



Seven Keys to Overcoming Loneliness in a Disconnected Society

Loneliness involves a deep sense of isolation and disconnection from others, and it occurs when persons feel that they have no one with whom to share the joys and hardships of life. Some have stated that their loneliness feels less like sadness and more like an imprisonment that leaves them despondent toward life (I suppose that is why solitary confinement is such a severe punishment).

While everyone can benefit from some amount of alone time, a healthy and fulfilling life needs close interpersonal relationships. Unfortunately, people today feel more isolated than ever. The average family unit is severely fractured, the divorce rate is at almost 50%, and more people live alone today than ever before in American history.

In my counseling practice (ccnsb.com), more than half of the clients who solicit therapy—no matter what their presenting problem (depression, addiction, anxiety, sexual issues)—are also presenting a severe lack of interpersonal relationships. In direct response to their loneliness, many feel cynical and depressed; they lack confidence, feel rejected, feel alienated, and feel inadequate to build meaningful relationships.

Some time ago I began asking myself, “why are the majority of my clients—many who are young, attractive, intelligent, even well-to-do—profoundly disconnected from others?” I have identified several reasons, and in doing so have identified a number of strategies for overcoming isolation and building those important relationships, that I have found helpful.

Let’s begin by looking at why persons today are so isolated.

It is easy, even in vogue, to blame society for our problems. And while I am going



to go ahead and say that society is a major part of the loneliness problem, I would also like to remind everyone that society is not some tyrannous robotic that operates our lives. Our society is each one of us. We are the society we blame.

So how is our society affecting the number of relationship-starved clients pouring into The Counseling Center of New Smyrna Beach? Harvard professor Daniel Gilbert points out that people today have to answer three major life-questions that their parents, grandparents, and great grandparents didn't answer. Those questions are: 1) Where to live, 2) What to do, and, 3) Who to do it with.

Less than a century ago most people were born, raised, lived, and died in one community. They did the job their parents did. They would build friendships in grade school and at church, and then keep those friends for the duration of their lives. They wed early, and had several children in their early 20s. Making new friends and families was not an issue. They lived and died surrounded by their family or long-term friends.

However, today it is the norm to leave one's family and friends behind as we pursue our educational and vocational goals. First we leave for college, where we usually build new friendships. However, those don't last either, because when undergrad ends we move again—a series of times in our 20s and 30s. Each time we travel alone, leaving old relationships behind. We need to reconnect and establish new relationships at every juncture. All the while, we are more focused on our education or career than we are personal relationships, so the task of making friends is always at the bottom of the to-do-list. And nothing at the bottom of the to-do-list ever gets done.

The result: Many of us have no close friends, we are unmarried, and we live lives that feel empty and bleak.

Community and Family are becoming foreign words. We place a low value on "community" because we don't really understand what community is anymore.



Many of us, when we think about community, envision a small town with cantankerous old couples walking down the street, sheriffs with big hats, corner stores that close at 6pm (and all day Sunday), and one-dimensional suburban nuclear families. This image of community has little that interests us, and even less to offer. It makes us feel all the more disconnected. Thankfully it is a lie.

Strategy One: Redefine Community.

Community is what you want it to be. Community means joining a kickball team. Community means being surrounded by friends who love you, who you respect, and who you want to share your life with. For many of us, an acceptable community looks more like “dorm life” than a Norman Rockwell painting. Community is having three friends who show up at your place at 8 in the morning, with coffee. Community is having those same friends knock on your door at 5pm on a Thursday to pull you away from the computer. The corner store in your community is open 24 hours a day, even on Christmas.

Strategy 2: Turn Off Your TV

Here is a short list of hit shows: Grey’s Anatomy, Scrubs, Friends (ok Friends is a bit old), Lost, Laguna Beach, and The OC.

Why are these shows so popular? Or, better put, what do all these shows have in common? Answer: Every hit show on this list displays profoundly close relationships that most of us don’t have in our lives. The Grey’s Anatomy cast lives together, the Lost cast is lost together, and do you remember that episode of Scrubs where three of Dr. Cox’s patients died? His colleagues took shifts sitting with him in his apartment, as he drank himself silly.

I am willing to bet that more than the lavish lifestyle, the beach, the adventure, or the interesting job, what draws us to these shows is the close relationships between the characters. The TV mocks us, because we miss this truth all the



time. We watch Grey's and think we want to be a doctor. All we really want is to live in a big old house with six close friends.

Kill your TV. Move into a house with six close friends. You will miss two seasons of your favorite show and not even notice.

Strategy 3: Things are the red herring.

In the video game "The Sims" the players controls the actions of an average person (a "sim"), living a normal life. You start with a basic house, and help your sim to get a job, build friendships, and buy stuff. Buying stuff is a lot of fun. There are hundreds of items from work out centers to flat screen TVs to modern art you can buy for your sim that can make his/her life more enjoyable.

The creator of the video game "The Sims" was once interviewed, and questioned about the materialism about the game. The items are a "Red Herring," he explained. The way to win the game—to have a happy sim—is has nothing to do with the items. A happy sim has strong relationships with the other characters in the game.[ii]

The same mistake players of the Sims make we make in our real lives. We work 50-plus hours a week to buy things we think we want, or to live in lavish spaces we can hardly afford. All the while we would be happier sitting on milk crates with a group of close friends. A house full of nice things but without friends is hell.

Here is the secret to personal success: People, not stuff. Community, not career.

Step 4: Explore people, not places

Not long ago I was listening to a lecture by a Stanford Professor who spoke about a research study that investigated people's priorities. Here's how the study worked: Participants of different ages were shown two different marketing



campaigns. One of the campaigns appealed to the person's desire for learning and adventure; the title read something to the tune of "Explore and learn from far off places." The second campaign appealed to the person's desire for relationships. The title read something similar to "Build relationships with those you care about." Which marketing campaign do you think people preferred? It depended on age.

The younger participants chose adventure, and the older participants chose relationships. The older people are wiser, right? Maybe not. When the older participants were first asked to imagine that a drug had hit the market that was guaranteed to extend their life by several decades, they also chose adventure and learning.

I found this interesting, and then saddening. Not because I don't like exploration—but because adventure and learning without relationships is hell. The participants were continually prioritizing something that would ultimately make them less happy (Interestingly, it was only the idea of death that led them to prioritize what was of real value).

A client of mine, let's call him Doug, is profoundly unhappy (and lonely). His solution is to leave the ivory tower of Harvard and move to Florida. There he would buy a jet ski, and a satellite dish. He would build computers and fix four wheelers. "Not bad!" I tell him, "Close your eyes and imagine being there. Imagine being there for two days alone. How happy are you?" As we explore the idea he begins to see, after only an hour on the Jet Ski he would be bored, wanting to talk to someone.

The idea of the lonely traveler seems romantic. But when you are that traveler, you don't care so much about the museums after a few days. You watch people on the street. Friends laughing, and lovers holding hands. Soon you are on your cell phone, making overseas calls to connect to the people you thought you didn't need.



Here is the secret to personal success: People, not places.

Strategy 5: Pay the Price

Every choice we make costs a price. The choice to build a support system is no different. It takes an investment of time and resources. You are going to need to put some margin into your schedule if you are going to be successful in building relationship. You might need to work as hard for relationships as you do at your career. Warning: this could slow your business, career, and even your money making potential. It can also increase your life satisfaction exponentially. So consider—what are relationships worth? How much money would it take for you to live a life of solitude (I am hoping there is no sum high enough)?

I know someone who recently left a lucrative position to be with friends in another state. Society might scoff at this, but she is happier now than she has been in years.

Strategy 6: More confidence, more skills

This strategy could be a book.

One reason persons remain in solitude is that they have been alone for so long they begin to think that others will not understand them, others will reject them, or they think they are not able to build and maintain close relationships.

First, I communicate to my clients is that they have nothing to lose, and the world to gain, when they try to build relationships. I also remind them that other people—when it comes to building relationships—might feel as disconnected and worried as they do. I counter the idea that no one will understand them by telling them the truth that I talk to people all day that are feeling and saying the same exact thing they are!



If they say they are not “a person who can just go up to someone and talk to them,” I remind them that there is no such thing as talent and that practice and experience is the only way to become “a person who can just go up to someone and talk to them.”

Strategy 7: Make sure your relationships are deep

There are three criteria any relationship must meet for it to be a deep relationship.

1) You must interact with the person outside of the venue in which you met them. For example, if you meet someone at the gym/coffee shop/a friend’s house, the person cannot be considered part of your inner circle unless you arrange to meet the person somewhere else.

2) You must have spent time with the person for the sole purpose of spending time together. Having friends who you play basketball with does not count as having “inner circle” friends—the focus is on having a good game of basketball, not on building relationship. I ask my clients, “Have you gotten together with the person to just ‘hang out?’ Have you gone to get coffee or a meal with this person? Have you gotten together just to ‘Catch up?’”

3) You must meet with this person one-on-one, and be willing to be intimate, to share both the joys and hardships of life with the person. Does the person go to you with his/her triumphs and problems? Do you do go to him/her with your triumphs and problems? Do you trust the person to keep a confidence? Does he/she trust you to keep confidence?

Isolation and Loneliness are real but they can be overcome by using some of the strategies listed above. If you feel you would like to talk to myself, or one of the other therapist at The Counseling Center of New Smyrna Beach please give us a call at (386) 423-9161 or visit us online at www.ccnsb.com.