

## Alone but not Lonely<sup>1</sup>

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Loneliness is an existential and inescapable human condition feared by all. Wherever we look we find loneliness amidst crowds. It is hard to come by a person who has not experienced loneliness.

Nothing comes with us, nothing goes with us; we are born alone, we travel alone and we die alone. We cannot eat, sleep or share our experience, our joys or sorrows with anyone else. We can only share information, but not understanding.

Such is our human condition and this state of affairs will continue until the individual merges into the divine. This is what Plotinus calls *"the flight of the alone to the Alone"*

There could be no poverty greater than loneliness, no fear greater than the feeling of being isolated, not being wanted, not loved, not appreciated. Some existential philosophers even consider loneliness as the essential condition of humanness. *Vedanta*, naturally, denies this view. All our struggle from birth to death is to accept, cope and overcome this dreaded loneliness through family, society, work, prayer, meditation, etc.

### So what is loneliness?

Loneliness is a mental state where a person experiences an intense feeling of emptiness and isolation, of not being wanted, of being cut off from everything. It is a state in which life appears to be meaningless and purposeless. It is a state where a person is incapable of deriving any joy from life and, often, feels like committing suicide.

It is normal to feel lonely at times. But when loneliness becomes intense, constant and brings on depression and pessimism, it turns into a dreadful disease.

Loneliness should not, however, be equated with being alone. One can be alone and feel joyful and fulfilled. And one can be intensely lonely in the midst of crowds.

*"Language... has created the word 'loneliness' to express the pain of being alone. And it has created the word 'solitude' to express the glory of being alone."*

Paul Tillich (Theologian and Philosopher)

### Types of loneliness

Loneliness is of many types.

1. There is a simple and temporary type of loneliness. Often when one

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is removed from one's surroundings one feels lonely. When people lose their loved ones or partners they can be overwhelmed with loneliness. Or when a person fails to pass an examination or fails to secure a job, he may feel lonely. This state does not last long and can easily be remedied.

2. One may feel lonely when one feels misunderstood and not appreciated. This is especially applicable to creative people like artists, scientists, great writers, and also patriots and statesmen; these people often feel lonely, because there are few with whom they can talk meaningfully.

Spiritual giants can experience loneliness sometimes. Swamis like Shivananda and Brahmananda used to feel sad, because there was nobody with whom they can joyfully share their experiences. (Even Sri Ramakrishna felt it sometimes! A joyful person, often, wishes to share his joy with all!)

3. Another type of loneliness is the feeling that one has no friends and relatives, and that no one loves me, and I have no one to relate to. Such people feel forlorn and depressed, and often entertain thoughts of suicide.

4. Old age and chronic diseases can and do often bring on the feelings of loneliness. In fact these days the aged and elderly suffer intensely from feelings of loneliness in spite of all the facilities provided for them.

5. Then there is a special type of loneliness. It is the intense longing of the soul to become united with the divine within. *Vedanta* tells us each soul is potentially divine. This potential divinity will not allow any individual to rest until the soul is merged in the Universal. This spiritual longing may not manifest for a long time. But it is bound to come in every person's life at some point of time and make them lead a spiritual life. Sincere spiritual aspirants feel that in this whole world they are alone, no one belongs to them and they belong to no one. Though this feeling is categorised as loneliness, this is not a disease, nor a cause for distress. On the contrary this is a most necessary and desirable condition for spiritual growth. Without this feeling of loneliness none can advance in spiritual life. As May Sarton put it so beautifully: "*Loneliness is the poverty of self; solitude is the richness of self*"

Loneliness is a dreadful disease. Its causes, effects, and cure will be discussed in future editorials.

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Loneliness is a painful and negative state of mind. There is no one who is free from it, no one can be free from it. We all suffer from it for a shorter or longer period of time. Some philosophers consider 'aleness' as the very essence of being human. It means that being unable to be alone is to lose one's humanness itself. Even animals (pets, especially dogs when separated from their owners) are seen to suffer from loneliness! Saints alone are exceptions. They never feel lonely as they experience the presence of God at all times.

In our last editorial we discussed what loneliness is. In this

editorial we will discuss the causes and effects of loneliness. Loneliness results not from one but from many causes. These causes can be roughly divided into five categories: existential, external, psychological, social and spiritual.

### **Existential causes**

Loneliness is a constitutional element of existence. We are born and die alone. Each of us sleeps, eats, experiences pleasure and pain, health and sickness all by himself. At the most others can make conditions better or worse.

Birth, adolescence, youth, middle age, old age, and death (What *Vedanta* calls *shat vikaras*, the six changes) are inescapable realities of life. We gladly accept adolescence and youth but, inexplicably, many of us suffer from mid-life crisis. Menopause is a painful period of transition for many women. Old age affects almost all of us. Death and bereavement can also cause loneliness. All these events also bring about some external changes in our life. But the effects of these are also usually temporary and we learn to accept them soon.

Some of us cannot escape physical and mental disability. These can, and usually do, bring about some amount of discrimination and being looked down upon. Being treated as 'different' by others often makes people feel even lonelier.

### **External and Social causes**

Loneliness, definitely, has become a major problem of our times. In the past, families were either joint or typically larger, and very few people lived alone. Today millions live alone. Retirement and unemployment are also common causes of loneliness. To move away from one's country, family and familiar surroundings can lead to a sense of loneliness.

The stresses of modern life such as changes in employment practice, a rising divorce rate, and the fact that people easily move away to far off places, have caused many to suffer from feelings of loneliness. These actions give us much freedom. But this freedom has a negative effect. It leaves us without solid grounding in, or commitment to a family, a place or a community.

Thanks to advancement in medicine people are living longer. A new word 'Geriatrics,' i.e. the branch of medicine that focuses on health care of the elderly, has been coined. Due to modern social conditions many elderly people are forced to live in old people's homes. Though otherwise well taken care of, many of them experience intense feelings of loneliness. This is due to lack of love and affection from their families.

### **Psychological causes**

Along with the advancements in science and technology, massive inequalities, racial and social discrimination are also on the rise. Companies are growing bigger and multi-nationals are edging out or even snuffing smaller

and individual companies. This gives rise to intense competition and attempts to outdo others. Competition and success are the two great diseases of modern social life reminding us of the 'survival of the fittest.' Naturally these lead to feelings of being unwelcome, fear, sadness and failure.

Lack of purpose in one's life can also bring on feelings of loneliness. Low self-esteem, especially, when one compares oneself with (the seeming success of) one's colleagues can give rise to feelings of frustration and loneliness.

A survey of mental health problems in the USA found that social phobia was the third most common problem, after depression and alcohol dependence. People who are anxious, depressed, or trapped in addictive behaviour, may have low self-esteem and feel guilty and worthless. This can lead them to shun the company of other people and cut themselves off from their families and friends. This in turn leads to loneliness.

Fear of fear is a terrible experience! Along with other effects, anticipating the fear of loneliness can lead to deeper despair.

### **Spiritual Causes**

The root cause of any form of loneliness can be traced to the neglect of spiritual life. What is spirituality? It is "The Flight of the Alone to the Alone," as Plotinus puts it. The inability to be alone and enjoy the company of one's own higher Self is to be unspiritual and unhappy.

*Vedanta* teaches us that man's personality is trichotomous i.e., soul, mind and body. We suffer if body and mind are sick; we suffer even more if we neglect the spiritual side of our life.

In the past religion provided comfort for most people. Unfortunately the rise of science and technology has made many lose faith in God and moral values. Many of us are blissfully ignorant that neglect of spiritual life can leave us with feelings of profound emptiness and loneliness.

How do we know this is true? If we have, more or less, all that life can give us and still continue to feel empty and lonely inside ourselves, the cause is undoubtedly spiritual. If we do not lead a spiritual life, we definitely feel an emptiness in spite of having an abundance of material goods.

### **Effects of Loneliness**

Loneliness can lead to varying degrees of despair, anxiety, sadness, boredom, inability to function effectively in any given situation, etc. Loneliness and boredom are closely allied emotions. These emotions must be understood and dealt with properly. Otherwise they can lead to suicide, or all sorts of criminal activities, even to murder. Many antisocial activities, including crime, can be traced to intense feelings of boredom.

We can see from the above that there is no option but to deal with our feelings of loneliness.

The cure for loneliness will be discussed in our next editorial.

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Loneliness can wreck our lives. But if we deal with it in the right way, it will yield invaluable fruits: physical, intellectual and spiritual. In this issue we will discuss how we can do it.

Loneliness can be overcome, but it needs strong determination and definite practice of some of the steps outlined below.

### **Accepting loneliness**

The first step in overcoming loneliness is by understanding its inevitability and accepting it. We live and die alone - this is an inescapable fact of existence. When we begin to accept it, a new vision of life opens before us. With this acceptance also dawns a new urge to make creative use of it. It is only then that our true potential begins to manifest. When we accept the existential condition of our loneliness, the first thing we notice is that our fears and anxieties start to diminish slowly.

Sri Ramakrishna used to advise his devotees to go into solitude every now and then. His words have deep significance. Most of us fear solitude, for we fear to be alone. Solitary confinement is considered as one of the worst forms of punishment, for one is forced to confront oneself and few can stand it.

What may be the cause of this fear? Perhaps the ego fears the loss of its identity. The ego, for its support, usually depends heavily on nationality, religion, language, culture, job-status, social position etc. When these seem to be lost in solitude, the ego fears for its very existence. Just as a baby seems to be lost without its mother, so also the ego experiences terrible fear in the absence of all these. If I am not so and so, then what am I? Part of our fear of loneliness is our fear of losing our self, or our sense of who we are. But by accepting the fact that we are alone we lessen our fear of loneliness.

### **A definite goal in life**

We must have a definite goal in life. The secret of a mature personality is to have a goal and purpose in life. A definite goal makes life meaningful and also defines one's daily activities. A person with a goal in life and a set routine of activities can cope with loneliness better than one who has none.

### **Physical exercise**

Surprisingly those who exercise regularly have less problems with loneliness. Probably this is due to the changes that occur in our bodies as a result of exercising. Swami Vivekananda used to say strong bodied people have more control over their emotions.

### **A good hobby**

An enjoyable hobby is a good antidote to stress and loneliness.

Especially hobbies like music and gardening can uplift our minds and make life's journey much more pleasant.

### **Service**

Many rush into feverish activities or cook up other schemes for avoiding loneliness. All these escape tactics will not help us. They are not only counter-productive, but can actually exacerbate our loneliness once the excitement is over!

But true service-oriented activities can help much. Swami Vivekananda was a great advocate of service to God in the form of humanity. The Ramakrishna Order was founded with the twin motto of one's own salvation and the welfare of the world. His concept of service goes far beyond the spiritual and merely social realm. Genuine service needs a good and loving heart. Love and goodness, as we know, are the greatest purifiers of the ego! They act as antidotes to negative feelings like depression and despair, loneliness included.

True love unites the lover with the object of his love. No one can be loving and selfish at the same time. As such one of the best remedies to loneliness is serving society, looking upon it as the manifestation of God. These days many opportunities exist for those willing to render service. One can join an organisation (and there are many who welcome volunteers) or a voluntary group. Or visit old-age homes, hospices, etc. and spend some time with people who feel lonely and left out. If one is unable to render service, one can help organisations not only financially but in many other ways.

### **Spiritual practice**

As we mentioned earlier, the root cause of loneliness is spiritual.. We feel lonely, because we are ignorant of our true nature. No matter how fulfilling our life might be socially, intellectually or morally, our heart yearns for the divine. This yearning we feel is deep, real and it comes from the depths of ourselves. Spiritual loneliness is really a deep void within ourselves, a hollowness that cannot be filled with anything other than spirituality.

Swami Vivekananda put his finger right on the problem when he said: "Each soul is potentially divine." Whether we know it or not all of us are trying to manifest our forgotten divinity. Any halt in this process is what makes us feel lonely. Even a little regular practice of spiritual disciplines like prayer, meditation, etc. goes a long way in coping with loneliness. Sri Krishna says: "Even a little practice of this Yoga protects one from great fear." (*Bhagavad Gita 2.40*)

Simple prayer can uplift the mind to a higher realm. Whenever we detect feelings of depression or desolation, we can lift ourselves up through simple whole-hearted prayer. Similarly regular readings from the holy scriptures also can help us a great deal. Scriptures are the recording's of saints and sages. There is a great power in them. Even mechanical reading or

hearing of scriptures can lift our minds up into a higher state.

There are many types of spiritual practises. One of the most effective of these is the practice of the presence of God. The well-known book *Practice of the Presence of God* by Brother Lawrence is very reassuring and helpful. One should try to feel the presence of God in all places, at all times and under all circumstances.

*Japa* or constant remembrance of one's *mantram* or a holy word is highly effective. *Japam* should, of course, be done with full awareness and love. Through practice one can do *japam* almost constantly.

*Vipassana* or the meditation taught by many Buddhists is an excellent practice. (Belief in a God is not a necessary condition for this practice. Buddha did not speak of a God.) In *Vipassana* one is taught to pay close attention to all that goes on in the body and mind. One is advised to watch one's breath, postures, thoughts that rush in one's mind etc. Practice of *Vipassana* meditation is an excellent remedy for loneliness.

### **The importance of solitude**

Ours is a busy and extroverted civilisation. Here the cultivation of solitude is discouraged. But cultivation of solitude is most important if we want to have peace, joy and fulfilment.

Sri Ramakrishna often advised his devotees to go into solitude. He said: "It is most necessary to go into solitude now and then and think of God. To fix the mind on God is very difficult, in the beginning, unless one practises meditation in solitude. To meditate, you should withdraw within yourself or retire to a secluded corner or to the forest." The *Bhagavad Gita* also advises all aspirants on a number of qualities which a seeker of self-knowledge must cultivate. One such quality is resorting to solitude and turning away from the society of men.

Solitude is an excellent way of cultivating noble thoughts. "They are never alone that are accompanied by noble thoughts." (Sir Philip Sidney)

Some of the greatest creations in literature, art, and music (not to speak of spirituality) that the world has known were only conceived in moments of profound solitude. Kierkegaard speaks of relating to one's own self by willing to be oneself. This is undoubtedly a heroic task.

Solitude is the handmaid of the interior life. In solitude alone we can discover our true Self. Without quiet and aloneness, it is not possible to develop an interior life. And without an interior life there is nothing to speak to us but our own emptiness and loneliness.

Loneliness is an existential fact of life. But we need not be lonely or suffer from it. We have outlined some of the best ways of coping with it. Loneliness is a gift of God. Through proper use of it we can become Blessed and Fulfilled. □