

LONELINESS IN CRISIS

by

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I learned to ride my sister's bicycle when I was eight. I leaned it against the wooden milk can platform located at the edge of the farm lane. I turned the left pedal to the up position, climbed to the seat, then pushed myself and the bicycle forward. The lane was straight and level, which meant I didn't have to negotiate curves and hills. Keeping my balance was my only focus. When I wanted to dismount, I slowly coasted to the side of the platform, slammed on the brakes, and leaned the bicycle against the platform. Eventually I learned to start and stop without the aid of the platform. Keeping my balance became almost second nature.

When I went to work for a neighboring farmer, I decided to ride the bicycle to his tomato field. That necessitated taking a blacktop road with a steep hill, a curve, and a one-lane railroad underpass. As I descended the hill I quickly realized that my riding skills did not match the new terrain. Fear gripped me as I approached the curve at a high speed. My front wheel hit loose gravel. I struggled to keep my balance, but I flew over the handlebar and the bicycle plunged into the ditch. My knees were bloody and the bicycle fenders were badly bent. I had experienced a crisis.

Crisis: Prolonged Loss of Equilibrium

Douglas A. Puryear, in his book *Helping People in Crisis* (1979), shows how rapid, displeasing, and undesired changes in a family or in the life of an individual are a threat to balance or equilibrium. If the usual skills and strategies for handling conflict or change do not resolve the problem and restore equilibrium, a crisis may begin. Crisis is the result of not being able to quickly counteract the changes and conflicts. A crisis can be triggered by a major situation or event as well as by a relatively minor situation or event that is added to an already heavy load.

Another way of expressing *equilibrium* is a *sense of security*. When I was losing my balance on the bicycle, my sense of security was drastically jeopardized.

An individual's sense of security, according to Puryear, depends on his or her relationships with others. These relationships help an individual to meet four basic emotional needs:

- Relatedness to others.
- Support from others.
- A sense of personal separateness and identity.
- Self-esteem derived through input from others.

How loneliness affects crisis resolution. All four of these needs are poorly met when a person is lonely. The sense of security is fragile. Loneliness is a signal that there is a relationship deficiency. It is understandable, then, that loneliness is a real causal factor in poor crisis resolution and also a contributing factor in the genesis of crisis.

In their book *Crisis Intervention: Theory and Methodology* (1974), D. C. Aquilera and J. M. Messick state that a problem will not lead to a crisis unless there are deficiencies in one or more of the following balancing factors: adequate perception (how the problem is viewed), adequate network (a group of close relationships to lend support), adequate coping mechanisms. A lonely

person's inadequate network is against him or her before a problem arises. It makes it difficult to prevent or to resolve a crisis when one does arise.

Puryear lists eight principles of crisis intervention: (1) immediate intervention, (2) action, (3) limited goal, (4) hope and expectations, (5) support, (6) focused problem solving, (7) self-image, and (8) self-reliance. The fifth principle is difficult to carry out because the lonely person has little or no social support in place before a potential crisis-producing problem arises. The helping person will need to become a primary, temporary support until an adequate social support network can be developed. The seventh principle presents a challenge for the helping person because a social network is indispensable to the development of a healthy self-image. Lonely people frequently have a faulty self-image due to relationship deficiency.

Even more challenging is the research finding that people in crisis will resolve it in some way, usually in no more than six weeks after the crisis begins. The newly-acquired equilibrium may be adequate and healthy or inadequate and unhealthy. A lonely person is very likely to arrive at an unhealthy equilibrium because support is seldom present.

Opportunity. Crisis is a time when helpers have an open door to help facilitate change. People in crisis are more accessible and the least defensive. They have tried many things without success. Now they are open to new strategies. Now is the time to make a life-changing impact on the family and on individuals.

This brief look at crisis and crisis intervention theory points out the need to understand loneliness and its treatment.

Loneliness

Hunger in famine proportions. In their fascinating book *In Search of Intimacy* (1982), Carin Rubenstein and Phillip Shaver call loneliness a severe hunger in famine proportions. They see it as a sign of societal failure to meet the psychological and social needs of people. Their use of the word hunger intrigues me because ordinary hunger signals us that it is time to take nutrition. It is healthy. On the other hand, hunger associated with starvation holds a consequence of far greater magnitude. If conditions do not allow access to nutrition, hunger is simply an omen of death.

Dr. James J. Lynch, professor of psychosomatic medicine at the University of Maryland Medical School at the time of this writing, agrees with this suggestion of mortality rate increase. His books *The Broken Heart* (1977) and *The Language of the Heart* (1985) report excellent research that identifies loneliness as the main risk factor in premature death from all causes. Lynch attributes the malignancy of loneliness to a lack of dialogue. "In its most general meaning, dialogue consists of reciprocal communication between two or more living creatures. It involves the sharing of thoughts, physical sensations, ideas, ideals, hopes, and feelings. In sum, dialogue involves the reciprocal sharing of any and all of life experiences" (Lynch, 1977, p. 217). He goes on to state that trust and commitment are vital to the existence and health of dialogue. Dialogue can be verbal, but it is largely non-verbal. When commitment is broken, the nature of dialogue changes, trust deteriorates, and eventually the relationship dies. When a person has no relationships in which true dialogue occurs, his or her basic human needs are unmet, and loneliness begins its sinister work.

Other definitions of loneliness are based upon various models developed by psychologists. One model shows how being deprived of a community and the broad spectrum of intimacy experienced in that community causes loneliness. Without adequate community and life-enriching intimacy, a person is left to experience loneliness. Another model demonstrates that loneliness results when there is a gap between expectations and reality. The greater the gap, the deeper the loneliness.

Existential loneliness. A third model I have labeled the existential model. This model shows that

in our rebellious world people experience core loneliness because of our alienation from God, others, self, and the natural world. Sin triggered this alienation. The first human family hid from God, blamed each other for the tragedy of losing a perfect home, became focused on pleasing self, and spread over the land to abuse the gifts of the natural world. As this alienation goes unchecked, loneliness prevents God's children from accomplishing the purposes for which they were created. All of us confront this core loneliness, just as we all are exposed to various disease processes. Loneliness is not an indictment of personal weakness or spiritual failure. It has identifiable causes. With proper intervention a person can get beyond it (Yeagley, 1998).

Societal Causes of Loneliness

- Promotion of independence and self-reliance.* These qualities are often lauded as an excellent way of making advancements and gaining success. Teamwork seems to have been replaced by individual initiative.
- Competition.* It begins in preschool and reaches to the home, the workplace, the church, and recreation. Paul Tournier strongly suggests that it makes us enemies instead of friends. Loneliness is the result.
- Segregation of age groups.* Children spend most of the day with peers. Elderly people leave families for nursing homes and senior daycare. This deprivation of transgenerational relationships isolates individuals.
- Suburban sprawl.* For those who can afford them, homes on large country lots remove us from close neighbors and good conversation over the backyard fence.
- Home entertainment.* Fun at local gathering places has been superseded by computer and video thrillers that are experienced in privacy.
- Urban crime.* City people avoid unnecessary interaction and stay behind locked doors.
- Mobility.* Frequent moves shrink support systems.
- Latchkey children.* Long hours separated from parents is bound to produce loneliness in children and teens.
- Easy divorce.* Staying and working things out is viewed as being old-fashioned. Personal freedom is touted as healthy. Assuming responsibility for another person and loyally upholding a commitment is not a top priority in the minds of many counselors. Rejection and loneliness rise with the divorce rate.
- Isolation.* Many factors contribute to the isolation of individuals and families. For example, single parents are too busy for personal development and the development of a support system. Illness sometimes confines a person to the home and prevents socialization.

Personal Deficit Causes of Loneliness

- Lack of social skills
- A retiring nature
- Antisocial behaviors that repulse others
- Narrow range of interests
- Illness that isolates
- Emotional problems
- Unrealistic expectations

Helping the Lonely Person

Support. Since loneliness signals a relationship deficit, the helping person needs to understand that he or she must become a supporting friend to the individual or to the family for an undesignated period of time. It is not appropriate to worry about over-dependency.

The helper's role is to develop a bond and a trust level that will facilitate dialogue. The lonely person will need to lean on the helper until other people enter the support network. Once bonding happens, the helper can assist in widening the support system. This is a long, slow process.

Many attempts will be made. Many failures will happen, but the helper must not give up. I'd like to broaden the term *helper*. Our society has pretty much assumed that a family or person who experiences loneliness must see a counselor. That may be necessary for some, but counselors cannot provide full support for a lonely person for an undetermined period of time, if for no other reason than insufficient insurance coverage. I am suggesting that the term *helper* encompasses the entire church family.

The church often puts most of its energy into church growth. If care is not taken, nurture and caring are in short supply. I do not believe we violate the gospel commission to consider not only how many people we will bring in but also how we will care for them over a lifetime. To do less is irresponsible.

When I personally develop a relationship with a lonely person, I gradually bring other church members into that person's world. I can't meet a person's total needs, so I recruit others to engage in the life of the person. I am acquainted with churches that hire counselors as part of the pastoral staff. These counselors have a goal of engaging the entire congregation in helping roles.

Some Christian counselors have even closed their private practices to spend most of their time training members to minister to people such as the lonely. In Seventh-day Adventist churches, family life coordinators can arrange for some of this training.

Education. Understanding loneliness and acknowledging loneliness are the first big steps toward getting beyond it. The church can provide educational programs designed to help people prevent or get beyond loneliness. I am acquainted with two large churches in the Dallas-Fort Worth, Texas region where as many as 30 different classes are being held each week. The doors are open every day except Monday. Small churches cannot do this, but I have pastored two small churches in the last 10 years where I held at least 4 classes each year. The pastor can engage other professionals to conduct the classes. Here are a few suggestions for classes:

- Loneliness 101*. This class defines loneliness, summarize the causes, and look at solutions. Publicity for the class needs to state that attendance does not mean you are lonely. I mention this because I have taught this class without this disclaimer. Some of the attendees wanted me to close the door to the hall so a person passing by would not think them lonely.
- Principles of Communicating in Conversation*. This class explores the levels of communication, emphasizes topics that evoke conversation, shows how much and when to disclose yourself to another person and how to read body language.
- Building Self-esteem*. This class is not about selfism, but about a Scriptural way of determining your worth as a child of God. It deals with negative self-talk that is destructive and emphasizes the role of success and achievement in building a healthy self-image. Each student is helped to evaluate assets, liabilities, and goals.
- Assertiveness Training*. This is not *aggressiveness* training, rather it teaches how to treat others with respect and how to protect your own sense of dignity. Attendees will learn how to agree and disagree, how to compliment and receive compliments, and how to handle criticism constructively.
- Creative Writing*. Lonely people often express themselves in writing with a freedom they do not have in conversation. This class teaches the principles of expression in writing and moves into sharing that writing with others.
- Principles of Conflict Resolution*. This class emphasizes the art of breaking problems into manageable pieces, followed by organizing and prioritizing action toward a solution.
- Personal Growth Support Group*. This is a time-limited program that engages a small group in helping one another with areas that inhibit personal growth—areas such as inferiority feelings, fear of failure, loneliness, difficulty in friendship formation, etc.
- Lonely Though Married*. This class identifies reasons for loneliness in marriage and explores ways to eliminate it.

First Aid for the Lonely

In addition to finding some good classes that will move a person through loneliness, you might suggest some of these home remedies:

- Admit that you are lonely.
- Keep a journal in which you jot down times of the day when you were especially lonely. Record what you think were triggers to that loneliness.
- After two weeks or so of journaling, review what you have written. Look for the key to your times of loneliness.
- Since loneliness is relationship deficiency, strive to engage in at least one social activity per week.
- Force yourself to engage in that activity whether you feel like it or not. It is easier to act your way into a new way of feeling than it is to feel your way into a new way of acting.
- Many lonely people are sedentary. Push yourself to engage in one active pursuit each day whether you feel like it or not. This could be exercising at a fitness center where you are in touch with people or it could be arranging to walk at the mall with a friend. I ride a bike around my country home. When I see people I stop and talk.
- Try to figure out what societal factors have contributed to your loneliness. Give yourself permission to sabotage them. If you are too independent, decide to ask another person to do something for you. I used to change the oil in our family car, but that was too solitary. Today I went to the Ford garage for an oil change. I had fun chatting with a salesman as he showed me the latest Mercury sports car. I swapped stories with a man in the waiting room about funny things that have happened to us as we have traveled. Depending on the Ford mechanic for an oil change opened doors to relationships and fun conversation.
- Ask a pastor or a relative to help you change your perception of your situation. Decide that you will not allow loneliness to do something to you, but that you will decide what to do with loneliness.
- Build a simple and regular schedule for yourself. Determine that life will not just happen or "unfold" spontaneously.
- Spend half an hour each day planning to do something nice for another person, even though you don't know that person very well. I am going to a surgeon for minor surgery next week. At the time of my first visit I overheard the office staff talking about cookies. My wife offered to make two dozen cookies for me to take with me the day of the surgery. What an ice breaker!

Ideas for Using this Material in a Seminar

The material could be condensed into a single 90-minute time period or you could profitably use up to five 90-minute sessions, perhaps meeting once per week. For the condensed version I would suggest that participants be given a copy of *How to Get Beyond Loneliness* by Larry Yeagley (1998) so that they have adequate time to read it before the seminar. This book defines various models of loneliness. It examines the psycho-social-spiritual dimensions of loneliness. Many alternatives are offered.

A five-week seminar would be enhanced by giving participants the additional book, *Why Be Lonely?* by Les Carter, Paul D. Meier, and Frank B. Minirth (1982). This book spells out how loneliness affects various age groups in a variety of loss and change situations. It is a good blend of spiritual and psychological factors.

Any seminar is dull without group interaction. Build group interaction into your plans. Here are a few discussion starters:

- Think of a time when you were lonely during a crisis. What helped you? What did you wish for? What did not help you?
- How can our church foster dialogue in the life of the members?
- Of all the classes under the education section of this seminar, which would help you the most? Why? What classes would you add? What can your group do to get some classes started?

•The book *How to Get Beyond Loneliness* (Yeagley, 1998) refers to breaking the alienation with God, others, self, and nature. Think about your own experience with loneliness. How did these types of alienation impact your experience?

•Did you or any other person attribute your loneliness to a lack of spirituality? How would you make a case for the idea that experiencing loneliness is not a good barometer for judging the state of a person's relationship with God?

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