

Short Review

Loneliness or Solitude: How Are They Different?

Ami Rokach *

York University, Canada; E-Mail: rokach@yorku.ca

* **Correspondence:** Ami Rokach; E-Mail: rokach@yorku.ca

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Abstract

Loneliness, social isolation, aloneness, and solitude may be used interchangeably by some who may miss the difference between them. Loneliness is the experience of being alone, or perceiving that one is alone and unimportant to others. Solitude is being geographically isolated out of one's choice. Loneliness is not a feeling, but a multidimensional construct which is expressed cognitively, behaviorally and affectively. Solitude is also reviewed and a clear distinction between loneliness and solitude is established. The paper examines both constructs and highlights the emotional, cognitive and behavioral manifestations of each, and how solitude may assist us in facing loneliness.

Keywords

Loneliness; solitude; alienation; isolation; consequences of loneliness

The recent evolution of the internet, smart phones, and social media have interfered with our ability to connect and work with others, and as a result, some prefer connecting with their virtual communities (e.g., those found on Facebook, Twitter, Reddit, etc.) than the communities of the real world [1]. Research shows that more and more people report that they do not have a close person



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to be close to, resulting in loss of social ties [2]. Cross cultural research pointed out that social connections suffer and are sometimes diminished, when it is possible for people to connect virtually [1, 3]. Exploring the consequences of loneliness Cacioppo et al. [4] found that it has increased lately and is associated with less than good mental and physical health. As Victor [5] noted, loneliness was always present in humans' life since humans are social animals and as such, depend on their social relations for wellbeing. Loneliness has been conceptualized in two main ways. First, is the one seeing loneliness as a result of unfulfilled social needs and lack of connection to others. The other is the "cognitive approach" which posits that it is our perception, and not lack of social relations which heralds our perception as being lonely and disconnected from others [6].

1. The Toxic Effects of Loneliness

Undoubtedly, bouts of loneliness are familiar to most of us, which may occur periodically and may resolve on their own, or after we take some appropriate action like seeking social contacts. However, prolonged or chronic loneliness may be associated with significant pathology which may be associated with various detrimental effects, inconsistent sleep, cognitive disruptions, compromised immune system, increased blood pressure increased inflammation and even Alzheimer's disease prognosis [7-10]. As Moustakas [11] observed, loneliness is an existential *experience*, and as such it has cognitive, emotional and behavioral manifestations like all other experiences that humans undergo, though these are mostly negative:

Hawkely [12] found that loneliness is associated with a range of adverse health outcomes, such as effects on mortality, morbidity, health behaviors and health-care utilization. Additionally, loneliness was seen to be linked with increased risk of cardiovascular disease, metabolic syndrome, functional disability, dementia and mild cognitive impairment, as well as depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation.

Valtorta et al. [13] based on a meta-analysis on 11 studies involving victims of cardiac events and stroke found loneliness, was associated with 29% increase in coronary heart disease, and 32% increase in the risk of a stroke. Loneliness is known to be related to depression, which naturally lowers the individual's interest in his health, or alternatively in improving it [14, 15].

1.1 Affective Features of Loneliness

Heinrich and Gullone [16] posited that loneliness is commonly related to negative and upsetting sentiments (see also Rokach [17]) which may include feeling undesirable and dismissed [18], and seeing oneself as unattractive [19, 20].

1.2 Cognitive Features

Low self-esteem appears to be central attribute of the lonely [21]. Research indicated that low self-esteem and loneliness have influence each other (see Rokach & Sha'ked [22]). Accordingly, lonely individuals see themselves as useless, ugly, unlovable, and socially rejected [16]. These self-perceptions may intensify if loneliness becomes a chronic condition. An association was found between Loneliness and self-consciousness, self-focus and hyper-sensitivity to feelings of rejection [23]. Unfortunately, many lonely people feel powerless to address their loneliness ([16]; see also

Danneel et al. [24]). Such a situation creates a negative feedback loop of misery, worthlessness, and further loneliness.

1.3 The Behavioral Features of Loneliness

The lonely exhibit social inhibition and ineffective social skills [25, 26]. They are less inclined to face social challenges, may not be assertive and have inept social skills [27, 28]. Interestingly, we commonly see that the lonely engage in the inappropriate use of self-disclosure which frequently sabotages their attempts to get close to others [29]. The helplessness experienced by the lonely results in an inefficient approach to coping with stress [25, 30].

Cacioppo & Patrick [31] observed that as the individual becomes more motivated to engage in social connection and validation, they become demanding of attention and social involvement. Interestingly, lonely individuals are more critical of others and behave in a non-inviting manner, which may exacerbate their loneliness [31, 32].

2. Sociocultural Context

Loneliness does not discriminate Since anyone may experience it [33]. So, who are those who feel detached, distanced and socially isolated? What are their feelings and their attributes? Pappano [34] noted that “we are losing touch. And we don’t even realize it” (p. 1). Others suggested that the lonely often watch other people, in malls, stores, or on T.V. ([35]; see also Rokach & Sha’ked [22]). Yet, as research has indicated, while we may all experience loneliness, everyone experiences it in a different way [1, 16].

Most lonely people do not, easily, admit even to themselves, that they are truly lonely [36]. Interestingly, a commonly held misconception is that loneliness only impacts the old, disabled, financially disadvantaged, and the delinquents of society. It is clear a disadvantage to not acknowledge loneliness, as it creates an obstacle in addressing loneliness (see Rokach [37]). I have seen people and clients in my practice, having little difficulty describing their family problems, traumas and even mental health concerns, but they are quite reluctant to talk about being lonely. The explanation for it may have been provided by Schultz [32] who wrote that “To be alone is to be different. To be different is to be alone, and to be in the interior of this fatal circle is to be lonely. To be lonely is to have failed” (p. 15). There is, unmistakably, a shame to being lonely [38] as society has traditionally never approved of individuals who gripe about their problems.

3. Approaches to Loneliness

The literature indicates that at present, people are more isolated than they were in past generations [2, 39]. In the first quarter of the 21st century, we are also approaching a kind of living where virtual reality is satisfying and in many ways replacing the social needs of the younger generation, reducing their need and ability to socially connect with others. While in the past people were born, lived and died in the same village, this day and age people constantly move between neighborhoods, cities, countries and sometimes even continents in order to satisfy needs of employment, health, financial reasons [40].

It is becoming increasingly more common for the lonely to watch television and engage in superficial watching of their favorite actors and celebrities on the screen. Similarly, the internet is

playing now a major role in developing friendships, especially for young adults, to a point where virtual connection are almost replacing real life ones [41, 42]. As a result, there is a proliferation of cybersex, cyber intimacy, and digitally “intimate” relationships in tandem with decreased social contact (see Song et al. [43]).

3.1 So, What Is Actually Loneliness?

Loneliness has been defined, over time in a variety of ways. One of the more notable contributions was that of Fromm-Reichmann’s [44], who wrote about and described it as a significant social issue. Weiss [45], saw loneliness as composed of two ‘kinds’: the emotional or the social type. Emotional loneliness resulted when an individual has no intimate relationship feeling isolated and anxious, while those who experienced boredom and were, consequently, unfulfilled due to inappropriate social networks which were insufficient to meet their social needs.

Cognitive theorists held a different view of loneliness which they considered to be the consequence of frustrating social relations which are frustrating the person’s expectations and which contributed to psychological distress [46, 47]. Importantly, this approach highlights the idea that loneliness can indeed be experienced while we are alone, but we could be lonely surrounded by others. Romantic relationships could also be the ground of intense loneliness leaving both individuals feeling a lack of connection and the crushing anguish of loneliness can still be clearly felt [22, 48]. It is quite clear that just having others present is not enough to ward off loneliness. Our social needs indicate that people need to support, trust, interact and motivate one another as a way to reduce loneliness [4].

Typically, it is accepted that when one is geographically separated from others, feeling alone, seeing oneself as disliked and neglected, will bring about what we term loneliness. In our analysis of the literature, there emerge six themes characteristic of loneliness’ experiences: 1. Loss or separation give rise to loneliness; 2. Loneliness may start in childhood and continue throughout one’s life; 3. Loneliness was found to be associated with lack of purpose or meaning; 4. As a result of the pain it causes, loneliness is hard to endure; 5. Once lonely, individuals find significance and connection; and, 6. Loneliness may encourage personal growth.

Regardless of one’s theoretical basis, loneliness has three distinctive characteristics:

1. Loneliness is central to being human.
2. While all people may feel, intermittently, lonely it is a personal experience that may differ from one person to another. Loneliness, is always painful, agonizing and troubling.

Put simply, to be human is to experience loneliness. Loneliness was described as a non-dominant or recessive trait, which is expressed openly when the necessary conditions are present, such unfulfilled need for affection, lack of belongingness, alienation, or even the philosophical pondering of death [49].

4. My Own Research

Rokach [50] was not keen on the conventional methods that aimed at measuring and actually validating one’s loneliness, and launched a decades long research project that showed that loneliness is a multidimensional experience which is experienced subjectively and is not similar across the board. Rokach’s research pointed out that loneliness is a multidimensional experience which was found to have five different dimensions [17]. Each dimension, independently, may cause

psychological disturbance. However, when we experience two or more of these elements together, we always experience it as loneliness.

4.1 Emotional Distress

Emotional distress, with its inner turmoil and anguish was found to be the most salient dimension of loneliness. Those experiencing the pain of loneliness describe feeling aimless, anxious, and fearful.

4.2 Social Inadequacy and Alienation

This aspect of loneliness highlights the perception and *not necessarily the actual*, social isolation that is associated with the lonely's own perceptions that they are not as good or worthy as those around them, or in other words self-devaluation. Perhaps counterintuitively, once they are convinced of their low value to others, they step back from others, and do not let people get close or intimate with them, and thus if they do not allow others close to them, they believe that they cannot be rejected.

4.3 Interpersonal Isolation

Interpersonal isolation, or geographical distance from others, is what connotes to most people the experience of loneliness. Loneliness results from the perceived absence of social support that we might experience when we feel we can't associate and depend on others. It is similar to feeling that we have been overlooked, undesired, or forgotten. And still, these people crave friendships or romantic commitment which we all crave. Situational factors which may give rise to this dimension of loneliness may include ill health, low socioeconomic status, and little contact with one's community.

As Olds & Schwartz [51] put it, humans are social creatures in which our biological survival relies upon social connections, as our ability to connect is part of our DNA, so to speak; it is a biological need for us. If we examine the issue evolutionarily, humans are helpless at birth and are dependent for long periods on their caregivers. However, dependence alone is not enough, for a bond with others is needed for us to navigate through the complex and dangerous world.

4.4 Self-Alienation

Self-alienating behavior, is commonly connected with significant emotional problems, is actually a result of one's deep agony. When the pain of loneliness is insurmountable, one's reaction may include dissociation, estrangement, and/or detachment from the self, all in an attempt to minimize the pain of alienation. Another mechanism present here, which is also linked to depersonalization, is denial. Simply denying to oneself that one is lonely, and that may be helpful for the short run, but running away from the realization that one is lonely and in pain cannot be helpful is the person is looking to remedy or change the situation.

4.5 Growth and Discovery

Loneliness is painful, and we, commonly, do not expect to find any redeeming qualities to it. However, it may contribute to one's personal growth and development. Loneliness can encourage

one's self- reflection which may lead to one's re-evaluation of their social world, priorities and reflect on their mistakes while planning to correct them [11, 52, 53]. Loneliness can transform our suffering into a new, better 'us', which can be better and more effective socially. These moments can also lead to newfound creativity, personal strength, and new meaning attached to life that was not there previously [52].

4.6 Loneliness Anxiety

Moustakas [54] articulated a distinction between loneliness anxiety and existential loneliness. Existential loneliness espouses that life is a lonesome journey: we are born alone and die alone. In contrast, loneliness anxiety, is the intense fear of reexperiencing loneliness, which the person remembers as having caused pain and agony.

We can look at hunger as an analogy to loneliness anxiety. While most of us simply eat when we are hungry, those who've experienced starvation can become dysregulated with food. Consequently, they do not wait for hunger pangs but are obsessed with making sure that they are not starved again, thus buying and storing much more food than they need. These individuals have become anxious over experiencing hunger again, and their hoarding food lessens their anxiety toward this possibility.

A similar situation can be found with loneliness. Similar to those who are frantically trying to avoid hunger, those with loneliness anxiety are obsessed with not only avoiding loneliness, but with reducing their anxiety about developing it [11]. Consequently, lonely individuals experience unrewarding social engagements, and display clinging attachment to those responsive to this behavior.

5. Solitude

Although the words alone and lonely come from the same English root, meaning "all one," they are not synonyms, but could be complementary. Being lonely *may* involve being socially isolated, but that is not a necessary requirement, as one may experience loneliness while being surrounded by people or even loved ones. To clarify, one may be alone physically and not be lonely. Activities that people engage in while on their own, in solitude, include daydreaming, self-reflection, reliving past memories, or planning an upcoming trip are all examples of aloneness that is unrelated to the presence of others and is *not* loneliness. Therefore, being alone, could have positive effect on our emotional and cognitive wellbeing.

As we mentioned, previously, lonely people are not necessarily separated from others geographically. Being alone is an objective reality of being away from others. Essentially, one can be alone and not lonely. For instance, when one is day dreaming, or thinks about a coming trip, it denotes being alone without being lonely. Therefore, being alone is neither negative or positive. Cacioppo et al. [8], likened solitude to the *glory* of aloneness, while he saw loneliness as the *pain* of aloneness. Solitude enables those who engage in it, to be involved in self-exploration and creativity and allows us to be at peace, ponder, meditate write, create, and thus getting a chance to revitalize, reenergize, and reinvigorate [55].

As the cognitive approach to loneliness highlighted, the deciding factor of how we experience our situation, is not what actually occurs, but our perception of it. We will, undoubtedly, experience loneliness when we are alone and desire human companionship. However, solitude is being alone

without people around us. We can find immense joy and fulfilment in isolation and solitude, which we may want at that particular time, allows us time to get away from the incessant barrage of everyday tasks, and inconveniences. Solitude allows us to reflect, engage in meditation and write. Spending time with others is valuable and needed, but solitude is our time, that may help us reinvigorate (see also Cacioppo & Patrick [31]). Thus, solitude offers us the freedom from the demands of others, and allows us to attend to our needs as well as enjoy the benefits of a relaxed exiastance and a clear thinking which is unhindered by the pain of loneliness [55]. Solitude may ease the great tension and emotional upheaval of loneliness, as a result of a change of our mindset and cognitive approach to the experience.

The words alone and lonely are derived from the same English root, which means "all one," but they are two different concepts, we highlighted. We can meet lonely people who are miserable being surrounded by family or friends with whom they do not have good relationships, and on the other hand are those who live alone but are happy with their social support network and their meaningful social intercourse. If their time to be alone is one that they chose and accepted, they can benefit enormously from it.

Solitude being so important for our self-development and relaxation, it is thus no wonder that it is at the center of various spiritual traditions like Buddhism, for instance [56]. Research on the n\benefits of solitude, i.e. Long [57], found that solitude is often preceded by stress, a felt need to examine one's wishes, needs, and priorities—solving a problem, reflecting on the past, or preparing for the future. As a result of solitude, people reported increased self-understanding, self-renewal, creativity, and spiritual growth [50, 58].

Several religious and mythological figures have spent significant amounts of time in solitude, including Moses, Jesus, Mohammed, Buddha, Guru Nanak, etc. to name a few, Jesus' journey into the wilderness, Buddha's meditation under the Bo Tree, and Odysseus's 10-year voyage into his homeland were all enlightening experiences that happened during solitude.

Solitude was associated with great works of major writers such as Kafka, Gibbon, Rilke, and philosophers like Kant, Hume and Wittgenstein [59]. The noted American poet and philosopher Henry David Thoreau, willingly isolated himself to the Walden Pond for a period of more than two years in order to seek solitude and write, claiming that being away from regular life filled him with creative energy and motivation [60]. Albert Camus (1970, in Tick [61]) mused in his novel "The Plague", that in order to enhance self-discovery, we need to retreat from the world of work and face our own nature. Solitude is appreciated across cultures and across time, as Andre' [62] commented "As part of a rite of passage into adulthood, tribal cultures in North and South America, Africa, Asia, and Australia have sent adolescents alone into the wilderness to seek wisdom. Individuals who undertake these rites expect to grow beyond their ordinary selves, and often they do have unique experiences" (p. 13).

Moustakas [63] famously spoke of the healing and growth-promoting process of solitude, for it enables us to access our untapped potential which may lead to greater understanding about ourselves and the world. Perceiving their aloneness as solitude may enable lonesome individuals to manage the depression that lonely people complain about [64]. Solitude relieves the individual of dependence on others for company, which may increase one's sense of personal control [65]. Solitude was shown to relieve the individual of dependence on others for company, and that may contribute to one's sense of personal control and reduced occurrence of loneliness [50]. Solitude is moreover one of the recommended strategies to cope with loneliness [64] as it can have positive

emotional and cognitive effect on the lonely person who is struggling with pain. Consequently, enhancing solitary skills has been recommended as part of the therapy offered to the lonely. Solitude, allows us to care for ourselves by ourselves. We may get a better, deeper understanding of our needs as our increased self-knowledge contributes to a more focused and fulfilling life, and the better equipped we will be to have accepting and loving relationships with others [66].

6. Loneliness and Solitude

Both loneliness and solitude address being alone, but it is our perception and understanding of these experiences which distinguishes the two. When we desire the company of others and cannot fulfill it, we end up feeling forgotten, irrelevant, and abandoned. On the other those of us who want solitude do so because they prefer and require being alone in order to do what they may do best alone: reading, writing, reflecting, meditating or getting in touch with nature. Where loneliness is painful and results in various negative repercussions, solitude is often described as invigorating and revitalizing.

7. Conclusion

In closing, we have shown that loneliness is a multidimensional construct. Its five dimensions include emotional upheaval, a sense of inadequacy, self and interpersonal isolation, and a markedly changed awareness of oneself [50]. Loneliness can be experienced by every person from every walk of life sometimes in their lives. The type of loneliness experienced determines what we will experience. If, for example, loneliness was experienced due to a personal predisposition that may be related to early attachment disruptions what we termed essential loneliness, or alternatively due to a reaction to one's environment and life changes (referred to as transient loneliness). But regardless of its cause, loneliness is always associated with excruciating pain which impacts one's self-esteem [21]. Adding to the pain suffered by the lonely, is societal prejudice and stigmatization of the lonely, and which enhances their pain, shame, and fear of further rejection.

Loneliness can, sometimes, result in positive changes for the individual and spur personal growth [11, 52]. Solitude, on the other hand, is always associated with positive outcomes. Solitude can be described as the luxury of escaping a demanding and stimuli-filled environment. What differentiates these two experiences is our perception which will decide whether we experience pain and dejection or the increased ability to experience and engage in intimacy, discovery, creativity, and spirituality [55].

Author Contributions

The author did all the research work for this study.

Competing Interests

The authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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