

Loneliness Might Not Be What You Think

Exercise 1: Read the article

¹ This may surprise you: feeling lonely has little connection to how many people are around you or how many people you talk to every day. Loneliness isn't necessarily being physically absent from other people. Instead, it's the feeling that you are unable to share anything that you care about with anyone else. Even if you have a husband or wife or family members or co-workers or neighbors around you, if you don't share anything that is important to you with them, you'll still be lonely. In other words, according to Jonathan Hari in his book *Lost Connections*, loneliness is caused by a loss of connection to others.

² Hari claims that more people say they feel lonely than at any time in the past. And this loneliness can often result in health problems, anxiety and depression.

³ In a study about loneliness and stress, participants wore a heart monitor for two days while doing what they normally do. They were also given a beeper that made a sound nine times a day. When they heard the beeper sound, they had to write in a notebook how lonely or how connected they felt and what their heart rate was at the moment. The second day was the same, but each time they heard the beeper, they had to spit saliva (mouth water) in a small glass tube, cover it, keep it and give the nine tubes to the lab the next day.

⁴ The researchers found that when the participants wrote that they were feeling lonely, a stress chemical in their saliva called cortisol and their heart rates increased greatly showing that they were experiencing a lot of stress. In fact, the level of their stress was the same that people would feel if a stranger suddenly hit them in the face. Interestingly, some of the loneliest participants were experiencing loneliness even though they had spoken to many people during the two days.

⁵ In another study to see the relationship between loneliness and health, volunteers first answered the question: "How many friends and friendly connections do you have?" Then they agreed to let the researchers give them the cold virus. The researchers found that the volunteers

who were more isolated (in other words, who had few friends and connections) were three times more likely to catch a cold than the ones who had a lot of connections to other people.

⁶ In other studies, researchers found that people who feel lonely have a much greater chance to develop anxiety and depression. Hari wanted to know why loneliness can have these negative effects on people's health and mental conditions. To investigate this, he decided to study our ancient ancestors.

⁷ Thousands of years ago, people lived in small groups of about 100-200 people, and they needed to cooperate with each other in order to survive. They had to work together to kill large animals to eat. They needed to share food and take care of each other when they were sick. It was natural for them to be connected to each other. You can probably imagine how terrible it would be if you were your ancestor and got lost from your group for several days or weeks. You would be in danger of being attacked by animals, of not having someone take care of you if you got sick and of not getting enough food. Naturally, you would feel terribly insecure. From this, Hari came up with a theory: people who lose connections with others will feel something similar to what our ancestors would have felt. This feeling of isolation and loss of connection is loneliness, and it naturally leads to poor health and depression.

⁸ Hari is concerned that many people today aren't connected with others. Researchers asked Americans of all different ages a two-part question: how many people are close enough to you that (1) you could ask for help if something terrible happened to you, and (2) that you could share really good things that happened to you? A few decades ago, the average number of close friends was three. Recently, the average was none.

⁹ Hari points out that there is a common self-help saying that he has often seen on Facebook, "Nobody can help you except you," which he says means that nobody can help me but me. He believes that this idea of doing things alone

is not natural for human beings, and it makes us feel terrible and insecure.

are sharing something meaningful or something we care about with another person or other people.

¹⁰ To end loneliness, according to Hari, we need two things: other people and a feeling that we

Pre-discussion Exercise 1

Answer True (T) or False (F) according to information in the article.

- ___ 1) We can feel lonely even in a crowd of people.
- ___ 2) Recently, people are less lonely than several years ago.
- ___ 3) In the first study, only people who were feeling lonely, they heard a beeper sound.
- ___ 4) In the first study, lonely participants had heart rates and cortisol levels that showed they were feeling stress.
- ___ 5) In the second study, volunteers who had fewer close connections were more likely to catch a cold.
- ___ 6) It was natural for our ancestors to be independent of other people.
- ___ 7) Recently, people tend to have fewer close friends than a few decades ago.
- ___ 8) On Facebook, it's common to read comments telling people that they shouldn't rely on other people to help them.
- ___ 9) If we don't want to feel lonely, we just need to go someplace where there are a lot of people.
- ___ 10) The author mentions sharing "something we care about." An example of this could be two people enjoying talking about their favorite type of movies.

Pre-discussion Exercise 2

Think about these discussion questions. You don't have to write anything.

1. Do you feel a connection to your family members?
2. Do feel a connection to your neighbors?
3. Let's talk about feeling stress and increased heart rates. Do you sometimes feel these?
4. If you were in this study about colds, do you think you would catch a cold?
5. If we asked people in your country today how many close friends they have, what do you think they would say? Do you think it would be different several decades ago?
6. Have you seen the "Nobody can help you except you," comment on social media? Do you agree with it?
7. If I told you that I was feeling lonely, what advice would you give me?
8. Did you ever feel lonely when you were younger?
9. Do you think social media can cause loneliness or can it keep people from being lonely?
10. Think about someone you feel connected to. What do you share that is meaningful or that you are interested in?

Small-group Discussion for: Loneliness Might Not Be What You Think

Student A

Directions: Read these questions to your partners and respond to theirs.

1. Were you surprised by the first sentence: "...feeling lonely has little connection to how many people are around you or how many people you talk to every day"?
4. **Don't look at the article when you answer this question.** There was a study about the heart monitors and saliva. Tell about the study and the results?
7. **This is a discussion question.** If you were in this study about colds, do you think you would catch a cold?
10. **This is a discussion question about your country.** If we asked people in your country today how many close friends they have, what do you think they would say? Do you think it would be different several decades ago?
13. **Don't look at the article when you answer this question.** At the end of the article, Harri says we need two things to end loneliness. What are those two things?
16. **This is a discussion question.** Do you think social media can cause loneliness or can it keep people from being lonely?

Post-Discussion Discussion

While you wait for other groups to finish, you talk about one of these:

- a) Was there anything in this article that surprised you or that you don't agree with or that you found very interesting?
- b) What are somethings that cause you stress? Do they affect your health?
- c) Do you think loneliness is a problem in your country?
- d) Think of a different topic and discuss it.

Small-group Discussion for: Loneliness Might Not Be What You Think

Student B

Directions: Read these questions to your partners and respond to theirs.

2. **This is a discussion question. We should all answer this and ask follow-up questions.** Do you feel a connection to your family members?
5. **This is a discussion question. We should all answer this and ask follow-up questions.** Let's talk about feeling stress and increased heart rates. Do you sometimes feel these?
8. Why did the author talk about our ancient ancestors?
11. **Don't look at the article when you answer this question.** What did Hari say he often read on Facebook about getting help?
14. **This is a discussion question.** If I told you that I was feeling lonely, what advice would you give me?
17. **This is a discussion question.** Think about someone you feel connected to. What do you share that is meaningful or interested in?

Post-Discussion Discussion

While you wait for other groups to finish, you talk about one of these:

- a) Was there anything in this article that surprised you or that you don't agree with or that you found very interesting?
- b) What are somethings that cause you stress? Do they affect your health?
- c) Do you think loneliness is a problem in your country?
- d) Think of a different topic and discuss it.

Small-group Discussion for: Loneliness Might Not Be What You Think

Student C

Directions: Read these questions to your partners and respond to theirs.

3. **This is a discussion question. We should all answer this and ask follow-up questions.** Do you feel a connection to your neighbors?
6. **Don't look at the article when you answer this question.** Tell about the study with the cold virus.
9. **Don't look at the article when you answer this question.** Researchers asked Americans how many close friends they have. What did Americans say several decades ago compared to recently?
12. **This is a discussion question.** Have you seen the "Nobody can help you except you," comment on social media? Do you agree with it?
15. **This is a discussion question.** Did you ever feel lonely when you were younger?
18. Let's check our True False answers in Pre-Discussion Exercise 2.

Post-Discussion Discussion

While you wait for other groups to finish, you talk about one of these:

- a) Was there anything in this article that surprised you or that you don't agree with or that you found very interesting?
- b) What are some things that cause you stress? Do they affect your health?
- c) Do you think loneliness is a problem in your country?
- d) Think of a different topic and discuss it.