

# What is Loneliness?

*Sponsored by ARPC Stephen Ministry*

Article 2 in a series on Christian perspective on loneliness

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Although common definitions of loneliness describe it as a state of solitude or being alone, loneliness is better described as a state of mind in which there is a perception of social isolation. Loneliness is a state of mind characterized by a dissociation between what an individual *wants* or *expects* from their relationships or social interactions and what that individual *experiences* in their relationships or social interactions.

Because it is based on expectations of social engagement, a person does not have to be isolated to feel lonely. A person can be surrounded by others, such as a college student on a university campus or a sibling in a large family, and still experience loneliness. Loneliness can also be caused by situational factors, whether temporary or permanent, by sudden life changes that

disrupt relationships, or by emotional problems such as anxiety or depression.

How prevalent is loneliness?

While everyone may feel lonely some of the time, for a large number of people loneliness is a chronic condition of life. About two in five Americans report that they sometimes or always feel their social relationships are not meaningful, and one in five say they feel lonely or socially isolated.

Groups found to be at particular risk of loneliness include women, being either younger (e.g., aged younger than 25 years) or older (e.g., aged older than 65 years), those who live alone, those who have low socio-economic status, and persons with poor mental and physical health.

How does loneliness affect our health?

Loneliness has been identified as a major public health concern associated with heightened risk of mental and physical illness, cognitive decline, suicidal behavior, and all-cause mortality.

Studies have found that loneliness in adolescence and young adulthood predicted how many cardiovascular risk factors (e.g.,

body mass index, waist circumference, blood pressure, cholesterol) were elevated in young adulthood, and that the number of developmental occasions (i.e., childhood, adolescence, young adulthood) at which participants were lonely predicted the number of elevated risk factors in young adulthood.

Loneliness has also been associated with the progression of Alzheimer's disease, obesity, increased vascular resistance, elevated blood pressure, increased hypothalamic pituitary adrenocortical activity, less healthy sleep, diminished immunity, reduction in independent living, alcoholism, symptoms of depression, suicidal ideation and behavior, and mortality in older adults.

According to a study published in *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, current evidence indicates that heightened risk for mortality from a lack of social relationships is greater than that from obesity.

Can loneliness be contagious?

Yes, loneliness has been found to be a form of social contagion—the thesis that attitudes, beliefs, and behavior can spread through populations as if they were somehow infectious. “Simple exposure sometimes appears to be a sufficient condition

for social transmission to occur,” research psychologist Paul Marsden says. “This is the social contagion thesis; that sociocultural phenomena can spread through, and leap between, populations more like outbreaks of measles or chicken pox than through a process of rational choice.”

In a decade-long study, researchers examined how loneliness spreads in social networks and discovered that “a person’s loneliness depends not just on his friend’s loneliness, but also extends to his friend’s friend and his friend’s friend’s friend.” The full network shows that participants are 52 percent more likely to be lonely if a person they are directly connected to (at one degree of separation) is lonely. The size of the effect for people at two degrees of separation (e.g., the friend of a friend) is 25 percent and for people at three degrees of separation (e.g., the friend of a friend of a friend) is 15 percent. At four degrees of separation, the effect disappears, in keeping with the “three degrees of influence” rule of social network contagion.

Is loneliness discussed in the Bible?

Because loneliness is part of the human condition, it is not surprising that several persons in the Bible experienced loneliness. In [1 Kings 19](#), the prophet Elijah appears to have suffered from a

sense of social isolation that made him almost suicidal. Paul likely experienced loneliness, as when he tells Timothy, “At my first defense, no one came to my support, but everyone deserted me” ([1 Tim. 4:16](#)). Jesus also appears to have been experiencing loneliness in the garden of Gethsemane on the night before his crucifixion ([Matt. 26:36-46](#)) and while on the cross ([Matt. 27:46](#)).

David also expressed his feelings of loneliness in the Psalms. In [Psalm 25:16](#) he says, “Turn to me and be gracious to me, for I am lonely and afflicted,” and in [Psalm 142:4](#) he says, “Look and see, there is no one at my right hand; no one is concerned for me. I have no refuge; no one cares for my life.”

What can Christians do about loneliness?

*Remember you have a friend in Jesus* — In [Ephesians 2:14-17](#), Paul says, “For this reason I kneel before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name. I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith.” Never forget that you have a friend in Jesus ([John 15:15](#)), and that the Spirit dwells within you to give you strength to handle this season of loneliness

“It would be cruel to suggest that human friendship is irrelevant once one has befriended by Christ,” Dane Ortlund writes in *Gentle and Lowly*. “God has made us for fellowship, for union on heart, with other people. Everyone gets lonely—including introverts.”

“But Christ’s heart for us means that he will be our never-failing friend no matter what friends we do or do not enjoy on earth,” Ortlund adds. “He offers us friendship that gets underneath the pain of our loneliness. While that pain does not go away, its sting is made fully bearable by the far deeper friendship of Jesus.”

*Find your family* — [Psalms 68:6](#) tells us, “God sets the lonely in families” (NIV). If you’re a follower of Christ, God has set you “with God’s people and also members of his household” ([Eph. 2:19](#)). Because of your union with Christ, you are spiritually connected to a family of brothers and sisters who will love you and be with you for all eternity. Find your family by embedding yourself in a community of believers.

*Reach out* — If you feel lonely, reach out to those around you and let them know. If you suspect someone you know is lonely reach out to them and let them know you want to help. Don’t put it off or make excuses about why you don’t have the time, ability, or

attention. When people are in need, Christians should be rushing to help for we are called by Jesus to love our neighbor.

*Stephen Ministers are especially trained to come alongside you to listen, care, encourage, and provide emotional and spiritual support during a time of loneliness. There are several ways to make arrangements to talk to a Stephen Minister.*

(1) Complete this confidential Stephen Ministry form. Bob Bohler or Deb Williams will then contact you.

OR

(2) Call directly: Pastor Bob Bohler (706-549-9284) or Stephen Ministry Referrals Coordinator Deb Williams (706-247-9000).