

Alone vs. Loneliness

Opinion

In all of the research regarding this topic, it boiled down to this: Alone is a state of being and loneliness is a state of mind.

Let's unwrap this a little. Alone is a state of being; something you physically are at that time and in that space. For example, if you are home by yourself, you are alone; if you are on a golf course with no one around, you are alone; and if you are at the office and everyone has gone home, you are alone. In each of these examples, being alone changes when another person enters the space you are in. When alone, you have the ability to change from being alone to not being alone simply by inviting someone into your space.

Loneliness is a state of mind, meaning an emotional state of being, or when we feel emotionally disconnected from the people around us. Let's use the same examples as before. If you are home and the house is filled with family or friends but you don't feel you can open up, you are feeling lonely; if you are on the golf course with 3 others in your group but feel disconnected, you are feeling lonely; if you are at an office Christmas party, surrounded by co-workers and no one wants to hear more than "fine" when asked "How are you?", you are lonely.

Loneliness is much harder to remedy, because of the complexity of feeling in sync with another human being. Loneliness is difficult to change because of our own resistance to being vulnerable and the hard time we have acknowledging these painful feelings. Finally, loneliness is challenging because of the skills required for two individuals to be emotionally connected.

So how can we be more aware and purposeful with our lives in order to battle loneliness? If loneliness were associated with being connected with another person, whether it is family or friend, it would seem like spending time with them would be a good start. The French philosopher Simone Weil once wrote that attention is the rarest and purest form of generosity. She lived in the early twentieth century without any of the digital distractions of today, so imagine how generous we are now with so many more alternatives. But, just like the early twentieth century, being purposeful in battling loneliness does mean making an effort and time for the people you care about.

University of North Carolina Professor, Barbara Fredrickson, cautioned that even though giving attention to other is great, it works even better when you start by giving yourself attention. She is quoted as saying "Your brain is tied to your heart". Even though this can be difficult for many of us, the professor's message is very clear in how the battle against loneliness starts by taking care of our self first before we move on to help others.

The overall message from the professionals is that we not only are supposed to give attention to ourselves and people we care about, and be careful of distractions such as phones, computers, and TV's, but we also need to be vulnerable when doing so. So, when you are with friends and family, be brave and talk about worries or fears; when you are on the golf course show your strength by sharing a story of happiness and sadness; and when you are at work be an example for others by sharing stories of anger and frustrations.

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In recent months some of the British younger Royals have opened up about their loneliness, including Prince Harry. He struggled with the grief the death of his mother at age 12, and tried to cope with it by shutting down his emotions. The consequence for this strategy was additional isolation and pain. This was especially hard for a person who lived in the public eye with limited room for a private grieving. It was not until his thirties that he started sharing his stories with friends, family, and therapist. His emotional exploration of his mother's death, his processing of his grief, and his willingness to be vulnerable with his emotions has allowed him to become close with others. One positive result of developing these new coping strategies has been his courtship and engagement to Miss. Meghan Markle. Allowing himself to feel again, allowing himself to love again, allowed him to not be lonely and isolated in a world that never really left him alone.

His sister-in-law, Princess Kate, also expressed loneliness, but her circumstance was due to being a mother of several young kids. Along with countless of new parents around the world, Princess Kate felt alone even though there was a house full of kids, and support staff. She felt overwhelmed with the experience of motherhood, and did not feel like she could talk about it with others. That lack of connection was the trigger of her loneliness and isolation. It was not until she developed a self-described bravery to reach out to others, that she started to feel better about her situation. I agree that Princess Kate was very brave for pursuing a path that lead her to find companionship and connection.

Finally, Robin Williams once said, "I used to think the worst think in life was to end up all alone. It's not. The worst thing in life is to end up with people that make you feel all alone." So, whether you are alone or lonely, it is worth your time and effort to process your state of being as well as your state of mind. Telling your story and hearing others, can only lead to a happier, healthier, and longer life for you and the others around you. It has for me.

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Conflict of interest

The author declares there is no conflict of interest.