

Loneliness and Isolation

Virtually everyone experiences loneliness and isolation from time to time. The feeling can be especially noticeable around the holidays, Valentine's Day, birthdays, and times of extreme stress.

Loneliness and isolation are similar but they are not the same. Loneliness is the distressing feeling of being alone or separated. Social isolation is the lack of social contacts and having few people to interact with regularly. You can actually live alone and not feel lonely or isolated, and yet you can feel lonely or isolated and be in a relationship or around other people.

Effects of Loneliness and Social Isolation

Loneliness and social isolation can negatively affect your mental health as well as your physical health. You might be filled with self-doubt as you wonder why you can't seem to connect with others. Perhaps you begin to question your worth. It's easy for these negative thought patterns to spiral into depression.

Loneliness can also activate your nervous system's “fight-or-flight” stress response. During times of isolation, you might notice an increase in muscle tension, digestive troubles, and chest pains. Stress and anxiety; particularly in social situations; can lead you to self-isolate, deepening your loneliness and sense of isolation.

Loneliness and isolation can be a leading cause of unhealthy behaviours and addictions. This can lead to a distorted view of the world, yourself, and others. Perhaps your self-loathing thoughts go unchallenged or you begin to see other people as threats.

Tools

There is only one way to deal with isolation which will hopefully reduce the feelings of loneliness, and that is by being with other people. Here are some examples of what you can try:

- **Join a Class or Club** – try an art class, exercise class, book club, pottery class, etc. Joining a class or club automatically exposes you to a group of people who share a common interest. Check your local library, community college, city parks and recreation parks to name but a few to find what is available.
- **Volunteer** – Volunteering for a cause that you believe in can provide the same benefits as taking a class or joining a club: meeting others, being part of a group, and creating new experiences. It also brings the benefits of altruism and can help you find more meaning to your life.
- **Strengthen Existing Relationships** – You probably already have people in your life that you could get to know better or connections with family that could be deepened. If so, why not call friends more often, go out with them more, and find other ways to enjoy your existing relationships and strengthen bonds.

- **Adopt a Pet** – Pets, especially dogs and cats, offer so many benefits, and preventing loneliness is one of them. Rescuing a pet combines the benefits of altruism and companionship, and fights loneliness in several ways. It can connect you with other people – walking a dog opens you up to a community of other dog-walkers, a cute dog on a leash tends to be a people magnet. Additionally, pets provide unconditional love, which can be a great salve for loneliness.
- **Keep Busy** – Distract yourself from those feelings of loneliness and make a date with yourself. Do you have a hobby you've always wanted to try or a home improvement project that's been lingering on your to-do list? Take some time to invest in yourself and your interests and keep your mind occupied in the process.
- **Go to the Gym or Physical Activity** – Going to the gym can be a great way to reduce loneliness and isolation, you will be around others with the same interests. Also going for hikes, a walk on the beach, fishing, etc. can help get you out there and get you grounded with nature. This can be incredibly connecting with the world around you and you might just run into someone and strike up a conversation with them.
- **Talk to a Stranger** – This one may sound crazy but sometimes just taking the time to talk to a stranger you encounter can make your day feel just a little bit better. Go for a coffee alone and sit beside someone else that is sitting alone, strike up a conversation. In fact, research has shown that striking up a conversation with a stranger contributes to our social and emotional well-being.
- **See a Therapist** – Research suggests that loneliness and symptoms of depression can perpetuate each other, meaning the more lonely you are, the more depressed you feel, and vice versa. Sometimes just “getting out there” and meeting other people isn't enough. It's possible to still feel lonely when you're around them, which could actually be a sign of depression or social anxiety. If this is the case for you, it may be a good idea to seek psychotherapy to help with feelings of loneliness, especially if you also feel other symptoms of depression.

No one of these will fix your feelings of loneliness and isolation, you need to take up a combination. It's all in your hands to take control of the situation and make it better for yourself, unfortunately no one else can help you with this situation, they can only give you ideas about what works for them.

So with this in mind, it is a good time to fill in your Vitally Absorbing Creative Interests (VACI) on page 62 of the SMART Recovery Handbook and get out there and enjoy yourself.