Loneliness

What is loneliness?

While common definitions of loneliness describe it as a state of solitude or being alone, loneliness is actually a state of mind. Loneliness is defined by researchers as feeling lonely more than once a week.

Loneliness causes people to feel empty, alone, and unwanted. People who are lonely often crave human contact, but their state of mind makes it more difficult to form connections with other people. Loneliness, according to many experts, is not necessarily about being alone. Instead, if you *feel* alone and isolated, then that is how loneliness plays into your state of mind. For example being in a room surrounded by people and still feeling lonely.

What can cause loneliness

Contributing factors to loneliness include situational variables, such as physical isolation, moving to a new location, and divorce. The death of someone significant in a person's life can also lead to feelings of loneliness. Additionally, it can be a symptom of a psychological disorder such as depression.

Loneliness can also be attributed to internal factors such as low self-esteem. People who lack confidence in themselves often believe that they are unworthy of the attention or regard of other people, which can lead to isolation and chronic loneliness.

Health risks associated with loneliness

Loneliness has a wide range of negative effects on both physical and mental health, including:

1. Alcoholism and drug use
2. Altered brain function
3. Alzheimer's disease progression
4. Antisocial behavior
5. Cardiovascular disease and stroke
6. Decreased memory and learning
7. Depression and suicide
8. Increased stress levels
9. Poor decision-making

What Research Suggests About Loneliness

Researchers have found that low levels of loneliness are associated with marriage, higher incomes, and higher educational status. High levels of loneliness are associated with physical health symptoms, living alone, small social networks, and low-quality social relationships.

Close Friends Help Combat Loneliness

Researchers also suggest that loneliness is becoming more common in the United States. Since 1985, the number of people in the U.S. with no close friends has tripled. The rise of the internet and ironically, social media, are partially to blame.

Experts believe that it is not the *quantity* of social interaction that combats loneliness, but it's the *quality*.

Having just three or four close friends is enough to ward off loneliness and reduce the negative health consequences associated with this state of mind.

Loneliness Can Be Contagious

One study suggests that loneliness may actually be contagious. In a 10-year study, researchers examined how loneliness spreads in social networks. The results indicated that people close to someone experiencing loneliness were 52% more likely to become lonely as well.

Tips to Prevent and Overcome Loneliness

Loneliness can be overcome. It does require a conscious effort on your part to make a change. In the long run, making a change can make you happier, healthier, and enable you to impact others around you in a positive way.

Here are some ways to prevent loneliness:

- Consider community service or another activity that you enjoy. These situations present great opportunities to meet people and cultivate new
- friendships and social interactions.
  Expect the best. Lonely people often expect rejection, so instead focus on positive thoughts and attitudes in your social relationships.
- Focus on developing quality relationships. Seek people who share similar attitudes, interests, and values with you.
- Recognize that loneliness is a sign that something needs to change.
- Understand the effects of loneliness on your life. There are physical and mental repercussions for loneliness.