

# The Loneliness Epidemic

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According to scientific data from the UCLA Loneliness Scale and a new Cigna study of over 20,000 U.S. adults, loneliness has reached epidemic proportions in America. Loneliness is linked to numerous health concerns, including increased rates of depression, anxiety, and suicide. And it can hit anyone--from those who are married to those who are not, from the young to the old. People who are lonely say they feel isolated and left out, even when they're in a crowd.

People might look like they're "connected" when they have thousands of friends on social media. There's even neurological confusion: when someone "likes" our posts on Facebook, our brains release a small amount of dopamine with each "like" we receive. Influencing our brain's reward and pleasure centers, that dopamine could even make us think we're happily connecting with real people. But a trace of dopamine can't begin to compare with the amazing neurochemical benefits of building healthy relationships with real people, in real time.

***Connecting, deeply connecting with other believers decreases loneliness.*** Jesus said, "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another" (John 13:34-35, NIV). When our hearts and minds are focused on Jesus, we'll love each other as a community of Christians and profoundly care for each other in practical ways. Jesus told us to "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself'" (Matthew 22:36, NIV).

For decades, we've emphasized autonomy while sometimes neglecting the command to share God's rich, unconditional love with all kinds of people. We need to bravely move away from comfortable cliques or isolating habits. Pastor Bob Kirk urges the church to "learn to enjoy humanity, with all its warts and weaknesses, without pulling away in fear and judgment--this is the one thing the church doesn't know." Kirk adds, "Most churches, I think, are frightened of human beings." You can read about this in a superb book by Mike Mason: "Practicing the Presence of People: How We Learn to Love."

***Why are we lonely?*** We forget we're designed with a purpose for God's purpose, not our own (see Ephesians 2:10) and that this world is not our eternal home. "For our citizenship is in heaven, from which we also eagerly wait for the Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ" (Philippians 3:20, NKJV). Augustine said, "Thou hast created us for Thyself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it finds its rest in Thee."

We forget God's promises, such as Joshua 1:5: "I will be with you...I will not fail you or abandon you."

We feel lonely because we're designed for community. When people fail us, marring God's design, we can entrust our legitimate needs for connection to the God Who made us. In their exquisite book, "Fearfully and Wonderfully Made: A Surgeon Looks at the Human and Spiritual Body," Dr. Paul Brand and Philip Yancey explain that "the brain abhors silence," noting how, from birth, each person was entrusted with billions of neurons "poised for action," ready to communicate to the body with incredible complexity. Since God wants every part of His body to function in harmony, each of us can learn to joyfully recognize our worth, discovering how to make a difference *where we are* today! You can't do anything where you are not, so why not enjoy being fully alive where you are?

### ***When we feel lonely, what can we do?***

1. We can remind ourselves that God cares. Like the psalmist, we can be honest about how we feel and bring our sorrows to God. “Turn to me and be gracious to me, for I am lonely and afflicted. The troubles of my heart have multiplied; free me from my anguish. Look upon my affliction and my distress... Guard my life and rescue me; let me not be put to shame for I take refuge in you... my hope is in you” (see Psalm 25:16-21, NIV).

2. We can reach out to others instead of waiting for people to reach out to us. That includes inviting people into our homes, engaging in what is almost a lost art: hospitality! You don't have to have a certain kind of home to practice being hospitable. Whether you live in an apartment, a mansion, a boat, or a dorm room, there are people with whom you can learn to build healthy relationships.

Ask God to show you what you *can do* with the amazing, original life He has entrusted to you, instead of rehashing what you can't do or what others aren't doing for you. Don't let others' failures stop you from experiencing God's hope, because your unique gifts matter for eternity. Today, you can prayerfully discover how to connect with others, whether it is through writing letters, creating something for someone in need, tangibly caring for one person, or volunteering to help in your church nursery, kids' program, or another ministry. We can summon the courage we need to battle loneliness when we begin to understand and appreciate God's perfect design for us and choose to live in His strength rather than our own or others' weaknesses.

3. Change your perspective: appreciate the quiet seasons as opportunities to grow and build your relationship with God, aware that your Savior understands every emotion you feel. Like Paul, we can seek to “know Him and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death” (Philippians 3:10, NKJV). When we realize our lives matter for eternity, we'll be motivated to make our relationships count for eternity rather than turning to people or activities in hopes of fulfillment--or with disillusionment, whenever we (or they) fail.

***What can the Church do to solve the loneliness problem?*** Another church program is not the answer for epidemic loneliness; the problem can only be resolved as each of us consciously chooses to connect one-to-one with people where God leads us every day. *Both those who are lonely and those who are not can work together, learning to appreciate, connect, and care for one another.*

1. Each of us can be aware of how we're managing our own lives. At least twice a year, take a day or two to set goals-- both short term and long term, planning how to make healthy choices for spiritual, emotional, physical, social/relational, financial, and mental growth and balance.

2. Grow in understanding and application of Truth, conquering loneliness with compassion for every part of Christ's body. Romans 12:5 (ESV), says “though many, [we] are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another.” We can bridge the loneliness gap with sincere love, per Romans 12:9-13, Colossians 3:12-17, etc.

3. We can intentionally reach out to others. George Washington Carver said, “How far you go in life depends on you being tender with the young, compassionate with the aged, sympathetic with the striving and tolerant of the weak and strong. Because someday in your life you will have been all of these.”