter their path or disturb them. In other words, life must be on my terms if I'm to achieve something. I must exert a certain amount of control and pushback if I'm to get things done that may carve out a quite unique existence.

Such a life comes with consequences. Emily Dickinson, the American poet, wrote: 'Nothing has happened but loneliness.'⁴ There are an array of 'types', of course, and it's important to establish with clients what

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exactly it is that equates to preferred or joyful solitude, and what tips them too far into the maelstrom of disturbing loneliness.

Erich Fromm wrote '...[one's] mode of life... determined... by the peculiarity of an economic system, becomes the primary factor in determining his whole character structure, because the imperative need for self-preservation forces him to accept the conditions under which he has to live.'⁵ The words 'peculiarity' and 'self-preservation' stand out here. We all see peculiarities, abnormalities, anomalies and outliers in systems and the world at large. We may even see such quirks within ourselves. When such oddities become unfair, however, and undermine the wider good, we start to question how and why that system could have been built. People, procedures, business, politics – they all come at us. Certain things we find difficult, not in keeping with what we believe to be right, intelligent or gracious. And yet we fall back on that unsavoury word, 'self-preservation', as if it alone justifies not confronting things or tackling bad decisions.

I'm always amazed, in the different worlds I inhabit (publishing, counselling and stockbroking), how compliant people are, how they regularly obey and co-operate with awful decisions made above them. How they just 'crack on' without dissent of any kind. I guess, in this respect, I wonder who I am and who my clients truly are, because we're all seemingly trying to find strength while in the shadow of people we perceive to be clowns or bozos (to put it impolitely).

Does fighting the system make it harder? Undoubtedly so. Does being less agreeable and challenging things perhaps lead to loneliness? Absolutely. Fromm put it this way: '[We] need to be related to the world outside [ourselves]... [as] to feel completely alone and isolated leads to mental disintegration just as physical starvation leads to death.'⁵

So where does this leave us? And where might we find our tribe, or collection of individuals with similar outlooks? We don't, after all, wish to be '...ostracized... or beaten up... [as in the case] of apes or chimps in a group... [sat] in a corner contemplating'.⁶ But then some rail at '...the stupidity of books that tout cures...'⁷, which I understand because one person's answer isn't necessarily another's.

Loneliness is 'an emotion cluster', according to Fay Alberty, comprising a range of alternating



feelings – including fear, anger, resentment, sorrow, shame, jealousy and self-pity'.⁸ This, I can run with, because it gives us scope, breadth and difference. It seems to exemplify a rainbow of sensations which ultimately contract or diminish us in some way.

Fear

Fear is interesting, as we may have once imagined ourselves growing incrementally. We may have been told that life should be a linear graph, with the x-axis as lived years and the y-axis as wisdom, wealth and self-assurance. Fear permeates us though. It hints at unpleasant circumstances if things continue the way they are. It speeds up our heart rate. It triggers an adrenaline surge. It is, you could argue, the big brother of anxiety in that '...fear is a strong biological response to imminent danger [whereas] anxiety is marked by

apprehension and worry over things that may or may not occur...'⁹

Fear genuinely grips you. In my experience, it seems to map out an unsolvable puzzle; one with numerous dead ends or overwhelming requirements. Fear sees that life has become *too* complicated, too burdensome, no longer smooth. Whatever looked good, within touching distance – perhaps retirement – now seems like an unrealistic dream; our flagging energy tormenting us, telling us that whichever path we take, we'll regret it. And this, of course, leads to loneliness because there are no answers, no cures, nowhere to turn. We're frozen. Suspended. If we present our dilemma to others, then shame kicks in. Then perhaps anger and jealousy, following a feeble or apathetic response. Finally, resentment, sorrow and self-pity are left to sweep up the mess, in the process lifting a mirror up to our dejected face.

We reach a lot of crossroads in life. I joked with a friend the other day that you're not really an adult – not even close – until you've been married, had kids, lost a grandparent, suffered illness of some kind, worked for 35 years, got divorced and begun to question everything you thought to be true. The sad thing is, I've probably come to believe that. And yet I think I'm a good therapist because of this happiness and hardship. It has honed me. It has allowed me to see the real beauty in life – what we miss, what we value, what we long for, what we adore, and what makes us truly ache when it disappears.

Loneliness has a lot of '...clout [and] can... be triggered and compounded by adverse life factors'.¹⁰ Such a statement is irrefutable. It can be torn down though. The 'slow choke of loneliness'¹¹ *can* be reversed. But the healing is often sluggish. Clients speak of an '...emptiness...

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“ I wanted conversations that stirred me. I wanted exceptional, uplifting, well-meaning exchanges

[the] desperation of wanting to allow people in but not being able to.¹⁰ This appalling situation suggests both a willingness and unwillingness to move life forward, almost as if the embarrassment of your plight or predicament is too permanent a stain to admit to.

‘Is this really how I want to present myself to the world?’ can be the underlying concern or mortification. ‘Is framing myself this way tantamount to nullifying my dignity?’ Music was said to be Richard Strauss’s ‘...chief refuge from the unspeakable within him...’¹² – loneliness, terror and death. When I have seen clients evidently running from the world, not facing it or doubting themselves, I tend to ask them one simple question: ‘What is it you’re proud of or like doing?’ Some will tell me about their love of music, like Strauss, but how they’ve neglected their instrument. Some will tell me about their art or great drawings, but how they’ve not attended to such endeavours recently. Some will talk enthusiastically about a project they’ve started (gardening or woodwork) but failed to finish.

Accomplishments. Enjoying things. Feeling at one with yourself. They all tend to restore something inside us and gear us up for the world. Without that creative spark, at whatever level, I believe people feel lost, not as brave, unworthy somehow. And this impacts our self-worth. To some, relationships, full stop, can be ‘...at best “...embattled togetherness”’;² which I found quite acute

and amusing; like being inside one is the equivalent to a readiness for war. This arguably teeters towards actively avoiding or resisting self-preservation, namely being on the outside. Better to *be* lonely, prize solitude and not indulge in the giant compromise that is love or friendship.

But then, is this ‘...silent stoicism [or] abject cowardice’?¹² We all need time away from crowds, people and loved ones, yet when this hurtles into resigned isolation, we must ask ourselves: What is the cause of this? Has the world taken a turn I’m simply not happy with? Has spending ‘...serious time out of circulation’¹⁷ multiplied my fears in an unfounded way? Or am I just bored with humanity and no matter what the anguish or consequences, I would prefer that to having surface conversations?

The past

Cowboys ‘...broken in body... twisted in spirit [and] bruised by debt, failure, loneliness... and most of the other afflictions of man [are said to be] extreme romantics [and] sentimental to the core. They are oriented towards the past and face the present only under duress, and then with extreme reluctance.’¹³ Sometimes I wonder if we reach an age where this becomes very telling and trenchant, when our lives definitively tilt towards the past because it represents an easier and richer time. This cannot account for all loneliness cases or even the majority, however, I’m inclined to think that we do begin to look at the past with fondness because it offers both certainty and guarantees (with a flash of warmth), while the future dangles things before us in an undetermined way. Moving beyond this stasis, while respecting the past, is the ultimate test. Finding a way through the ‘glass wall’;¹⁰ which seemingly separates us and others, us and the ‘content crowd’, us and ‘normality’, is the real challenge.

I was sat at a restaurant table the other night with 15 work colleagues. It was pleasant enough, a nice send off for someone whom I’d known for 25 years, but I felt a little worrisome. No one could see that. I put on a reasonable act. I’m in the habit of becoming extremely quiet if I’m reflecting on life and maybe that’s more of a red flag. On this occasion, I was relatively OK. I’d even chosen a chair among people who I was less forced around. But, and here’s the big but, it wasn’t sufficient or adequate. I was keen to get home and relax properly. Why? Because I wanted

conversations that stirred me. I wanted exceptional, uplifting, well-meaning exchanges.

Such a comment will insult many people, but I’m just being emotionally honest. And it’s largely why loneliness creeps up on me at times (perhaps out of disappointment that no one wanted to chat about the new Bob Dylan biopic, *A Complete Unknown*, or the new Maria Callas biopic, *Maria*). They were my teammates, but they weren’t my tribe. I indulged in self-preservation to a degree, but to retain my sanity I’ll avoid going out with them for the next four months. Being myself for a good, solid chunk of time in the foreseeable future is essential to my wellbeing.

Olga Khazan, in 2017, wrote: ‘People with few social connections experience brain changes that cause them to be more likely to view human faces as threatening, making it harder for them to bond with others.’¹⁴ I see the logic. I see the spinning fruit machine that wishes to line us all up like lemons. But it’s the *type* of bond which is important. Shared interests. Depth. Tomfoolery. Whatever moves you or fulfils you. There’s no escaping that, unless you wish to hang out with incompatible souls. I think loneliness deserves better though. I think it deserves warmth and wit. ●

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YOUR THOUGHTS, PLEASE

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