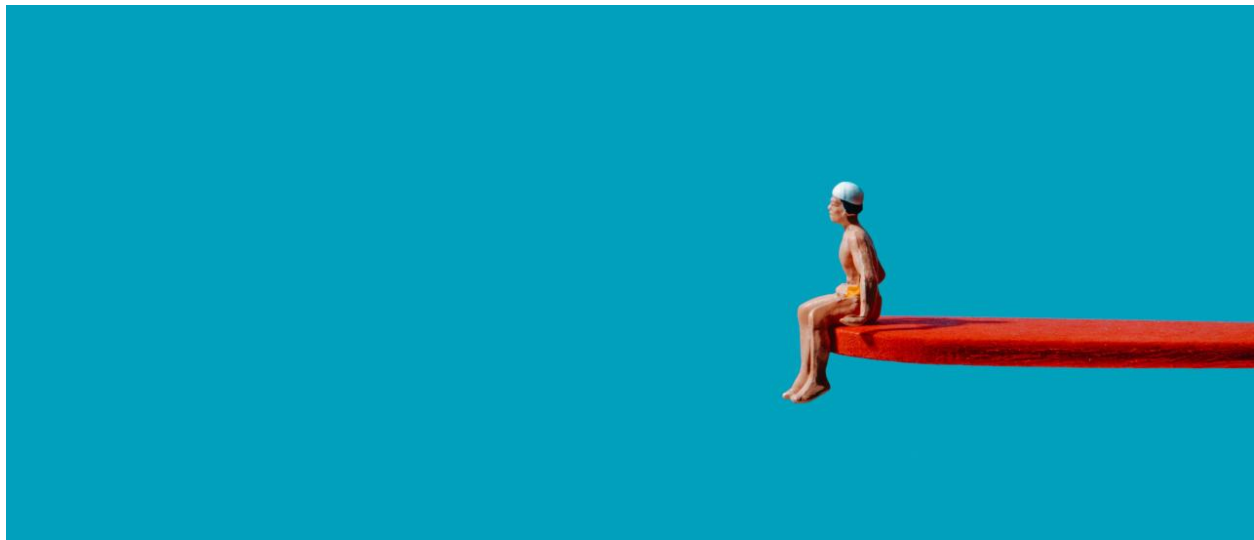

Learning to Be Alone



By [Manfred F. R. Kets de Vries](#) , INSEAD

Loneliness is a call for deeper connection with ourselves and others.

Despite a seemingly glamorous life as a fashion executive, Nadine felt a gnawing loneliness. Her life was filled with acquaintances but devoid of true connection. She desperately wished for someone who understood her. This struggle stemmed from a traumatic childhood marked by abandonment and isolation, leaving her with a deep-seated fear of emotional vulnerability.

While she hoped her career would foster connection, the cutthroat environment only pushed her to project an even tougher exterior. Romantic relationships proved fleeting, leaving Nadine questioning if genuine connection was even possible. This profound loneliness, a vicious cycle of self-doubt and isolation, threatened to consume her entirely.

Loneliness is a distressing emotional state that arises when there's a gap between the quality of social connections we desire and the ones we experience in reality. It is a subjective experience; we might feel deeply alone in a crowd, with friends or even in a marriage.

However, some people prefer solitude and don't experience loneliness. They find enjoyment in their own company, while still maintaining social

relationships they can tap into when they feel the need to connect.

For these people, the silence of solitude provides space for introspection and allows the mind to refresh. Similar to **brief periods of boredom**, solitude can serve as a catalyst for creative thinking and original thought.

Loneliness is a warning sign

Most of us will experience loneliness at certain points in our lives; it is part of being human. Feeling lonely, at times, can be considered a positive reaction – a healthy aversive emotion that motivates us to strengthen our social connections. It can be a warning sign that our life has become unbalanced.

Therefore, in small doses, loneliness can serve as a healthy signal that we may be lacking something essential. It forces us to reflect on our lives and may help us redefine what’s really important. However, chronic loneliness can lead to a cascade of negative mental and physical health consequences.

While transient loneliness typically motivates people to improve relationships with others, chronic loneliness can lead to a state of excessive caution concerning the motives of others. This creates a self-reinforcing cycle of negativity and suspicion, ultimately hindering the development of positive interpersonal relationships.

Chronic loneliness is also linked to an increased risk of depression, dementia, self-harm and suicide. Individuals experiencing chronic loneliness may struggle to maintain a healthy relationship with themselves.

Surviving the loneliness pandemic

It is paradoxical that, despite being connected more than ever through our devices and social media, the experience of loneliness persists and even grows. Social media can bring people with mutual interests together while also amplifying disagreement and segregating people into increasingly divisive echo chambers.

As Nadine’s story demonstrates, the lonelier we feel, the more it shapes our thought processes, making it increasingly challenging to overcome. This difficulty is further amplified by the current “pandemic of loneliness” we are

experiencing, a phenomenon exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic. Loneliness has turned into a modern-day malaise – a silent yet pervasive public health concern.

On a personal level, all of us have the power to address our loneliness. Often, we find we are lonely because, psychologically, we have been building walls instead of bridges. As the French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre aptly noted, “If you’re lonely when you’re alone you’re in bad company.”

The obvious antidote is social connection and fostering community. To achieve true health, happiness and fulfillment, we may need to rethink how we interact with others. This can start with prioritising social connection and valuing self-care practices. We should be more intentional about checking in with ourselves to see if our social needs are being met.

Find comfort in being alone

Indeed, we should perceive feelings of loneliness as an opportunity for introspection, an incentive to understand ourselves better. Learning to be comfortable with solitude can ultimately enhance our ability to build meaningful, intimate relationships.

If we use our solitary time wisely, we can acquire greater self-awareness and self-knowledge. This may help us better understand who we are and why we do what we do. Essentially, loneliness can push us out of our comfort zones and provide a pause for us to better understand why we feel isolated.

Rekindle connections and forge new ones

It’s also essential to strengthen our current relationships and invest in our social well-being. Spending time talking to family and friends, whether by phone, email or social media, is often the remedy we need when feeling imprisoned by loneliness. We should also make the effort to build new connections and expand our social circles, by joining groups centred around common interests.

Online communities can be valuable refuges during bouts of loneliness. Despite its drawbacks, the internet is home to many groups that allow

instant connection from the comfort of our own space. Participating in support groups, WhatsApp forums or online chat groups can offer a supportive and safe environment to connect with others who are experiencing similar emotions.

Give as much as you take

While seeking support is an excellent remedy for loneliness, it should not be a one-directional activity. It is not just about receiving attention; it also involves giving back to others. Intentional acts of kindness and generosity can boost our sense of self-worth and break down feelings of loneliness. Engaging in altruistic activities present great opportunities to meet people and form meaningful connections while also finding a sense of purpose.

Don't suffer in silence

If previous efforts to alleviate loneliness haven't been sufficient, it may be time to seek professional help. A professional can provide support in dealing with feelings of low self-esteem and negative thought patterns that prevent us from creating meaningful relationships. It is important to recognise that, just like any medical condition, feelings of loneliness will only worsen if left untreated.

Throughout human history, certain experiences remain constant, and loneliness is among the most significant. For many, it will always be a challenge to learn how to be alone without being lonely. Fortunately, for most, these feelings of loneliness are transient, mere fluctuations in life's ebb and flow. However, loneliness can escalate beyond control when fuelled by trauma, illness, loss, the effects of aging or the substitution of human interaction with technology. Undoubtedly, we all need a social circle and intimate connections to navigate life's complexities.

We should view loneliness not only as a warning sign but also as a chance to engage in personal growth. In this light, a quote from the late American actor Robin Williams resonates: "I used to think that the worst thing in life was to end up all alone. It's not. The worst thing in life is to end up with people who make you feel all alone." Loneliness does not stem from lacking people around us, but from being unable to share what truly matters with others.

Find article at

<https://knowledge.insead.edu/career/learning-be-alone>

About the author(s)

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About the research

["One is the Loneliest Number: Reflections on Feeling Alone"](#) is a Working Paper.