

Loneliness: The Silent Killer?

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The approach of Christmas is a cause of much excitement for countless numbers of children and adults alike. Yet from many, Christmas brings with it a great sense of foreboding and dread. The voluntary organization *Lifeshare*, which caters for the needs of homeless people, state that, “Whilst Christmas brings joy to many, for others it is a time of loneliness, hardship and depression - when the suicide rate traditionally peaks”¹ The sad reality is that for many, Christmas only brings an increased sense of detachment and isolation. However, loneliness is not limited to a season, it is an ever-present emotion that effects all of us in varying degrees.

Loneliness is the feeling of sadness that results from isolation or a lack or companionship. The sense of detachment from significant others can give rise to emotions of anger, sadness, depression, worthlessness, resentment, emptiness, vulnerability and pessimism. Loneliness is no respecter of persons. Contrary to popular opinion, it is not the sole domain of single people and the elderly. It affects those in marriages, families, those with successful careers, introverts, extroverts, and every age group. The fact that loneliness is the result of a lack of emotional connection means that mere proximity to others is not the solution. We may be in the presence of thousands and still feel isolated.

The Lonely Society, a 2010 report commissioned by The Mental Health Foundation, suggests that lonely people often share certain characteristics: these include more of a history of loss or trauma and a childhood spent with negative, critical and harsh parenting (See *The Lonely Society*, 15).² However, loneliness is not merely a psychological/emotional problem. Research is now demonstrating that loneliness is also detrimental to physical health. Neuroscientist John Cacioppo, has researched social seclusion for decades. He has found that while obesity increases the likelihood of early death by 20%, excessive loneliness pushes up the odds to 45%.³

Feeling isolated from others can disrupt sleep, raise blood pressure, lower immunity, increase depression, lower overall subjective wellbeing and increase the stress hormone cortisol. At sustained high levels, cortisol gradually wears the body down. Lonely people are nearly twice as likely to die prematurely as those who do not suffer feelings of isolation.⁴ The idea of dying from a broken heart is a lot closer to the truth than many realise.

The solution to loneliness often requires individuals to take personal responsibility for their emotional wellbeing. The Bible states, “A man who has friends must himself be friendly” (Proverbs 18:24). While some may claim that they do not need anybody apart from God, such protests ring hollow because God Himself said, “It is not good that man should be alone” (Genesis 2:18). It is significant that God made this declaration while Adam stood in perfect manhood untainted by sin. The sense of being ‘alone’ is not a sign of our sinfulness, it is a sign of our humanity. We are hardwired for intimate human relationships. Where healthy human connection is absent, deterioration in emotional wellbeing is the inevitable result.

There is a marked difference between being alone and being lonely. While John the Baptist spent long periods by himself in the wilderness, Ellen White comments that his life, “was not spent in idleness, in ascetic gloom, or in selfish isolation . . . In solitude, by meditation and prayer, he sought to gird up his soul for the lifework before him” (*The Desire of Ages*, 64).⁵ Even though introvert personalities may cherish time alone to recharge their energy levels, they still have a basic need for social interaction in order to preserve good emotional, spiritual and physical health.

Loneliness is a fact of life and it is unrealistic to expect that we can go through life without experiencing this sense of isolation. The key is in how we choose to respond to our loneliness. The only solution to loneliness is relationship. Cacioppo, describes loneliness as social pain - a psychological signal designed to alert an individual of their isolation and motivate him/her to seek social connections.⁶ Those who are lonely need to be intentional about forming relationships.

Loneliness can often be the product of the fear of relationships, an unhealthy introspection due to low self-esteem and the result of emotional pain or trauma. However, the individual who struggles with loneliness must exercise the courage to step beyond their fears and pain in order to cultivate healthy connections with others.

Healthy friendships are a key factor in helping individuals to develop resilience in the face of adversity. There is much truth in the old axiom that “A trouble shared is a trouble halved”. Solomon states in Ecclesiastes 4:9-12, “Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their labour. For if they fall, one will lift up his companion. But woe to him who is alone when he falls, for he has no one to help him up.” Often the best way to address our own problems is to reach out to others. Solomon states that, the generous soul shall be made rich, and he who waters will also be watered himself (Proverbs 11:25).

Nazi concentration camp survivor Corrie Ten Boom testified that one of the ways she was able to endure her ordeal was to take her mind off her own problems by focussing on helping others. The primary characteristic, which should be exhibited by a follower of Jesus is love (see John 13:35). Love by its very nature is about giving. Agape love is one of the most effective remedies for warding off the self-absorption to which the lonely may be tempted.

The ultimate solution to our loneliness is our forever friendship with God. In our loneliness we can express the Psalmist’s cry, “My eyes are ever on the LORD, for only he will release my feet from the snare. ¹⁶Turn to me and be gracious to me, for I am lonely and afflicted” (Psalm 25:15). In turn the Lord promises, “I will never leave you nor forsake you, I will come to you, I will be with you even to the end of the world. Not only does He promise His eternal presence, but He also creates opportunities for human companionship. The Bible states, “God sets the lonely in families, he leads out the prisoners with singing” (Psalm 68:6).

¹www.lifeshare.co.uk.

²Issue: Social Neuroscience: Gene, Environment, Brain, Body

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³Aditya Chakraborty The Guardian, Monday 21 October 2013 20.20 BST

¹The Lonely Society, The Mental Health Foundation (2010), 15.