
Building a social life

Loneliness can force all your responsibilities, internal conflicts, and questions onto your shoulders, and make you feel unsupported, unwanted, misunderstood.

When you are lonely, you may feel that you are floating through the world not connecting with other people – not really –, and just existing. This may be one of the most painful emotions to experience, but it doesn't have to be permanent. Loneliness can be relieved.



Addressing loneliness through vulnerability

When you hear the word “lonely”, you might imagine a person who is physically alone and not spending much time with others. However, loneliness can also be felt in a room filled with people. Additionally, you don’t need to interact with people all the time to feel less lonely. Meaningful connection with even one or two people can make all the difference in relieving loneliness.

What is social connection?

According to psychologists, social connection is something that can be achieved through vulnerability. ‘Vulnerability’ is a big, abstract word, but it is essentially a risk that you take when you are honest and express your feelings. This is much easier said than done, since vulnerability opens us up to the possibility of getting hurt.

If we’re honest with someone about our romantic feelings for them, we might be met with rejection. If we share details about our past with someone, they may start to see us differently. If we are open about our traumas, people may not respond how we need them to. If you’ve ever chosen not to be vulnerable, it may have been a choice to survive and protect yourself from harm, which is valid and understandable.

We must acknowledge that both pain and connectedness “come to us through the same door.” When we shield ourselves from hurt, we “are also shielded from love, intimacy, and connection.”





How can we be more vulnerable while still preserving some sense of safety and security?

There is no risk-free way of being vulnerable. However, there are strategies of opening up that you may be more comfortable with. This could mean saying hi to the grocery store clerk or holding the door open for someone. All of these are ways of being honest, expressing your feelings, and opening yourself up. Depending on your experiences, you might feel more comfortable being vulnerable in some ways over others – and that's okay!

Coping with rejection and respecting boundaries

Hurtful responses from other people are often unrelated to your own worth. If you ask someone how their day is and their response is dry, it does not mean that you are not deserving of a conversation, but rather reflects on their internal thoughts at that moment. Being able to separate your inherent worth from other people's responses to you can help you feel safer when being vulnerable. Facing rejection does not make you less worthy of love or social connection.

However, you have a duty to respect the personal boundaries set by others. These boundaries may be related to your pursuit of that person romantically, sexually, platonically, etc. Regardless of the circumstance, you should not make someone feel guilty for upholding their boundaries. Another person setting boundaries for your relationship with them does not lessen your worth. If someone is establishing boundaries with you because of a behaviour of yours which hurt them, acknowledge how your actions could have been different, apologize if it feels appropriate, and try to move on. If that person does not want to reconcile that situation, they do not have to.

The same expectations apply when you set boundaries; if you set them, you deserve for them to be respected. This process of accepting the boundaries others set for us can be painful and it is natural to feel disappointed, but it is your responsibility to do what is right.



Benefits of social connection

Over time, and by making the choice to be vulnerable, you will hopefully form a circle of people (or have even just one person) who you can turn to and who can turn to you. This community can offer you a sense of belonging and appreciation for who you are, while also inspiring you to do better. Moreover, connection can provide you with a sense of purpose, as you develop your identity inspired by the role you take on in those fruitful relationships. For example, you can be the friend who offers a listening ear, or perhaps the one who brings snacks to every hangout. You can laugh, cry, and share both joyful and painful moments with them. Social connectedness can help relieve your sense of loneliness.

Some ways for you to interact more with other people:

- Visit places where you feel comfortable, e.g., a local café, the gym, a library
- Join clubs or groups where you can find folks who share your interests
- Schedule regular hangouts with friends, e.g., weekly game nights

Some ways for you to connect with the people in your life:

- Show initiative in communication, e.g., send a text or call them every once in a while
- Offer a listening ear
- Request their advice when you find yourself in a difficult situation
- Share your wins with them and celebrate their wins

