

I'm Lonely

We have all experienced loneliness. Whether it's the kind of lonely that shows up like a mysterious hole in your heart while surrounded by loved ones or it's the kind of familiar emptiness reminding you that you are alone.... loneliness is part of the human experience.

As much as loneliness is a common human experience, it is not one that we often talk about. The Corona Virus has brought up the loneliness conversation more because there is an instinctive realization that we are not having our normal social connections. Extroverts are feeling the loneliness the quickest because they are the ones who get life from being with people. Introverts are taking a little longer since solitude tends to be a source of comfort for them. Regardless of what experience feeds your soul, being quarantined for this long will eventually lead to some form of loneliness. And it is good to talk about it!

I have had that shocking experience of being at a table filled with family and friends looking around and feeling utterly alone. Those moments are surreal. They are also revealing. Moments of extreme loneliness whisper softly to our inner self that something is not right. It can feel shameful to not have close connections. We may fear that something is wrong with us or that people do not like us. Loneliness creates feelings of isolation that can grow exponentially if we do nothing about it.

I am blown away by how many people have estranged relationships with close family members. It is as if there is an entire population of people who don't talk about the fact that they are not in relationship with the key players in their lives. The loneliness that accompanies this form of aloneness is astronomical. Coupled with the actual sorrow of losing significant relationship is the shame that accompanies estrangement. Shame is that experience that shrouds your total personhood in a sense of feeling wrong, bad or unworthy. Brene Brown, shame researcher and storyteller says of shame that it is "the intensely painful feeling or experience of believing that we are flawed and therefore unworthy of love and belonging ... that something we have experienced, done or failed to do makes us unworthy of connection". Speaking of the loneliness surrounding unhealed relationships can be the beginning of unraveling knots of pain and isolation.

Loneliness can be described in several different ways. Dr. Vivek Murthy reports that research defines loneliness as a gap between the social connections you need and the social connections you have. One form of loneliness is the longing we have for an intimate partner, someone with whom we closely walk through life. There is another loneliness that comes when we do not have a friend group or a support network of quality friendships. And then there is a wider loneliness that comes from not belonging to a community or feeling connected with unified purpose. Any gap in any one of these levels of relationship can bring loneliness.

Feeling connected with others in deep and meaningful ways is a need of every human being. But equal to this need is our need to be connected to ourselves. How often do we know and fully embrace our voice, our value or our power? If we do not experience connection to ourselves, we will be loneliest for our self. I love Kelsea Ballerini's song "Miss Me More":

I thought I'd miss you But I miss me
more I miss my own beat, to my own
snare drum I miss me more ... I forgot I
had dreams, I forgot I had wings Forgot
who I was before I ever kissed you ... I
miss me more

There is a loneliness that comes when we cannot be our most authentic self. I think of the gay teenager whose Mom and Dad have told him he will never be accepted if he is gay. I grieve for the student who could no longer keep up with the pressure of success and ended life with a rope. And I think of how I have been hiding family secrets most of my life in order to protect parents' lives. A lack of authenticity within ourselves leads to radical separation from all. Even though we may be in close relationship with many people, if we are not completely true to ourselves, there will be a grand canyon between us and others everywhere we go.

Brene Brown writes in *Braving the Wilderness* that truly belonging and believing in yourself opens the door to sharing your most authentic self. It also opens the door to experiencing the "sacredness in both being a part of something and standing alone in the wilderness". If you have ever had the experience of feeling fulfilled and peaceful while being alone, then you know the power of truly belonging to yourself. It is from this place that genuine connection will happen within relationship. Authentic connection forms the beginning of deep and meaningful relationships.

This time of quarantine during COVID 19 has brought a season of such change and upheaval that many people have experienced emotional distress. It may bring with it an unrest that unravels what we have known and trusted. Ron Rolhauser, Catholic priest and author says that all of spirituality is what we do with the unrest in our souls. If you are aware of such unrest, then you are already on your way to uncovering real connection with yourself and others. And you are in good company. Jesus experienced loneliness when he asked his friends to wait with him. He experienced aloneness as he cried out to his Father while he died on the cross. This human experience on earth eventually leads us to look to the eternal for hope and guidance. When we seek, we are promised we will find. The direction lies no farther than your very own heart. May your best friendship start there so that all other connections will come from that place of love and truth.

Welcome unrest as a teacher and guide. Wonder where and with whom you are most authentic. Evaluate fulfillment you experience in significant relationships. Engage with your truest

self in a way that conveys love and friendship. Where would you like to gain more closeness and connection?