

Do you feel lonely in your relationship?

It is very fitting that LONELINESS is this year's theme of Mental Health Awareness Week 2022. According to the Mental Health Foundation, one in four adults feel lonely some or all the time. There is no single cause and there's no one solution as we are all different. However, the longer we feel lonely, the more we are at risk of mental health problems. This was never more so than during the past two years of the Covid-19 pandemic which has led many people to feel isolated and cut off from communities and their loved ones.

Mental Health Awareness week helps to raise awareness of the impact of loneliness on our mental health and wellbeing and how we have all experienced loneliness in different ways and the practical steps we can take to address it.

We may have had pre-conceived ideas of what loneliness is – just an older person's issue or a result of a bereavement. Loneliness can affect us all. It seeps into every section of our community regardless of gender or sexual orientation. We are not always aware that loneliness can occur even if you are in a relationship? Just because you are dating someone or in a long-term marriage does not exclude us from the possibility of feeling lonely.

Alone versus loneliness

Being 'alone' is a physical state where you are physically by yourself and can take pleasure in this solitude. Being 'lonely' is an emotional state where you FEEL alone and isolated, disconnected from others even when they're right next to you.

Loneliness is a complex feeling and has to do with the quality of one's relationship as opposed to the number of people in ones' life.

Robin Hewings, Programme Director from the Campaign to End Loneliness quotes Loneliness as being a negative unwelcome emotion whereas solitude can be a positive emotion.

I hear from clients how they feel: *"something isn't working, we are growing apart", "I don't feel listened to and no longer feel very important."* Rarely do we recognise ourselves as feeling lonely in the relationship. When we do feel lonely in our relationships, it can mean several things and it shows up in counselling sessions in different guises. It may mean you feel unloved or unheard. It may mean you no

longer feel as close to each other as you used to feel. This can have devastating effects on your relationship if not understood.

What are the signs of loneliness in a relationship?

Ongoing feelings of disconnection, isolation and disengagement from your partner may be signs that you are in a lonely relationship.

What causes loneliness in our relationship?

Life transitions

One of the most common ways it manifests is with the impact of change in your life situation like a change of job which means longer hours and less time to spend together. It can be a big life transition like moving in together, moving house or moving countries, marriage, pregnancy, divorce, illness, children leaving home, retirement.

Incompatibility

We no longer feel we are on the same track and working together to achieve our original shared goals. Feelings of intolerance, impatience and unhappiness are never far from the surface which can be quite a lonely experience.

Health problems

If a partner is dealing with chronic illness, or severe long term health issues of a close relative, loneliness may well show up in a relationship.

Loss of intimacy

No longer feeling closely connected physically or sexually to our partner often leads to feelings of isolation and loneliness with the tendency to close-down and withdraw from the relationship.

One of the questions I often couples with whom I am working:

"What does loneliness feel like and how does it show up in your relationship?"

These are some of the answers:

- something isn't working
- loss of emotional connection
- avoiding each other
- drifting apart
- thinking more negatively

- you are never there for me
- feeling sad
- irritability and anger with each other
- we barely talk to each other anymore
- don't make time for each other
- children are the priority
- too stressed with work
- no time or desire for sex

The impact of loneliness on a relationship

Loneliness doesn't always show up very clearly. It can create emotional and physical distance where you find yourself feeling more annoyed and irritated by your partner, starting arguments and an unwillingness to engage, seeing everything negatively. You may find yourself avoiding your partner emotionally and sexually, generally feeling very disconnected and alone. One client recently shared that he would never have described himself as feeling lonely in his marriage but now it's been talked about that's exactly how he felt when his wife had their first child. A year later he felt she didn't care for him anymore. He felt the baby was much more important to her than he was. He had even got as far as thinking he will need to leave his marriage.

Another client expressed deep sadness that her partner continually prioritised his work over her and the family. Even holidays were never holidays as he was always working. It was only when she recognised how lonely she was after the children left home and it was just the two of them that the relationship became untenable for her.

If these feelings aren't addressed it can lead to feelings of depression and anxiety, alcohol and drug addiction and emotional and sexual affairs.

How to work through loneliness feelings in your relationship

As with all emotional issues, it's so important to find a way to communicate with your partner some of the feelings you are having without getting into an argument. Remind your partner you are not criticising or blaming them, you just want to share your feelings of loneliness. Your partner may not even be aware that you are having these feelings and need more support. We often assume our partners should know what we need and what we are going through. The reality is they more often don't. They really appreciate it when you make time to talk openly and

honestly about what you are needing from them and discuss the changes that you both need to make to feel differently about each other.

However, there are times when we can't find a way of talking to our partners so perhaps this is the time to seek help from a couples counsellor. They will listen to you both and, by asking the right questions, can help you tease out your feelings of loneliness, help you to engage with each other so that you can experience your relationship in a more connected way and no longer feel lonely together. As Robin Hewings said in a recent podcast on loneliness in the workplace: *"it's not about never feeling lonely again, but finding ways of not getting stuck in loneliness which is what cuts very deeply into people and their relationships."*

"Being alone is bearable; loneliness while in a relationship is painful."

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If you would like to discuss things further or to make an appointment, you can call me on either:

07976 403741 or (020) 8959 9528.

Alternatively you can contact me by email by clicking [here](#).