

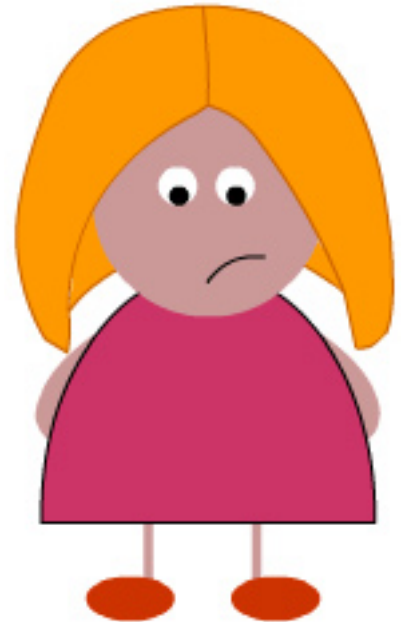
Loneliness

It is normal to feel lonely from time to time and it is something that most people have experienced. Depressed people, however, experience this to a much greater degree and can feel completely and utterly alone.

This is not to be confused with being physically alone. You can be in a crowded room and still feel lonely. Conversely you can be on your own but not feel lonely at all. The loneliness we are focusing on is the overwhelming feeling of being cut off from the world.

Discuss the following feelings with the group and ask if anyone has ever felt like this and why:

- You may feel that nobody likes you, that you are boring and useless.
- You may crave company but cannot bear the pain and anguish of having to converse with another person.
- Nobody can understand the desperation and panic you feel.



Much of this is related to negative thinking. Ask the group to look back at the previous sections and worksheets to see whether our own thinking is responsible for our loneliness. Low self-esteem can form a barrier that prevents people from opening up to others. Flipchart the following questions and ask the group whether they ever find themselves thinking or saying the following:

- I'm too boring and worthless to have friends
- They couldn't possibly want to be friends with me
- I can't think of anything interesting to say
- That type of person wouldn't like me

Emphasise that basically we are back to low self-esteem again. Think about it. If you don't like yourself how can you expect others to like you? You need to build up your own self-respect. Ask the group to look at their assets (see previous section). Can they find areas where they can improve? It is important to be ourselves and stop worrying about what others think of us. It is also important not to expect too much of other people.

We cannot depend on others to make us feel good because this must come from within ourselves. If we rely too heavily on other people, sooner or later someone will let us down and we will be left feeling angry and rejected.

Have a class discussion on the theme 'What makes a good friend'. Flipchart these questions and ask the group to try to answer them:

1. Why do some people seem to attract others?
2. What do you look for in a friend?
3. Do you think you are a good friend?
4. Do you find some people difficult to befriend? Why is this?
5. Do you hate to share your friends with others?
6. 'Loyalty is the most important quality in a friend'. Do you agree?
7. Have you ever been let down by a friend? How did this make you feel?

With the advent of the Internet, many young people are obsessed with how many friends they have on Facebook or Twitter. Has anyone 'unfriended' them? How many followers do they have on Twitter? How many parties are their online 'friends' going to this month? Who is popular and who isn't?

Young people feel the need to create an online persona—they want to be seen to be popular people with busy lives. They are being forced to brand and sell themselves online which is putting tremendous pressure on them. And the fact that young people now communicate online rather than meeting up and talking the way they used to can lead to isolation and loneliness. And this constant pressure to update their statuses, as well as constantly checking other people's, is not healthy.

Ask the group about their understanding of social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter. Are Facebook friends really friends or simply online contacts? Do they have 'friends' online who they have never actually met? Are their online 'friends' true friends?

It is useful to remember that we may be strongly influenced by what we are exposed to on TV and the media in general. The message that comes across is that a person must have a large circle of 'fun' friends otherwise he is a misfit. Is this realistic?

You may feel that this is true because you feel so lonely and unloved. You look around and see people laughing and joking—they all seem to 'fit in'. It is as if they all know something that you don't and nobody has let you in on the secret. You do not understand why you feel 'different'.



The key to these negative feelings is to build yourself up and realise that you are an interesting, worthwhile person. You need to take an honest look at your life and your whole attitude towards yourself and others. This requires positive action.

- Believe in yourself because you have the ability to accomplish many things. You also have the ability to change. But you only need to work on areas that you want to change. There are parts of your personality that are valuable that you want to keep. Do not think that you have to be more like other people and do not try to force yourself to suit the likes and dislikes of others. You are a unique person—many people will value you for who you are.
- Replace any negative thoughts with positive ones. It is a bit like listening to music. If you do not like what you are listening to, you can put on a different track. Do the same with your thoughts—if you do not like what you are thinking, change your thoughts for something better.
- When you look at others, try to concentrate on their good points. We all have faults and it is not fair to expect more of others than they can give. We may have been hurt or betrayed by somebody in the past but it is important not to dwell on these things or harbour resentments. The only person who will suffer is you.
- Make a list of all the people you know. How many of these do you actually like? What is it that you like about them? Make an effort to spend some time with these people. Do not always wait for others to make the first move.
- Look around at your community. Join a group or club—they are a great source of friends and you will meet people with the same interests as you. You will not make friends by staying at home watching TV night after night.
- Take up a hobby. Learn to play an instrument. Maybe you can join a band which will give you an opportunity to make friends.
- Learn to enjoy spending time on your own. Feeling comfortable with yourself is half the battle of fighting loneliness.

You may find that these activities are just too hard. You may be feeling too bad about yourself and just getting through each day is all you can manage at the moment. Do not feel guilty about that. There are some things that you may not be able to face up to until you are well on the road to recovery, so try to be satisfied with what you can do today.

Perhaps you feel you cannot tackle your loneliness until you have tackled your depression. But you need to remember that depression and loneliness often go hand in hand. The only person who can do something about this is you. So it is vital, no matter how bad you are feeling, that you try to do at least something each day, however small.