

# Loneliness: Its Cause and Cure

written by Tim Jennings, M.D. | May 6, 2021



Have you ever been lonely? Many of my patients struggle with deep feelings of loneliness. These feelings can be so intense, so uncomfortable, that they become intolerable, and the loneliness spurs people to take all kinds of actions to make the feelings go away. Deep loneliness leads to co-dependent relationships, the willingness to tolerate mistreatment just to avoid rejection; serial relationships, seeking someone to fill the void inside; and various forms of thrill-seeking, pleasure-seeking, and risk-taking just to feel connected.

If you struggle with loneliness, here is a question I ask my patients: Is there a difference between loneliness and being alone? Consider that for just a moment.

Loneliness is not about being by oneself; those who struggle with loneliness will still feel lonely on dates, in groups, with family—because loneliness is about something other than being alone.

Loneliness is a deep longing for something that is missing. It is longing for love, acceptance, validation, being valued; it is a longing to be whole, filled on the inside with contentment and peace. But ultimately, loneliness is a longing for God—for His presence in the life, for Him to occupy the place in our Spirit temple that we were designed for Him to fill.

When Adam and Eve sinned, they broke their intimate connection with God and ran and hid because

they were afraid. All human beings since then have also been running, struggling with these feelings of fear, isolation, and loneliness—and we have all sought to fill that void with people or things other than God.

Jesus met a woman at a well who struggled with loneliness. We read about it in John 4:4-26.

Jesus offers this woman a kind of water that if she drank of it, she would never get thirsty again—wow, what kind of water would that be? It wasn't H<sub>2</sub>O! It was something else that would quench a deep thirsting in her soul. But what was she thirsting for?

She thinks concretely, only of liquid water, and asks Jesus to give her some, but Jesus directs her to the type of water she really needs. He points her mind to the deep emptiness inside her, to the reservoir in her heart that is empty and that she has tried to fill with something other than the water of life. He tells her to go get her husband, but she replies that she doesn't have a husband. Jesus affirms her honest answer, saying, "You are right when you say you have no husband. The fact is, you have had five husbands, and the man you now have is not your husband. What you have just said is quite true" (John 4:17, 18 NIV84).

What did Jesus just point out? That she had spent her life seeking to fill a deep longing in her soul—a sense of inadequacy, a loneliness—with one man after another. It hadn't worked. She still wasn't filled; she was still empty. She was still thirsty—thirsty for love, to be made whole, to be healed, to have the emptiness in her soul filled. She longed for the water of life that, if she accepted it, if she drank it, if she let Jesus into her heart, then His love would become a well that would overflow from her heart to others. Then, rather than seeking to use others to fill her, validate her, affirm her, make her feel okay about herself, instead of constantly thirsting for affection, she would become what God designed every human being to be: a living wellspring, a geyser of love that bursts forth and overflows to others!

Loneliness is not the same as being by yourself, and it is also not the same as our God-given desire for connection and intimacy. God in Eden, before Adam sinned, said it was not good for Adam to be alone; He created Eve to be Adam's life partner. We are created as relational beings—to connect, to love, and to be loved. The desire to have someone to be united in love with and to share life with is not the same thing as loneliness.

But if we don't first drink of the water of life, if we don't first open the door to our hearts and invite Jesus in, uniting with Him and allowing Him to love us, to fill us, to whisper in our minds, "Well done! You are my good and faithful friend, you bring such joy to my heart. I love you and enjoy being with you every moment of every day"—if we don't do this, then we will seek people to provide us something they never can; we will seek people to fill the place of God in our hearts. We will seek people to make us whole, to make us feel worth, to value us and validate us. But, until we let Jesus in and unite with Him, we may be in relationship, we may be with people, but we will still be lonely.

No person, no drug, no pleasure-seeking activity can fill the deep emptiness in our souls, because we were built as living temples to be filled by the presence of our living God. Only in union with Him are we complete. Only when He abides within us are we whole. Only when we open the door to our hearts and allow Him in do we find peace; only then does the loneliness go away, for only then are we functioning as God built us to function.

So, if you struggle with loneliness, do the following:

1. Recognize loneliness is not about being alone; loneliness is about being disconnected from God and longing for the wholeness, validation, love, contentment, and peace that only come from union with Him.
2. Start out each day (at least 15 minutes) alone with God, meditate on His Word, invite Him into your heart. Take Jesus' hand and ask Him to walk with you to dark places in your heart—those deeply buried memories, hurts, disappointments, and failures that make you feel so inadequate, that incite fear of what others will think, that fuel the loneliness. Ask Jesus what He sees when you were bullied on the playground, when you were mocked, raped, molested, rejected, or when you were so lonely you looked a porn or hooked up for a one-night stand? See the tears in His eyes as He feels your pain, but listen to His tender voice telling you that you are His child, that He loves you, that He will take away your pain and heal your wounds if you let Him. Hear Him when He says you are loved for who you are—His child, not for anything you have done or anything that has happened to you. Let Him fill you with His love and presence. Ask Him to take away the hurts, the pain, the anger, the disappointment and to restore you to who He created you to be—His living temple—a holy place of love bursting forth to others.
3. Then as your day unfolds, talk to Jesus in your mind, make Him a part of the activities of the day. Share with Him your joys, frustrations, and concerns. In your mind think, "Jesus, thank you for the beautiful cardinal that just landed outside my window," or, "Jesus, thanks for being with me in this traffic jam and giving me patience; please oversee my day and my schedule. I trust you with how things turn out. Thanks for never leaving me nor forsaking me."