Loughborough University

Loneliness

Contents:

Feeling lonely at university

It is not surprising that loneliness is a common experience at university:

- We may feel lonely when we are separated from family and friends (pets too) and we are missing them, which is the grief of loss we sometimes call homesickness.
- We may feel lonely when we are not part of any group and we are feeling unknown and awkward, particularly when others around us appear to be getting along easily with one another.
- Even if we have a good social network, we may experience the loneliness of not having the intimacy of a close relationship with a special friend or lover.
- Also, we can easily feel lonely in unfamiliar and impersonal surroundings, such as anonymous lecture halls or group accommodation areas.
- We may have felt lonely before or we may be feeling lonely for the first time.

Equally, although we're alone when no-one is with us, we may feel lonely "in a crowd" - loneliness can be as much about being cut off from our own inner resources, as about being isolated from others.

Whatever the circumstances, these feelings of loneliness can damage our self- esteem and confidence and cause us great unhappiness, even despair.

Loneliness is widespread - recent research (M. Barker, D. Clarke and T. Cox) shows that loneliness is a chronic problem for 17% of students in Higher Education:
i.e. in a university of 10,000 students, 1700 of them may well be suffering long-lasting feelings of loneliness.

This page contains some more information about loneliness and some suggestions for ways to cope with loneliness.

Common causes and common feelings

Common Causes
You can feel lonely when:
- You are on your own and do not want to be.
- You feel excluded from joining in with groups or events.
- You are missing special people or places you care about.
- You have suffered a loss or bereavement.
- You feel alienated from the environment and the culture around you.
- You do not have an intimate relationship with another and want one.
- You feel people do not know who you really are.
- You have no-one to talk to about how you are feeling.

Common feelings
Loneliness can make you feel:
- Like an "outsider".
- Invisible and unknown.
- Disliked and unacceptable.
- Self-conscious and ill-at-ease.
- Self-blame: that it's your fault because of the imagined failings you see in yourself.
- Hurt, powerless and despairing.
- Angry and critical of others, sometimes vengeful too.

Negative effects
Loneliness can:
- Lead to feelings of worthlessness.
- Cause you to withdraw from social contact and the outside world.
- Result in disappointed expectations and spoil your enjoyment of university.
- Adversely affect your physical and emotional health.
- Result in the excessive use of tobacco, alcohol and other drugs.
- Lead to depression and suicidal thoughts.

The Catch 22 of loneliness
Loneliness is often seen as taboo and this creates a vicious circle: I feel lonely ... I cannot tell anyone ... I feel lonelier ...

Complicating factors

Anyone can feel lonely. Students from the following groups, however, seem more likely to experience loneliness at university and this may be true for you:

1. International students - you may experience 'culture shock' and a sense of disorientation: customs, language, food, weather, environment may all be unfamiliar and isolating.

2. Mature students - you may be living off the campus, perhaps with your own family, and feel cut off from other students around you by age and external commitments; also, you may be finding it hard to integrate these two separate parts of your life.

3. Joint Honours students - it can be difficult to establish a sense of belonging, if you are moving between departments with different staff and groups of students.

4. Shy students with low self-esteem - you may find it very difficult to initiate contact with others, even when you want to.

5. Students with partners – it can be hard to juggle your time between your studies and social life, especially if your partner is not a part of your friendship group. Sometimes this can cut you off from your close friends, as well as others, leading to feelings of dependency and isolation.

6. Single students - without any intimate relationships and away from home, you may experience the loneliness of being cut off from the warmth of demonstrative affection and of not being able to find it.

7. Bereaved students - you may find yourself isolated by grief, cut off from everyday experiences and relationships by the overwhelming sense of loss and despair.

8. Students with separated parents - as you leave home for university, you may experience heightened feelings of insecurity and aloneness if there are unresolved feelings since your parents' separation.

High risk times

There are times during university life when you may be more likely to feel lonely:

The First Week
Everything may feel new and unfamiliar; you may not know anyone, or where anything is; and this may leave you feeling lost and lonely.

The First Term
You may be feeling unsupported: uncertain about your work and what you are meant to be doing; or unused to looking after yourself, in terms of cooking or washing clothes or organising your personal finances. This can generate feelings of anxiety and isolation.

Christmas and other vacations

Your university friends and flatmates might be going home for Christmas and the holidays, but if this is not possible for you, you may not have physical contact with friends for weeks on end.

Returning After Christmas

After spending time at home again celebrating with old friends and family, it can feel unexpectedly lonely to be back in your room at university.

Exam Periods

The pressures of revision and the competitive nature of exams can reduce normal social contact and isolate you from friends, at the same time as increasing any anxieties you may have about personal worth and ability; and this can leave you feeling exposed and alone.

Ways of coping

Loneliness is a normal part of human experience. It can even have positive effects, if it doesn't last for too long. For example, it can lead to the discovery and development of personal resources and, therefore, to a greater sense of your own independence. It can encourage sociability and can act as an inoculation against future periods of potential loneliness.

If it becomes long-lasting, however, it can cause great distress and hurt. Here are some suggestions for ways you may find helpful in breaking the pattern of your loneliness:

Self-Acceptance

You may blame yourself for your loneliness wishing you were different ("If only I were ..."); it can be helpful to break the vicious circle of such negative thoughts by realising it may be your situation you need to change, rather than your personality or appearance. You are all right, the situation isn't - and you can do something about that.

Making Friends

It may be easier to find and develop friendships, if you can:

- Accept your own preferences: you may prefer one-to-one friendships to group contact; you may prefer quieter meeting places to pubs or clubs.
- Be realistic in your assessment of the relationships of others: are the apparent friendships you see around you as warm and certain as you imagine?
- Be patient with yourself, remember that friendships take time to develop.
- Choose activities you are genuinely interested in. Whatever these are (societies, sport, voluntary work, arts, crafts etc.), you will meet people there with whom you have something in common.
- Risk taking the initiative: your reticence can be misunderstood by others as aloofness or unfriendliness - for example, if you are feeling lonely in a lecture, avoiding eye-contact and pretending you're fine by absorbing yourself in a book or paper, you may be putting others off from contacting you. When we're feeling lonely, we can sink into ourselves and stop seeing the reality of the world around us. So, next time you're in a lecture, feeling that everyone around you has friends and that you are the only one alone, if you stop and look around you, you may well find others sitting on their own, who would welcome a smile from you and, perhaps, an offer of coffee in the break.

- Risk, also, self-disclosure: if you can be in touch with your own feelings and experience and talk about these to the other person, you may make it easier for them to do the same in return; this process can lead to mutual understanding and trust.
- Build upon your relationship by being a good friend: listening carefully, being responsive, showing understanding and even challenging sometimes, if it feels appropriate. (Deepening a few relationships can be more rewarding than pursuing many casual ones.)
- Avoid missing out on the warmth and support of close friendships, through exclusively seeking romantic relationships.

Alone, Not Lonely
Take time to do the things you enjoy, even if on your own: for example, going to a film or concert or for a walk.

Self-Assertiveness Workshops
You may feel too shy or awkward to make the opening moves towards friendship or to know how to respond to one that is offered: the University Counselling Team offers self-assertiveness courses during the year and these can be very rewarding, as well as providing the chance to make new contacts.

Sources of help

It can be extremely difficult to admit feeling lonely, because of the sense of personal failure that so often goes with it. After all, haven't you been told you're going to have the time of your life at university or something similar? Yet, an acknowledgement of the problem really helps.

In fact, one of the key findings of the research mentioned earlier is that students, who had been feeling lonely, said that the greatest help was talking about their feelings to someone who listened, cared, understood and accepted them.

Below are suggestions for people and services you might choose to talk to confidentially:

Your Personal Tutor or Hall Warden, if that feels comfortable.

The Centre for Faith and Spirituality Chaplains: 01509 223741
Chaplain or corresponding spiritual representative of your faith.
cfschaplains@lboro.ac.uk

Student Wellbeing and Inclusivity team: 01509 228338
studentwellbeing@lboro.ac.uk
To book an appointment with any of our services within Student Wellbeing and Inclusivity (including the Counselling Team, Mental Health Support Team and the Wellbeing Advisers), please complete the referral form.

Mind: 0300 123 3393
Information, advice and campaigning to promote and protect good mental health.

Campaign to end loneliness
This campaign believes that nobody who wants company should be without it.

Useful reading

- Intimacy and Solitude by Stephanie Dowrick (Women's Press, 1992 - ISBN 0 7043-43770)
- Loneliness, Stress and Well-Being: A Helper's Guide by P.M. Murphy & G.A. Kupshik (Routledge, 1992)
- Loneliness: How to Overcome It by Val Marriott & Terry Timblick (Age Concern, 1998)
- Shyness: What It Is & What To Do About It by Philip G. Zimbado (Perseus Books, 1977 - ISBN o-201-55018-0)