

The Dark Side of Loneliness.



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Many people, especially codependents, are haunted by inner loneliness. Twenty percent (60 million) of Americans report that loneliness is the source of their suffering. In fact, our emotional reaction to rejection emanates from the area of our brain (the dorsal anterior cingulate) that also responds to physical pain (Cacioppo and Patrick, 2008).

Loneliness vs. Aloneness

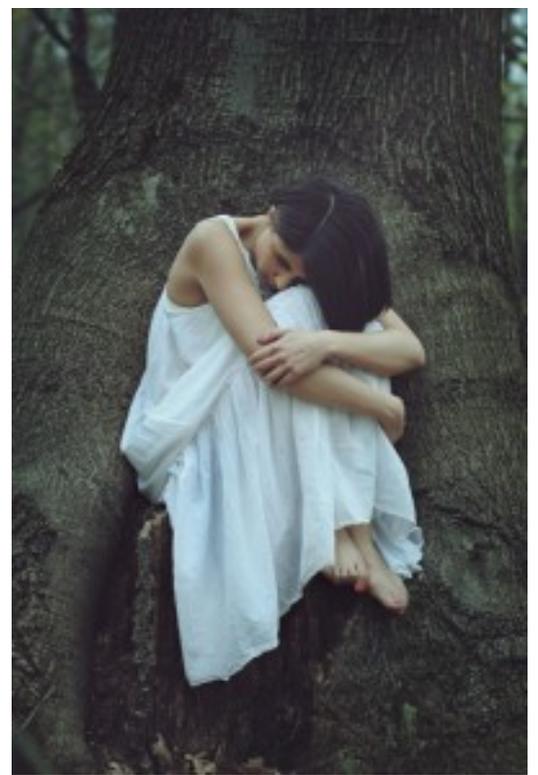
Loneliness is associated with living alone, which [surveys](#) indicate has steadily risen to 27 percent in 2013 and to 50 percent and higher in parts of Florida, West Virginia, and especially California.

However, solitude and being alone only describe a physical condition. We don't always feel lonely when we're alone. Individual needs for connection vary. Some people choose to live solo and are happier doing so. They don't suffer the same sense of abandonment caused by the unwanted loss of a partner through a breakup, divorce, or death. They may also have greater inherited insensitivity to social disconnection, according to [recent research](#).

Loneliness in Relationships

Although loneliness is greater among people living alone, it can be felt while in a relationship or group. This is because it's the quality, not the quantity, of social interactions that determines whether we feel connected. As the number of work hours and household television sets has increased, family dinners have declined. Today, although the quantity of interactions has increased, due to the proliferation of cell phones, screen time is replacing face time. People spend more time on their digital devices than in face-to-face conversations, contributing to more loneliness (Cacioppo, 2012).

A [UCLA study](#) showed that social skills are declining as a result. There's a 40 percent decline in empathy among college students due to new technology, and 12-year-olds are socially behaving like 8-year-olds. Recently, [Pew Research Center](#) found that 82 percent of adults felt that the way they used their phones in social settings hurt the conversation.



Codependency and Lack of Intimacy

The absence of someone nurturing to listen, care, and affirm our existence makes us feel isolated or [emotionally abandoned](#). Although intimate connections are the remedy, characteristically, codependent relationships lack intimacy. Codependents have difficulty with intimacy due to shame and poor communication skills. Often they partner with someone addicted, abusive, or just [emotionally unavailable](#) (and they may be, as well.)

Whether alone or in a relationship, codependents may be unable to identify the source of their unhappiness. They may feel depressed, sad, or bored, yet not know that they're lonely. Others know, but find it difficult to effectively ask for their needs. Their relationship dynamics and loneliness may seem familiar, like the emotional dysfunction in their childhood. We want and need emotional closeness from our partner and friends, but when an intimate, emotional bond is lacking, we experience disconnection and emptiness. (For more on emptiness and healing, see Chapter 4, "There's a Hole in My Bucket" in [Conquering Shame and Codependency](#).)

Years ago, I believed that more shared activities would create that missing connection, not realizing it was something less tangible – [real intimacy](#), which was absent in my relationship. (See "Your Intimacy Index.") Instead, like most codependents, I experienced "pseudo-intimacy," which can take the form of a romantic "fantasy bond," shared activities, intense sexuality, or a relationship where only one partner is vulnerable, while the other acts as advisor, confidant, provider, or emotional caretaker.

The undercurrent of loneliness and fear of loneliness stem from chronic lack of connectedness and loneliness in childhood. While some children are neglected or abused, the majority grow up in families where parents don't have the time or sufficient emotional resources to honor their children's feelings and needs. Children feel ignored, unloved, shamed, or alone. Some feel like an outsider, that "No one gets me," even though their family otherwise appears to be normal. To cope, they withdraw, accommodate, rebel, or take up addictions, and mask and, eventually, deny what they feel inside.

Loneliness and Shame

Meanwhile, the growing sense of separation from themselves and lack of authentic connection with a parent(s) can breed inner loneliness and feelings of

unworthiness. “The awareness of human separation, without reunion by love — is a source of shame. It is at the same time the source of guilt and [anxiety](#).” (Fromm, E., *The Art of Loving*, p. 9) As adults, codependents can get caught in a self-defeating cycle of loneliness, shame, and [depression](#). Repeated break-ups and abandoning relationships can foster a worsening cycle of abandonment. (See “[Breaking the Cycle of Abandonment](#).”)

The greater our loneliness, the less we seek to engage with others, while our anxiety around authentic connection grows. [Studies](#) show that prolonged loneliness breeds low self-esteem, introversion, pessimism, disagreeableness, anger, shyness, anxiety, lessened social skills, and neuroticism. We imagine negative evaluations from others, called *shame anxiety*. This leads to anxious, negative, and self-protective behaviors, to which other people respond negatively, fulfilling our imagined outcome.

The shame associated with loneliness is directed not only against ourselves. Loneliness carries a stigma, so we don't admit we're lonely. It is also experienced from others with gender differences. Lonely men are perceived more negatively than women, and more negatively by women, even though more women than men report feeling lonely (Lau, 1992).

Health Risks

The strong association between loneliness and depression is well documented. Loneliness also triggers serious [health risks](#), affecting our endocrine, immune, and cardiovascular systems, and accelerating death. According to a recent [study](#), the lonely have increased risk for [cancer](#), neurodegenerative disease, and viral infections.

Perceived loneliness triggers a flight-or-fight stress response. Stress hormones and [inflammation](#) rise, and exercise and restorative [sleep](#) decrease. Norepinephrine surges, shutting down immune functions and ramping up production of white blood cells that cause inflammation. Meanwhile, it makes us less sensitive to cortisol that protects us from inflammation.

In commenting on the research, neuroscientist Turhan Canli points out that loneliness one year affects our genetic inflammatory response the following year, confirming the self-reinforcing, negative, emotional spiral discussed above: “Loneliness predicted biological changes, and biological changes predicted changes in loneliness” (Chen, 2015).

Coping with Loneliness

We may not feel like talking to someone, even though it would help. Now we have the data to explain why biological, even genetic changes make loneliness hard to overcome. For many of us, when we're lonely, we tend to isolate even more. We may turn to addictive behavior instead of seeking social connection. There is a high correlation between obesity and loneliness.

We really have to fight our natural instinct to withdraw. Try admitting to a friend or neighbor that you're lonely. To motivate socializing with other people, commit to a class, meet-up, CoDA or other 12-step meeting. Exercise with a buddy. Volunteer or support a friend in need can to take your mind off of yourself and lift your spirits.

As with all feelings, loneliness is worsened by resistance and self-judgment. We fear experiencing more pain if we allow our heart to open. Often, the reverse is true. Allowing feelings to flow can not only release them, but also the energy expended in suppressing them. Our emotional state shifts, so that we feel invigorated, peaceful, tired, or content in our aloneness. For more suggestions, read "Coping with Loneliness" in *Codependency for Dummies*.

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Darlene Lancer is a Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist and expert on relationships and codependency. She's the author of *Conquering Shame and Codependency: 8 Steps to Freeing the True You* and *Codependency for Dummies* and six ebooks, including: *10 Steps to Self-Esteem*, *How To Speak Your Mind - Become Assertive and Set Limits*, *Dealing with a Narcissist: 8 Steps to Raise Self-Esteem and Set Boundaries with Difficult People*, and *Freedom from Guilt and Blame - Finding Self-Forgiveness*, available on [her website](#) and Amazon. Ms. Lancer has counseled individuals and couples for 28 years and coaches internationally. She's a sought-after speaker in media and at professional conferences. Her articles appear in professional journals and Internet mental health websites, including on her own, where you can get a free copy of "14 Tips for Letting Go." Find her on Youtube.com, Soundcloud, Twitter @darlenelancer, and at www.Facebook.com/codependencyrecovery.

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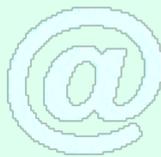
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