



# Loneliness and Connection



REFERENCES

## **Loneliness:** The feelings that come with an absence of connection.

Loneliness is an evolutionarily adaptive emotion that helps us to seek out connections and form communities. However, it can also impact our mental health in negative ways. In order to understand loneliness, we must acknowledge that human connection is as important to our wellbeing as other needs such as food or water. Humans are social creatures by nature. Regardless of your personality type, there is no way to work around our deep need for connection to and with others.

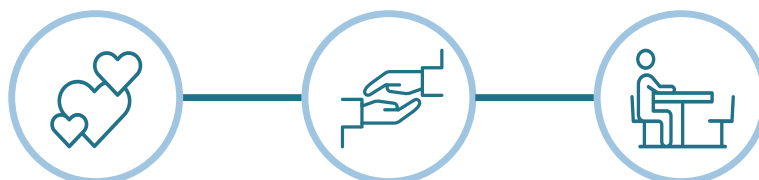
Connection can be defined as the feeling of being known, understood, valued, and cared for. Most of us internalize it as a broad, sweeping feeling that tells us that our basic needs are being met. It can include feeling like we are a part of a community, whether we are physically with that community or not. Another element of connection is the sense that we belong, and the positive feelings that come with the people and places that contribute to that belonging.

It is common to go through feelings of loneliness. According to Statistics Canada, more than 10% of Canadians are always or often lonely. Changes and transitions can also trigger loneliness and many students in college and university experience loneliness as well. In 2019, the National College Health Assessment, which surveyed more than 55,000 students, found more than 69% reported feeling “very lonely” in the past year.

Loneliness can be defined as the state of distress that occurs when we perceive a disparity between our desire to connect and our actual experience of connection. Loneliness will feel different for everyone, but a common experience is the absence of adequate connection with others. This can manifest as unwanted feelings such as sadness, shame, and despair.

## Three Primary Dimensions of Loneliness:

1. **Intimate or emotional** loneliness refers to the absence of social support such as a romantic partner.
2. **Relational or social** loneliness refers to the absence of extended supports such as friends or family.
3. **Collective** loneliness refers to the absence of community support such as school and work supports.



# Impacts of Loneliness on Mental Health

Loneliness is often described by its debilitating effects and has been associated with many negative mental health outcomes, including depression, anxiety, and decreased life satisfaction. Loneliness is related to worsening cognition over time and has been linked to substance use, sleep disturbances, and high levels of stress. A systematic review of suicide risk found that loneliness is associated with both suicide attempts and loss of life due to suicide.

One study, in which loneliness and social connection were induced using hypnosis, found that loneliness increases perceived stress, anxiety, fear of negative evaluation, and anger, and decreases optimism and self-esteem. These results suggest that a sense of connection acts as a scaffold for the self, and that if that scaffold is damaged, the self will suffer.

Similarly, it was also found that loneliness and academic stress were significantly negatively correlated with psychological wellbeing among college students, meaning that students with high levels of loneliness and academic stress would rate poorly in their psychological wellbeing. The same study also found that loneliness and academic stress were significantly positively correlated.

Loneliness can also impact our physical health. One meta-analysis found that loneliness and social isolation heighten health risks as much as smoking 15 cigarettes per day.



## The Relationship Between Isolation and Connection

Being alone and being lonely are two different experiences. For example, we may sometimes feel connected when we are alone. At other times, we might feel lonely while others are around. Sometimes togetherness can feel overwhelming or shallow, and it may not fill the need for connection. According to Stanford University, the goal is finding a healthy balance between togetherness and solitude, and part of reaching this goal is understanding the experiences of toxic loneliness and overwhelming togetherness and how we navigate them when they show up in our lives. Your identities, cultural background, and past experiences will all impact how connectedness and isolation show up in your life. Therefore, you should consider both your culture as well as your own boundaries when trying to navigate between solitude and togetherness.

**Healthy solitude:** This refers to time spent alone, often intentionally, in order to focus on oneself or one's personal growth. This time can restore our energy and allow us to move from a mode of doing to one of being.

**Healthy togetherness:** This refers to time spent in community or with others, feeling understood and cared for. It can also refer to the sense of support that can lead to feelings of belonging and can help us better deal with the challenges that come up in everyday life.

**Toxic loneliness:** This refers to time spent alone that negatively affects our mental health, drains us, and can sometimes prevent us from seeking out connection.

**Overwhelming togetherness:** This refers to connections that don't meet our needs, and where we are not comfortable showing up as our authentic selves. These kinds of social interactions can drain our energy and can even lead to toxic loneliness.

# How to Cope with Loneliness



- **Notice your feelings** – Noticing an emotional experience is the first step towards understanding it and being able to manage it. What does the feeling of loneliness do to your body? Can you label/name the experience? Have you made space and time for it to be felt? We often require more time to work through these experiences than we think.
- **Accept yourself** – You may feel lonely at this moment and that can be a powerful feeling. It's important to remember that this feeling is temporary – you can imagine loneliness as a visitor who is just passing by. You can also reach a state of acceptance by remembering that many others are likely feeling the same thing right now.
- **Assess your needs** – We are hardwired for connection, but we don't all have the same needs when it comes to navigating loneliness. Our needs are also likely to vary from day to day. The best thing is to focus on those needs and meet them however makes sense to you.
- **Build community** – Building networks of care takes time and effort, but joining a campus group, like a club or a team, can be one way to access connection. Relating with others based on shared interests can provide the sense of belonging you may be craving.
- **Strengthen existing relationships** – You likely already have some people in your life to whom you are somewhat connected, be they family, friends, or classmates. Try to call those people more often or find other ways to strengthen those relationships. It can be scary to reach out and be vulnerable, but the people in your life may be grateful that you did.
- **Adopt a pet** – If this option is financially feasible for you, dogs, cats, and other pets offer a reprieve from loneliness in a couple of different ways. Between the companionship they provide and the community of other pet owners they connect you to, adopting a pet can be a great way to fight loneliness.
- **Self-care** – Self-care is not a solution for everything, but it can really help us manage difficult times. Self-care can include activities that can help turn loneliness into positive solitude, for example spending time in nature or meditation. This can help turn our focus positively inwards. This is not about bypassing our experience of loneliness, but rather acknowledging it and doing something for yourself to help soothe it.
- **Limit social media** – Many of us engage in social comparison on a constant basis when we are on social media. Social media is a social valuation tool more than it is a facilitator of genuine communication. Pay attention to your social media use, what purpose it serves in your life, as well as the feelings you feel when you are on it.
- **Seek professional support** – Research has shown that loneliness and depression can perpetuate each other in a vicious cycle. If your loneliness has become chronic and you are struggling to manage it on your own, some forms of professional support may be able to help you prevent and decrease your loneliness.