

Pandemic Series
Part 7. Loneliness©

By Dr. Lois A. Dodds

Developmental Psychologist
and Trauma Therapist

Specialist in Global Humanitarian Workers

Co-founder and Director

Heartstream Resources for Global Workers

www.heartstreamresources.org

101 Herman Lee Circle, Liverpool, PA 17045

June 29, 2020

Pandemic Emotions

Part 7. Loneliness

“To be human is to suffer,” I wrote when I was young. Now, from the vantage point of years, I also write, “To be human is to be lonely.” A precious friend died this week, just before turning 100. The loneliness his dear widow is feeling and will go on feeling is part of our human condition—arising from the sacred grotto of our deepest self, the self which God created for love. I think loneliness is inescapable.

Have you noticed that in creation God made everything and pronounced it “Good!” Then He made Adam and said, “It is not good for man to be alone. I will make him a companion.” (Genesis 2:18) So right from the beginning of our human existence, God created us with this need to have someone to know us and to love us. It is this very desire to be known and to be loved that leads us to feel lonely. If we did not have this need, we would lack the sensitivity which leads to loneliness. If we have been so blessed as to be known and loved, when that ends through death or loss of a loved one, the void, the deprivation, feels like a seemingly unhealable wound. Yet, the fact that we have been known and loved can go on nourishing heart and mind, minimizing the acute sting of being alone. A blessed past helps our present and our future. Conversely deprivation in the past has impact on our present and our future.

The great tragedy is that most people have never felt fully known or loved, though they seek that without ceasing. Why is that? We will consider that in a minute. The current tragedy is that the pandemic has created circumstances in which to be loved and to be known has become more difficult. The paradox is that even people who must “stay-at-home” or are in lockdown together do not often experience that as a loving situation! I read and hear constantly about how hard it actually is for families and couples to be quarantined together. The 24/7 routines become maddening and suffocating for some. For others, they are “home alone” in the midst of family members or housemates, with exaggerated feelings of loneliness.

So, what is our problem? We were created by God and brought into His inner circle specifically for God to love us and for us to love each other. (Ephesians, Phillips paraphrase). The physician Luke tells us in Acts chapter 7 that God actually created the world and scattered people over the face of the earth so we might seek Him. His highly personal intention in creation was to have a family who would love Him and love each other. What could get in the way of such an amazing purpose? Who could interfere with such a noble plan?

It turns out that God has an enemy, who became the “enemy of our souls” as well. (I Peter 5:8) Satan’s strategy has been to mess up the world, and especially human relationships, through conflict, misunderstanding, hate, and all manner of evil stuff. Thus, God’s work of love has been thwarted for a time, so that instead of love most people are born into sorrow, twisted relationships and distress leading to the loneliness we all experience at times. We yearn for God, we long for integrity and authenticity. We long for Him to know us. We are thrilled when we

discover that He loves us and knows us intimately. His relationship to us become the template for our human loves. He made us in His image, with a vast capacity to love.

Trouble is, the divine image has gotten marred and scarred, scratched and blurred to the extent that most people never experience genuine love. Even secular psychotherapists and scholars record this for us. Virginia Satir, pioneer social scientist and observer of the human condition, tells us that in her best estimate, perhaps 3% of people are born into families which are truly healthy, able to love well.¹ Few of us are “planned;” most of us just happen into someone else’s story and they have to adjust to our presence. This is not always a good portent for being loved! What have we interrupted by our arrival? Roman and Raley write about the ways destructive family patterns are passed on from one generation to another.² Scott Peck too describes the shocking patterns in some families.³ Sydney Jourard writes of how people get sick because they live “ensickening lives” within the family of origin.⁴ Most ethnographies give us the bad news of human problems and suffering. (I’ve written some of them and learned many sad things I wish I didn’t know!)

One of the estimated 170,000 orphans who were discovered “warehoused” in Romania’s “hospitals” and “children’s homes” were so bereft of any form of love that overcoming that has been a lifetime challenge. The young man Izidor, featured in a story in *Atlantic Monthly*, says, “I have known since I was 15 that I would not have a family. *The way I see myself is that there would be no human being who would ever want to get close to me.*” (p. 75, italics added)⁵ He articulates what many people believe and feel about themselves.

Being married, half of a couple, or a family member does not eradicate this danger. Most married people I have known admit to periods of loneliness, sometimes profound. The process of having “fallen in love” enough to marry, to commit one’s life to the other, can begin to feel hollow when a couple do not also commit to creating habits and patterns of communication that foster emotional intimacy. When the duties of life come to the forefront, positive emotions can be squeezed out, so the prospect of actually coming to know each other deeply, at a heart level, can seem remote, even hopeless. This is especially true for those who choose a life of service in some foreign country, where the challenges to keep our hearts in touch are more taxing. I remember hearing, as a young wife, that the longer we are married the harder it is to be honest with our spouse. At first I rejected that idea, but I came to see that the more we invest in marriage, the more we want to keep it steady, the more we risk in each self-disclosure, each round of honesty. The same is true in sustaining our friendships. Isn’t that scary!

The social isolation and separation of the pandemic brings loneliness to the fore, as it does so many other emotions. For the individual at home alone it can be life-threatening. Another dear

¹ Satir, Virginia. 1972. *People making*. (1990 Condor Press, Souvenir Press) Therapist Lillian Rubin wrote similar true stories of life in the working class, in *Worlds of pain*. 1976. NY: Basic Books.

² Roman, Mel, and Raley, Patricia E. 1980. *The indelible family*. NY: Rawson, Wade Publ.

³ Peck Scott. 1978. *The road less traveled*. Simon and Schuster. 2003 paperback by Touchstone Publ. Also see his *People of the lie*, and *The different drum*.

⁴ Jourard, Sydney. 1971. *The transparent self*. NY: Van Nostrand.

⁵ Greene, Melissa F. 2020. Can an unloved child learn to love? *Atlantic Monthly*, June. Pp. 64-73.

friend now in her high 80's lives in an assisted living facility. Currently, no one can visit anyone; someone leaves her meals at the door. This amazingly mature and wise woman is about to "go bonkers" from being alone. She has even written a book about relationships—and now she feels utterly alone, due to the rules for the pandemic. In her case, as an extravert, she feels this more acutely. None of us is immune!

I doubt that any of us can totally eradicate the feeling of loneliness. It is one reflection of our yearning for intimacy with God. What we can do is decide how to behave and how to live in the midst of it, how to "make the best of it." We can alleviate or minimize loneliness to some extent through our choices, which makes life worth living.

Some Practical Steps

1. **Cultivate the most crucial and high-potential relationship--with God.** In my doctoral research at University of California Santa Barbara I discovered that the most highly developed persons came to regard relationship with God as the primary joy and theme of their lives.⁶ Out of that storehouse they nourished many, many people in need of love. They came to that awareness and capacity out of the habits of dialoging with God, being in His Word, and increasingly experiencing Him to be their source for all things. One very enjoyable and highly encouraging way to heighten your sense of God's presence is Reading Sarah Young's *Jesus Calling: Enjoying Peace in His Presence*.⁷
2. **Pray for others, intercede.** Use your feeling of loneliness to prompt you to pray for others, especially those whom you love and for whom you have responsibility. If you are lonelier because you have more free time, this is an excellent way to use the time and uphold others in prayer. Jesus taught us to ask, seek, and knock. (Matt. 7:7, 8) You will feel less lonely using your time in prayer, and God does honor it!
3. **Cultivate the life of the mind.** Take the mental challenge. Don't live "down" to your painful emotions, which can immobilize you, but rather live "up" to your ability to make choices prompted by the pain. The "famous" survivors of the death camps so often have been women and men who cultivated rich cognitive lives which were the antithesis of their suffering. Think of Corrie Ten Boon⁸ or Elie Wiesel.⁹
4. **Reach out to others,** right now through the phone, through Zoom, Skype, Google Meet, or Facetime. These truly remarkable means of technology can keep us in touch across seas and continents. Seeing the faces of family and friends you love or admire can ease the loneliness. Even a few minutes can draw you closer.

⁶ Dodds, Lois A. 1992. The perception and experience of supernatural spiritual power for personality growth and change. Ann Arbor, MI: University Microfilms International.

⁷ Young, Sarah. 2004. *Jesus Calling: Enjoying peace in His presence*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

⁸ Sherril, Elizabeth. 1982. *The hiding place*. NY: Random House.

⁹ Wiesel, Marion, translator. 1958. *Night*. NY: Hill and Wang, a division of Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

5. **Look at photographs of people you love**, on Facebook or in an album, even on the fridge. Remembering good times and special people is a powerful upper for the brain. It actually raises your serotonin, your brain's feel-good hormone.
6. **Acknowledge how you feel.** It's okay to say, "I feel lonely." That is clarifying but need not be stupefying! You cope by choosing to behave out of your values, not your feelings.
7. **Read uplifting literature.** Don't settle for the news, which is 99% negative. Listening or watching it especially over and over can be corrosive to both mind and soul. Yet, being home alone watching too much is certainly a temptation. So too "mindless" entertainment that does not nourish the soul. You can even create your own "literature" by writing your memoirs or a journal. I am always challenged in my desire for purity by what King David said, that he permits no vile or perverse thing or person into his home, his eyes, or his mind. (Psalm 101)
8. **Listen to music!** Drink it in! Especially worship songs, hymns, easily hummed or sung. It seems music is the fastest route to our spirits, and perhaps to the Lord. If you can create or practice music that is even better! You can do some virtual music making too. Dance or exercise, walk or run, with music. This helps both body and spirit.
9. **Volunteer and be self-giving!** Perhaps give time to help in the foodbank or other community service. This will increase your contact with people and increase your sense of self-esteem by doing good things for others. You may live in a village on the far side of the earth where people desperately need food and the simplest provisions. Each time you offer help you diminish your sense of aloneness. It increases your sense of being connected. You may live in a society of abundance where the yearning for spiritual food is just as powerful as the hunger for physical food. In both new and old relationships, you can become self-disclosing, *giving yourself* through sharing both thoughts and emotions. Taking the love out of your heart and giving it to someone who needs it is powerful for both giver and receiver!
10. **Give your time and talents to others!** Love to cook? Take dinner to someone. If feasible and safe, eat with them, keeping the six-foot minimum "physical distance." Open air is best, such as on a deck or patio. Even sharing a take-out meal with someone can mitigate their loneliness. What do you love to do that will benefit another lonely person?

You may still feel lonely even after you do all of these, but you will feel less depressed and frustrated, knowing you turn your loneliness into positive action. If you find that you are still profoundly lonely it is helpful to explore what roots it may have in your early life.

Is Your Loneliness from Early Deprivation?

Perhaps you were born into and grew up in a family and environment which did not treasure you or love you as you longed to be loved. That is the desire placed by God into every child as the most vital aspect of the image of God in us. Is there any hope for that gnawing feeling of being unacceptable, unworthy, insufficiently loved? Absolutely! For this very reason Jesus came into the world to bring God's love to you and me, to live out in the midst of very real, hurting people this incredible reality. It seems during this pandemic that for many people the crying out of the soul to be loved is louder and more insistent. It may even become incessant, urgent, the longing for assurance that at least one person—someone!—is truly hearing us and responding to our deep need.

Here are some of the fears dredged up or triggered by our loneliness. What does God offer us to assuage our fears?

- **Our fear of abandonment:** This fear is profound and universal. Our comfort is this: “Though my father and my mother forsake me, the Lord will receive me.” (Psalm 27:10) I remember one old man in the Amazon rain forest who said, as he was waiting to die, “I am so glad now I don't have to live with the buzzards! Now I can live with Jesus!”
- **Our fear of dying alone:** He is with us and will never leave us. In dying we move from this earthly existence where we are *already* in eternal life (though we may not see it or feel) it into a full experience of eternal life. His angels rejoice in our coming. Death is “precious in His sight” because we “go home” to Him more fully than we experience here. (Psalm 116:15)
- **Our fear of separation:** I love that Jesus told his disciples, and us that He wants so much to be with us that He is preparing a place for us. This is more than divine hospitality—it is the divine attachment of Jesus to His beloveds! We won't just arrive in heaven and wander the streets; He will have our place prepared for us! (John 14:2, 3, 4) This is awesome! As a mere mortal I look forward to guests coming to my home and I delight in arranging rooms or houses for them. It is an expression of my love to prepare the place. How much more so our divine room or “mansion” preparer!
- **Our fear of being forgotten or not being known:** Not only is God our creator and heavenly parent, but He is also the One who knows us best. “When we see Him face to face we will know Him as He knows us.” (I Cor. 13:12) He knows us intimately, and as we know him more and more, he meets the deep needs of our hearts. He knows us so well that He is selecting for each of us a new name which will be most fitting to who we are. (Rev. 2:17)
- **Our fear of annihilation:** As Christians we have the enormous advantage, compared to most religions, that we will not cease to exist. Rather we live with the promise of total restoration. “He heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds.” (Psalm 147:3) No matter what went wrong in this earthly life, we will even be restored in body, healed to the core! That is total transformation! (I Cor. 15:51-53)

Summary

The Lord can meet you and me in each of these fears intensified through our loneliness. You may still feel lonely even after contemplating these truths and practicing the ways to mitigate your aloneness. Remember that these feelings and fears are so deeply entrenched in us *because* we are made for love. We feel less depressed and frustrated when we consider our loneliness in light of being made in God's image and we choose to turn our loneliness into positive action. No matter how we feel, let us remember that our feelings are not the whole of reality.