Dealing with loneliness

It can come as a sense of emptiness: of feeling disconnected, alone even in a crowd. Often, it's accompanied by sadness, resentment, or anxiety. New situations can trigger loneliness: a move to a new city or country or a breakup with a partner. On the other hand, loneliness can creep in when relationships and situations become repetitive or routine. Boredom and loneliness frequently go hand in hand.

Given the importance that some people attach to being popular or successful, it's not surprising that many find it hard to admit they're lonely, even to themselves. However, loneliness is a part of being human; no one is immune. In many ways, loneliness is a healthy signal. It can stir us to make changes; to begin a process that may increase social contacts, improve relationships, and explore activities that offer learning and growth. These activities don't always need to involve others. We can feel content or connected even when we are alone.

Here are some constructive ways to begin dealing with loneliness:

Slow down and be more attentive to your surroundings. You can begin by making healthier choices and taking time to enjoy your food. It might also mean scheduling regular walks or bike rides and stopping to notice some interesting shop or garden along the way. Ask yourself: "Am I falling into the trap of routine?" If so, you may want to start setting goals in the following areas:

- Personal well-being (physical/intellectual/spiritual)
- Relationships (enhancing existing ones/forming new ones)
- Community activities

Stimulate your sense of curiosity. Look for an interesting article, event, or destination to explore. Rekindle an activity you previously enjoyed. Curiosity engages the mind. It encourages us to make connections, and seek answers.

Send the right signals to people. Too often, we send people mixed social messages. We make dates, then cancel or leave no message at all, waiting for others to call and when they don't, writing them off. If you want to spend time with people, schedule a time and stick to it.

Hone your social skills. For some people, loneliness stems from not knowing the "appropriate" things to do or say socially. If you are concerned about this, you can find advice on etiquette, interpersonal relationships, and communicating online or at a bookstore. Or check out an organization in your area to hone your speaking skills.

Reach out as a volunteer. Few activities bring such a sense of personal satisfaction as providing a useful service for those in need. There are many possibilities—hospitals, animal shelters, recreation centers, or a senior's facility, to name just a few.

Try "reconnecting" with people. Track down old friends and others you have lost touch with. An old relationship might flourish anew.

Maintain connections when abroad. If you're away from home, make an effort to stay in touch with friends and family. Technology offers so many unique ways to maintain connections, despite being oceans apart. You can video chat or text message in real time. Exchange photos of what you're up to and the city you're living in.

How to feel connected when you're alone

- Listen to music or read an uplifting book
- Take a walk in a park, field, or forest
- Attend a community event
- Play with a pet
- Visit a place of worship

- Browse through a museum, zoo, or art gallery
- Chart your horoscope
- Connect with others online through social media
- Take a bubble bath
- Cook your favorite meal

When it comes to dealing with loneliness, doing things that get you to feel more connected can make all the difference in the world. Sometimes, no matter how much a person tries to cope, there is the need to speak with a professional to manage and overcome negative emotions that seem to be a part and parcel of loneliness.