



Guidance for professionals who encounter people in involuntary solitude



Voluntary solitude can be beneficial in many ways. Being alone can be restorative, as all of us need solitude sometimes. Involuntary solitude, by contrast, can lead to both physical and mental ill health. In addition to the problems faced by the individual living in involuntary solitude, it also incurs costs for society. We therefore need to mobilise efforts to break loneliness. An important element of these efforts is to systematically provide opportunities for people to speak about loneliness, as well as to increase knowledge about the issue and promote possibilities for social interaction. These are areas where you can make a difference as a professional encountering people in involuntary solitude.

Involuntary solitude can befall anyone at any time during their life. A pupil changing schools might not make friends in their new class, or loneliness might be caused by moving to a different town to study, by getting divorced, losing a romantic partner, being on extended sick leave, or losing one's job. Occasional experiences of loneliness, to varying degrees, are common throughout a person's life.

Loneliness is often associated with not having close friends and acquaintances, a romantic partner, or family members to share one's thoughts and

emotions with. Feelings of loneliness are also common in people who perceive themselves as different, who don't feel noticed or understood, or who fail to find meaning in life. Such feelings of loneliness can be just as strong for people with few social contacts as for people in large social networks. Feelings of loneliness do not automatically imply a lack of social competence. But studies show that people who live in close relationships with family and friends are healthier both mentally and physically than people who live in solitude.

Different forms of loneliness

Many studies differentiate between objective and subjective loneliness.

Objective loneliness, or social isolation, means that someone both lives alone and rarely socialises with acquaintances or family. This type of loneliness is measurable and not necessarily negative. Voluntary solitude or isolation can often be a positive thing, as a time for rest and recuperation from socialising.

Subjective loneliness is a person's self-assessed loneliness. It doesn't necessarily have anything to do with how much socialising the person does. It's possible for people with access to a large social network to feel lonely as well as for people with few social contacts.

Subjective, or involuntary, loneliness is the form of loneliness that is harmful to a person's health. A commonly used definition in research is that "Loneliness arises as a consequence of a perceived difference between the desired and actual levels of social interaction".

Loneliness can also be divided into existential, social and emotional loneliness.

Existential loneliness – a realisation that every person is fundamentally alone, and then carrying the emotional weight of that insight throughout one's life. This can be linked to feeling that life has no meaning. This type of loneliness often becomes more apparent when a crisis occurs, such as when the person herself or a close family member becomes ill and is faced with death. Existential loneliness is difficult to share fully with other people, and for that reason is usually not remedied by having many friends or a large family.

Social loneliness – having few or no close friends and acquaintances to feel affinity with or be able to confide in.

Emotional loneliness – not having a love relationship.



It's important to draw attention to involuntary solitude

Benefits of being part of a social context

We humans have evolved over time into social beings, which means that community, togetherness and close relationships are important for our well-being. Feeling lonely can therefore seem a frightening prospect – as if something has gone wrong – that is best avoided.

People who live in close relationships are generally in better health, mentally and physically, than those who don't. Not having family or friends appears to be much worse for a person's well-being than not having a love relationship. Having social support is a good buffer against stress. Having access to emotional and listening support appears to be less important than simply having company.

There are periods in everyone's life when they need time to themselves or isolation from others, such as for recuperation and reflection. There are many people who appreciate their solitude. These are people who may not regard themselves as lonely despite having few social contacts, who relish their freedom and not having to take others into consideration, or who are happiest by themselves or in seclusion. Everyone is different. It's important, however, for voluntary solitude not to lead to long-term social isolation, which may then be difficult to get out of.

The risks of involuntary solitude

Several studies indicate that involuntary solitude is at least as big a risk factor for premature death as smoking or obesity. Long-term solitude that is not voluntary, and where a social context is absent, can cause stress and eventually have a negative effect on health. The most harmful type is chronic loneliness, in which the person constantly confirms to themselves that they are alone and that no-one wants to spend time with them – in other words, when loneliness begins to lead a life of its own.

Possible health risks associated with loneliness:

- Chronic, low-intensity additional stress
- Depression and other mental health problems
- Cardiovascular problems such as high blood pressure, heart attack
- Stroke
- Dementia
- Increased physical pain
- Cognitive deterioration, e. g. memory loss, reduced cognition and concentration ability

Be attentive to signs of loneliness

Loneliness is something we all experience, from time to time and to varying degrees, throughout our lives, but for some people the feeling of loneliness doesn't pass. Despite being so common, there is a stigma attached to loneliness, and many people find telling anyone about their feelings of loneliness shameful. This means that many people suffer in silence, which makes loneliness both hard to talk about and hard to spot.

Lonely people risk going into a downward spiral. They may feel that existence is insecure and full of threats, and therefore choose to avoid social

contexts. A person who feels lonely may also alienate other people by becoming too demanding or needy, or distance themselves from them in order to protect themselves from further disappointments.

A person who feels lonely may also misinterpret other people's signals, reading them as threats or rejection. This erodes their trust in other people. And a chronically lonely person may anyway feel that they don't deserve anyone's love. This in turn can cause them to give off a negative vibe, which may alienate other people.

What you can do when you encounter someone showing signs of loneliness

If you encounter someone who shows signs of being lonely, you can make a difference by bringing up and asking about loneliness. Depending on how long a person has been lonely, and on how much their loneliness has affected their physical and mental health,

there are different possibilities for providing support and help. Sometimes it's enough to talk about loneliness, while in other cases professional treatment may be needed – or you can suggest various remedial actions provided by civil society.

Speaking about loneliness

It can be difficult to speak about loneliness – in particular when it's rooted in involuntary solitude. This therapeutic area is still relatively unexplored, which means that there are no specific adapted procedures or methods as yet. Still, there are tried and tested general methods which can be applied. One example is Motivational Interviewing (M.I.), a method of interviewing that focuses on helping a person to make changes on their own conditions. Collaboration is key to this method, which puts the person needing support at the centre of things, without reprimanding them or talking down to them. The interview should mainly consist of open questions (not answerable with just Yes or No) and summaries of answers, to ensure that the professional has understood the situation. No advice must be given without prior consent.



Some examples of questions that might be used in an interview about loneliness:

- Describe whom you spend time with and what you do together.
- How often do you feel lonely?
- What are your earlier experiences, if any, of feeling lonely?
- How does loneliness affect you?
- What might you be able to do in order to feel less lonely?
- What prevents you today from participating in social contexts?
- What do you think you might need help with in order to feel less lonely?

Self-care tips to give to the person you encounter

One way a person can break the loneliness they feel is to try to increase their social interaction with others, but sometimes professional help is needed. It can be difficult for someone to understand what it is that triggers their negative emotions, how to manage them, and how to begin to change the pattern. Help may also be needed in dealing with problems arising from loneliness, such as depression, and in establishing new thought patterns, learning not to misinterpret social signals, and learning to like oneself.

If you're unable to help the person, encourage them to overcome their reluctance to seek help and support, so that they'll become able to manage their emotions and any problems they are facing.

If the person needs professional support and guidance, suggest that they contact their medical care centre or that they read more about loneliness on 1177.se. And refer them to the brochure "Do you feel lonely, or know someone who does?" which is directed to the general public.

EASE is an example of an action plan that an individual can follow in order to break their loneliness. It was developed by John T. Cacioppo.

E: EXTEND YOURSELF.

Take the first step to making contact by greeting, making small talk and having eye contact with other people.

A: ACTION PLAN.

Think about situations and contexts where you can meet like-minded people, and seek them out – e.g. a choir or an association.


S: SELECTION.

Choose those you want to become friends with and invest in that small number of people.

E: EXPECT THE BEST.

Assume that people around you want the best for you.





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