

Beating Loneliness



Andrew Newton

Only the lonely...

Human beings evolved to live in groups, with the support and cooperation of other humans. Left to face a dangerous world on our own, we would soon have perished. And this is why, even in the modern world, with all its comforts and conveniences, we start to feel lonely when deprived of the company of others. We become more focused on ourselves as we try to work out what has gone wrong. This compounds the problem because if we allow ourselves to become self-absorbed, we will intensify feelings of isolation and loneliness.

Researchers from the University of Chicago, led by Professor John Cacioppo, have proved that loneliness and self-centredness form a vicious circle that can be difficult to break. The more self-centred you become, the more you risk becoming locked into feelings of social isolation.

The findings are the result of an analysis of data taken from 229 people aged 50 to 68 over 11 years as part of the Chicago Health, Ageing and Social Relations Study.

Early research treated loneliness as a temporary feeling of distress that had no adaptive purpose, but this is not the case. As early as 2006, the researchers suggested that evolution has shaped the brain to incline humans toward certain emotions, thoughts and behaviour. Their new finding – that loneliness tends to increase self-centredness – fits this evolutionary interpretation.

From an evolutionary-biology viewpoint, people have to be concerned with their own interests. But the pressures of modern society are significantly different from those that existed when loneliness evolved in the human species. We have become such a powerful species as a result of mutual aid and protection as well as evolutionary changes in the brain that facilitated our ability to adapt in social interactions.

When we don't have mutual aid and protection, we are more likely to become focused on our own interests and welfare and we become more self-centred. Particularly in larger communities. For example, in large cities, loneliness is on the rise.

A report by two charities – *Relate* and *Relationships Scotland* – surveyed 5,000 people in the UK and the results were revealing.

- More than one in eight adults say they do not have a close friend.
- 45% of UK adults felt lonely at least some of the time and 18% felt lonely often or all of the time.
- 17% said they either never or rarely felt loved.
- 83% of people in the UK enjoyed good relationships with their friends.
- 18% of people said they had two or three close friends.

In modern society, becoming more self-centred can provide short term protection from becoming lonely... but not in the long term. This is because the harmful effects of loneliness build up over time and the cumulative effect adversely affects a person's health and wellbeing.

In contemporary society it is harder for people to banish feelings of loneliness. It's a fact that humans are at their best when they provide mutual aid and protection. It's not that one individual makes sacrifices for another, it's that working together, they accomplish more than the sum of their parts. Loneliness undercuts that focus and makes lonely individuals concentrate on their own interests at the expense of others.

Lonely people have been shown to be more susceptible to a variety of physical and mental health problems, so understanding loneliness and its causes means we could develop better therapies to deal with it. I have always supported the idea that the cure for loneliness and depression is to get individuals back into society, because it has been shown to work time and again.

A University of Western Ontario study claims that loneliness is written into our DNA and explains about 35% of your propensity to feel lonely.

In a study of adult twins, the researchers found that those who have many genetic factors for the personality trait of neuroticism are also more likely to feel lonely. These factors mean that some people are simply more prone to feel lonely – but finding connections and companionship can still help undo genetic tendencies for isolation.

The so-called loneliness epidemic is not just making people sadder, it also poses dangers to our over-arching health. Social isolation has been linked to higher risks of cardiovascular disease, obesity, diabetes and even death.

Understanding the differences between genetic and environmental influences on loneliness is challenging.

As social creatures, we have evolved to be at our best around others. But if you've ever felt helplessly lonely in a crowded room, it might (in part) be your ancestors' fault. To be more precise, around 35% of our loneliness is explained by our genes, according to the study published in the *Journal of Research in Personality*.

That doesn't mean that some people are doomed to be lonely while others aren't.

To understand the concept, think about the growth potential of a plant. It inherits its potential height, but if it gets put in an environment without light, it won't achieve that height. Similarly, if someone with a predisposition to loneliness they will be more likely to experience loneliness, regardless of the environment.

A pair of twins grow up in the same household with the same people and, depending on whether they are fraternal or identical twins, they will share 50% or 100% of their DNA. Either way they will share more common factors than most, until you put them in different classrooms.

If one makes friends in their class and is happy with the level of interaction they are having with other people, the less likely they will be to feel lonely. If the identical twin has the same genetic likelihood of loneliness but is put in an environment that is not as fulfilling in terms of relationships, they will be more likely to experience feelings of loneliness.

The study found that identical twins were more likely to feel similar levels of loneliness, even having had different experiences, than fraternal twins, who share only as much DNA as their siblings.

While each of our personalities is unique and shaped by these experiences, enriching or not, there are some broad categories that are genetically inherited. These are the 'big five'

personality traits: openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism.

Previous research has shown that neuroticism is linked to loneliness. But the new study goes beyond that and shows that there is a genetic factor causing coincidence of neuroticism and loneliness. So if you're neurotic, you're more likely to worry about your situation, the quality of your life, and ruminate – and that may increase your feelings of loneliness. You might even fall into the trap of worrying about worrying!

The good news is... there are things that you can do to counteract neuroticism. Practicing Mindfulness will help. Putting away your devices will help. I remember when kids were noisy – now they sit in silence staring at their screens. There is a great danger that the electronic age is destroying people's ability to interact in a normal and healthy manner.

Which brings us neatly to there next problem...

Scientists discovered that one reason people might be lonely that they shun interaction because they are more prone to be vigilant and alert to threats. Researchers found that, when exposed to negative social cues, the electrical activity in the brains of lonely people not only more pronounced, but faster.

The good news, according to two separate studies at the University of Chicago, is that loneliness *can* be easily overcome. As with depression, the secret lies in exerting a little self-discipline in order to become more social... and that means getting out more regularly and meeting people with the same interests.

As with people suffering from depression, people who are lonely become trapped in a spiral of negative behaviour. Despite feeling alone, they dread rejection from both friends and strangers and so shun social interaction. In fact lonely people are often secretly on guard against social rejection.

The first Chicago study (published in July 2015) in the journal *Cortex* and later in *Psychology Today*, involved 38 people who were very lonely and 32 who weren't. Researchers measured the electrical activity in their brain as the volunteers were shown words written in different colours and then asked to name the colour but not the meaning of the word. The test was designed to find out how participant's brains worked when it came to automatic unconscious influences.

The words were grouped in the following way:

- 25% were social and positive, like 'party'
- 25% were social and negative, like 'alone'
- 25% were emotionally positive but non-social, such as 'joy'
- 25% were emotionally negative and non-social, such as 'sad'.

When the words were shown on a screen, lonely people's brains went into a series of three different micro-states – periods of relative stability when different parts of the brain are active in a consistent pattern. A change of a micro-state indicates a new pattern of thought.

When shown negative social cues, the electrical activity in the brains of lonely people was faster and more pronounced. The brains of the lonely entered a micro-state that specifically responded to socially negative words, causing them to become extremely alert.

Lonely people were also able to pick up on the differences between socially threatening and negative non-social words. This suggests lonely people were looking out for negativity.

The second study – carried out by the same researchers and published online in August in *Cognitive Neuroscience* – involved 19 people, 10 of whom were lonely.

They were shown 28 pictures:

- 7 were social and positive
- 7 were social and negative
- 7 were non-social and positive
- 7 were non-social and negative.

When *their* brains were scanned for electrical activity the researchers found lonely people responded to social threats more quickly than non-social ones, as in the first study.

The researchers suggest that it's important for people who feel lonely to be *mindful* their brains are making them more alert to threats. It's hoped that they will then be able to take control of their behaviour.

One of the most important recommended changes in behaviour was for lonely people to actively seek out *more* social interaction. This also means that they make friends who have the same or similar interests, whilst at the same time, changing their attitude so that they expect the best from each interaction.

However, this social interaction must take place face to face – social contact that is limited to online chat is false and has no real value because it's simply not real.

Lonely people, as with those suffering from depression, need a plan of action. Often that will mean making a list of things to do and places to visit. An action plan is a means of empowerment, of retaking control, and assuming ownership of your life. An example of an action plan would include planning social events on a calendar and inviting others to join in.

However, it is also important that lonely individuals should seek out quality relationships over quantity in order to make more meaningful connections. [The same could be said for us all!]

A little optimism will also help. Adopting the mind-set that you are going to get the best out of social experiences can help bring people out of loneliness. I always recommend a visit to the Comedy Club as a first outing – laughter is, after all, usually the best medicine and laughing along with other people is a sure-fire way of breaking the ice and strengthening social bonds.

Most human beings are naturally social creatures. The desire to be together has always been, a part of the human survival strategy. Humans aren't very strong, we can't run that fast, we haven't got sharp teeth or claws to defend ourselves, and our bodies aren't covered in fur to keep us warm. Moreover, our young are fairly helpless for the first few years of their lives and we've had to work very hard to adapt to our environment.

We've had to learn to build, to delegate tasks and divide labour in order to establish a viable working society. And to make all this come together, we have had to learn that cooperation is the most important part of the strategy. In short, we need each other. Over millennia, this need has become hard-wired into our brains.

With this evolutionary strategy in place, it has become inevitable that humans need regular contact with each other and we function best when we have access to each other's company. Very few of us would be able to survive if we were cut off from all the other members of the tribe. Even in a land of plentiful food and water and beautiful weather, loneliness would soon start to take its toll, leading to anxiety, stress, depression and feelings of desolation.

I often deal with people who say they are depressed, but I've noticed that those with regular contact with friends or family are far less likely to be depressed. It is the opportunity to enjoy frequent contact with other humans that is one of the main reasons you don't end up sitting on a couch talking to people who are more than happy to charge you £100 an hour for the privilege!

Socialising is your natural saviour – unless of course you're glued to your tablet or mobile phone, because then you're risking your mental health.

Communicating entirely via email and text message can double the risk of isolation, depression, and mental illness. What you need is plenty of face time with other humans.

Words are only half of communication – you need to be able to read the body language, the facial expressions and hear all the nuances of language, the changes in tone of voice and enjoy the sound of real laughter to truly understand and benefit from conversation.

Dr Alan Teo, lead author of a study carried out at Oregon Health and Science University has proved this to be true. He says that *'Research has long-supported the idea that strong social bonds strengthen people's mental health... but this is the first look at the role that the type of communication with loved ones and friends plays in safeguarding people from depression. Phone calls and digital communication, with friends or family members, do not have the same power as face-to-face social interactions in helping to stave off depression.'*

Dr Teo's team at the University of Michigan assessed more than 11,000 adults aged 50 and older, who participated in a Longitudinal Health and Retirement Study. The researchers examined the frequency of face-to-face, telephone and written social contact, including email and text. After two years, they looked at the risk of depression symptoms, taking into consideration factors including health status, how close people lived to family, and any pre-existing depression.

Their findings revealed that having little face-to-face social contact nearly doubles a person's risk of having depression after just two years. The researchers also noted that having more or less telephone conversations, written or email contact, had no effect on levels of depression.

Monitored over a period of two years, study participants who met up with family and friends at least three times a week had the lowest level of depressive symptoms (6.5%) compared with those who had had less frequent contact. Those who met up with their relatives and friends only every few months, or less frequently, had an 11.5% chance of suffering depression.

The researchers also detected significant differences on depression levels when the participants socialised with family and when they socialised with friends. Among adults aged 50 to 69, frequent person-to-person contact with friends dramatically reduced subsequent depression. In contrast, those aged 70 and older benefited more from face-to-face contact with children and other family members.

So... there's the answer. Pick up the phone and organise a time when you can pop in for a

cup of tea, or even something stronger. Getting some quality face-to-face time really is the best answer!

I commented earlier that a visit to the Comedy Store might be a good place to start, but there are lots of other opportunities for joyful social contact. For example, have you ever thought of having a go at singing?

OK, I know it may be the last thing you want to do on a night out, but taking part in a karaoke evening could bring you closer to your friends and colleagues. Let them have a go first, and then jump in! It doesn't matter how out of tune everyone is, it's also a good laugh – and it can't be any worse than TV talent shows!

Please bear with me for a few moments... there is a real opportunity out there – one of many in fact – to change your life for the better, and it's available FREE to everyone. It just requires a little effort.

If you join a choir or an amateur musical or dramatic society, you really will have loads of fun and working with other people toward the goal of a live performance is immensely uplifting and rewarding. There are plenty of opportunities all over the country for you to do this.

Singing breaks the ice and helps people bond more quickly than a lot of other activities. Men and women who took up singing made friends more quickly than those who signed up for other activities. Oxford University researchers say that singing may be nature's way of helping big groups of people bond, and I think they're right.

I can speak from first-hand experience on this subject because in my youth I was a member of several amateur music-making groups, including a massed choir, a youth band, a semi professional orchestra, and took part in school plays and concerts. When I was 20, I joined the famous (professional) Max Jaffa Orchestra. I promise you, music brings people together in ways you can't possibly imagine until you've tried it.

If you caught any of the BBC2 series The Choir, then you will have seen the way choirmaster Gareth Malone used the power of music-making to spark friendships, unite workers and make people generally happier.

This special social interaction and cooperation was almost certainly part of our ancestors' survival strategy, passed down through the ages. Group singing or chanting is often an integral part of religion. Think about how religious ritual developed – singing hymns and repeating familiar prayers and responses and you get the general idea.

The Oxford researchers asked people studying singing, creative writing and crafts at night school, how close they felt to their classmates. Although all felt equally friendly by the end of the seven-month courses, those in the singing groups bonded more quickly. Quite possibly this could be because music is uplifting and has proved to lighten mood. Singing also breaks the ice more quickly than other activities, bringing groups closer, faster.

Singing is also a very public activity and many people understandably experience some level of nervousness the first time they have to sing in front of strangers. But, once everyone has had a go and you realise everyone really is literally singing in the same choir, that self-consciousness and nervousness evaporates very quickly.

This is something that happens right at the beginning, usually within a few minutes of the first rehearsal!

In the long term, all sorts of group activities bring people closer together, hence the millions spent each year by companies that take their employees on paintball days and Facebook allowing their employees to take breaks to compete on pinball machines.

In other kinds of group activities, bonds became stronger as people talk to each other during breaks or even during lessons. This study however provides the first clear evidence that singing is a powerful means of simultaneously bonding a whole group together.

Certainly, previous research has shown choir members are happier than those who simply sing in the shower. Choristers also seem more satisfied with their lives than people who play in sports teams.

But it appears that singing in groups is particularly beneficial because moving and breathing in synchronicity with others triggers the release of feel-good brain chemicals. This is regardless of the size of the group.

Other researcher has found that singing with others provides health benefits ranging from strengthening the immune system and reducing stress to holding the symptoms of Alzheimer's in check.

The main advantage of singing in a choir is that you don't have to be a great singer to join. Improvements to health come from being part of a team, working in harmony and exercising the lungs, diaphragm and other parts of the body.

Unless you're in the chorus at the Royal Opera House, this is actually more important than the ability to sing perfectly in tune – something that is obviously taken into consideration by the judges on The X Factor. Still, the main benefit is in living a happier and more fulfilled life.

So join up, and join in!

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