

## ADULT LONELINESS BLOG

Emotions are an essential part of the human experience. We feel joy, sadness, and all the shades in between. But unbeknownst to many, emotions can be a way for our body to signal its needs to us. For example, fear can indicate a need for safety, and anger can indicate a need to address an underlying issue. In the same vein, loneliness signals a need for stronger social connection, and this emotion has taken medical journalism and the news by storm.

It is known that chronic loneliness is equivalent to smoking 15 cigarettes a day. And that's just talking about the physical effects of loneliness, which make one more prone to heart disease, strokes, and diabetes. Mentally, chronic loneliness can increase one's chances of (and exacerbate existing) depression, anxiety, and other mental health conditions. This issue came to a head due to the social isolation caused by the pandemic. Chronic loneliness rates skyrocketed, to the point where the Surgeon General declared it an epidemic.

But what exactly is loneliness?

Loneliness is your body's way of signaling that it is not satisfied with its current social connections. Humans are inherently social creatures; we function better in groups rather than alone. Our evolution reflects this through the feeling of loneliness. So hilariously, if one needs anybody to blame for that crushing feeling in our chest, blame the predators that hunted early humans.

The most important thing to understand is that different people experience loneliness in different ways. Everybody has their own needs, which is why loneliness is so subjective — and therefore so hard to address. A person by themselves may not necessarily be lonely, just like how the loneliest of all may be surrounded by friends. It's crucial to realize that quite literally everybody experiences some level of loneliness; there seems to be a certain stigma against admitting that one needs deeper connections, and for this reason, many people do not address their feelings of loneliness. This can be extremely dangerous for many reasons, not just because of the aforementioned negative health effects of loneliness, but because of the endless cycle loneliness one can get trapped you in.

Emotional and physical pain activate similar areas in the brain that signal for threats. This means that once a person starts feeling lonely for an extended period of time, their brain can go into a primal, self-preservation mode — it will try to shield them from a threat that it perceives to be everywhere, in every person and every social interaction. While a lonely person is often very good at recognizing social signals, they will often misconstrue many social signs as negative when they are often neutral or positive. This causes them to be more closed off, which can increase loneliness. Can you see where this is going? Because this process seems natural to our brains, we often don't realize how isolated we've become until it's too late.

This leads to the question: if loneliness is so dangerous, how do we combat loneliness?

And this is the hard part! Because loneliness is so different from person to person; everybody experiences and deals with it differently.

One way to combat loneliness is to become more involved in one's community. Volunteering at places such as animal shelters or local non-profits is a nice way to find like minded people and new friends while making a difference in one's community! A relevant NY Times article recommends becoming a regular at a local shop: one can support small businesses while finding a second home. Another thing that can be done is take the initiative in organizing meet-ups and dates with friends and loved ones: even just going for a coffee together can do wonders for deepening relationships.

If you know somebody who may be struggling with loneliness, or you want an opportunity to get closer to and have deeper conversations with somebody, The Community Chest of Englewood has started a new initiative — the Connections project, an initiative that seeks to connect people who want to reach out, or Connectors, with people who might be lonely. You can read more about the Connections project and how to become a Connector [here](#).

It's hard. It takes courage and it's not a linear process by any means. But, as they say, a journey of a thousand miles begins with a simple step. Educate yourself, then start taking small steps to help both yourself and those around you. Take that single step to make your life better. Trust me: you won't regret it.