



# Loneliness and Connection

*Jean Vanier is the 2015 recipient of the Templeton Award, given in recognition of his life's work with the worldwide L'Arche Communities. He has a profound awareness of the ways that a sense of community, of belonging, transforms people's lives.*

“To be lonely is to feel unwanted and unloved and therefore unlovable. Loneliness is a taste of death. No wonder some people who are desperately lonely lose themselves in mental illness or violence to forget the inner pain.” (1)

Loneliness and isolation are increasingly recognized as important social determinants of health. These determinants include income and social status; social support networks; education; employment or working conditions; social environments; physical environments; personal health practices and coping skills; healthy child development; gender; culture. Loneliness often starts in childhood when someone feels isolated due to their difference from others, whether for physical, intellectual, cultural, religious, or socio-economic reasons.

Rather than being physically alone, the perception of being alone seems to matter the most. One can be alone in a crowd. Research has shown that the impact of loneliness on premature death is nearly as strong as the impact of disadvantaged socio-economic status, which increases the chance of dying early by 19 percent. A meta-analysis (2) indicated that loneliness has twice the impact on early death as obesity does and is equivalent to smoking 15 cigarettes per day. Loneliness impairs the ability to feel trust and affection, and people who lack emotional intimacy are less able to, for example, exercise good judgement in socially ambiguous situations making them more vulnerable to bullying as children and exploitation by unscrupulous salespeople in old age. Whether by physical distance from family and friends or by connecting only through technology, loneliness and isolation have become a major problem in today's disconnected society.

The human brain is hardwired to have regular contact with others to aid survival. Feeling isolated from others can disrupt sleep, impair executive functioning, elevate blood pressure, increase morning rises in the stress hormone cortisol, alter gene expression in immune cells, increase depression, and lower overall subjective well being. So intense is the need to connect, that isolated individuals sometimes form para-social relations with pets or television characters.

All people need “healthy sustained relationships with people, institutions, the community, or a force greater than oneself that promote a sense of trust, belonging, and that one matters.” (3) The literature has shown that having close relationships that are low in conflict protect one from stress-related mental health problems such as anxiety and depression. Opportunities to create sustainable and positive social connections are extremely important but not enough on their own. It is the secure attachment to another or others, the reciprocal positive regard, of being loved and valued, and the sense of belonging to a family or community that make the difference. Satisfying relationships in

older people improved their ability to develop their resilience, to bounce back from adversity, and to grow from the stresses in life. (4)

Some of the common causes of loneliness are the following:

- A lack of positive human contact or community, such as social isolation, where there is no one to share private feelings with; a lack of secure attachment to another.
- A lack of spiritual connection to something greater than one's self.
- Having a temperament with a tendency to be very introverted or fearful of connection with others.

It is important to recognize that loneliness is unhealthy and is a sign that change is necessary. Some suggestions for nurturing connections, which are the antidote to loneliness, are the following:

- Make a relationship wish list stating the important qualities in a friend. This list will help you recognize potential friends.
- Reach out to others, looking for shared common interests, attitudes, and values. Do not focus on differences.
- Practice doing random acts of kindness for others. Consider community projects to get involved in that provide social interaction.
- Acknowledge the connections you already have and the nurturing role they may play in your life, whether with certain people, special places in nature, animals, and music. Recognition of these connections underlines the capacity you already have to connect in a positive way.
- Focus on positive thoughts, and expect the best, not rejection.
- Connect with yourself by taking time for solitude (which is different from loneliness). Get to know and appreciate yourself.

As Jean Vanier stated eloquently:

“Belonging to a group of friends, to a community, to a home, to a family, is so important because belonging is the remedy for the evil that is the silence of loneliness”

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(1) Jean Vanier. *Becoming Human*. Massey Lectures: CBC, 1999.

(2) Masi Christopher M., Chen Hsi-Yuan, Hawkey Louise C., Cacioppo John T. A Meta-Analysis of Interventions to Reduce Loneliness. *Pers Soc Psychol Rev* 15 (2011): 219.

(3) Harper Browne C. *The Strengthening Families Approach and Protective Factors Framework: Branching Out and Reaching Deeper*. Washington D.C.: The Centre for the Study of Social Policy. September 2014.

(4) Cacioppo J.T., and Cacioppo S. Social Relationships and Health: The Toxic Effects of Perceived Social Isolation. *Social and Personality Compass* 8:2 (2014): 58–72.



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