



Men and Loneliness

Laurie McLeod, Artist, Author, Presenter and Entrepreneur

Stephen J. is a big bear of a man in his late sixties. Never married, he is retired but picks up the occasional odd job helping out his neighbors. He reports that he was terribly lonely in his 30's and 40's, when he felt intense social pressure to be married. Now that he is older, he feels better, likes his life and rarely feels lonely. He does have a platonic relationship with a female friend who lives down the street. He sees her regularly and that feels supportive yet free. Life is good.

Richard D. is a social worker in his late forties who recently went through a ravaging split with his partner of seven years. He was helping to raise his partner's two sons and when the adult relationship broke up, he also lost his relationship with the boys. "I used to have a family and now I don't," he laments. He states that he is profoundly lonely.

David R. is a scientist and is happily married. He says that he feels lonely when he is not connecting with others, or not feeling great about himself. Even though he has a partner, he says he still feels lonely at times but the feeling can be helped simply by reaching out to his wife or to a friend. He has been part of a men's group for 22 years and has found much kinship there.

Although their names have been changed, every man described above is a real person with a real heart and a real experience of loneliness. Although each man's situation is unique, their lives speak to a larger trend that sociologists are charting – the rise in loneliness in men's lives. The dangers of becoming socially isolated are clear. Richard S. Schwartz, a psychiatrist in Cambridge notes that loneliness has been linked to a number of

serious health problems and can be just as detrimental as obesity, smoking, alcohol abuse and high blood pressure. While that's the bad news, the good news is that having strong social connections really can support heart health, the immune system and emotional stability.

What is loneliness and where does it come from?

The answers are varied and boil down to each individual and their nature. Some psychologists believe that loneliness originates when people get disconnected from themselves. For men, this often begins in late childhood when they stop paying attention to and acting on their feelings. As adults, responsibilities such as work, family and attending to the needs of others often distract men from addressing their feelings and dealing with their loneliness.

Environment and genetics both play roles. Research shows that men who had strong attachments to their caregivers when young are less likely to experience loneliness... and vice versa. Genetics likely plays a part in determining the level of connection that we need, though of course it is fluid— we feel differently at different times.

Begin to shift the loneliness in your lives.

Go within. Reach out. Keep it regular.

Make more time for connecting with yourself. Take time each day to meditate or walk in the woods or simply be in a restful, solitary place. It doesn't have to be a big time drain. Consider taking even five minutes at the beginning or the end of the work day to sit and just notice your breath, check in with yourself and find out how you are feeling. It may seem counter intuitive to be alone when you feel lonely, but being alone is not the same thing as loneliness.

Reach out. Call a friend. Make a date night with your partner. Join a group activity in your community. Crucial to men's well being is friendships with other men. Join a men's group. Going to religious or spiritual services is a source of great support for many. "Meet ups" can be a fun and simple way to be with a group of like-minded people. A British study confirmed that men connect best when experiencing a shared activity. So do something that interests you that you can do with others.

Keep it regular. Make a schedule so this kind of connection is built into your life on a routine basis. This constancy is part of the reason bowling leagues and community softball groups are so successful, because they happen on a regular reliable schedule. You want this reliability in your life, so that times of rich social connection are built in and always there.

For online advice, support and inspiration visit thegoodmenproject.com. Or better still, pick up the phone and make an plan to meet up with someone you care about. It is an essential gift of joy you can make to yourself anytime.

*If you are experiencing serious loneliness, there are professionals who can talk with you anonymously and confidentially. Call the toll free MIIA EAP: 800-451-1834 or the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline 1-800-273-TALK (8255).