

Loneliness in our Relationships

If there is anything positive that's come out from this current Covid pandemic, it's that issues of loneliness and isolation experienced by so many, especially during this last year, are firmly at the centre of our awareness. Organisations such as Campaign to End Loneliness believe that people of all ages need connections that matter and provide a wide range of support networks and resources available to everyone. Nothing highlights this more than the heart-breaking images of the elderly in care homes looking out of their windows to see a family member who they can no longer touch or hug.

As our population ages, the amount of older people in the UK grows and we are seeing an increase in the number of people aged over 65 experiencing chronic and severe loneliness.

However, we often think that loneliness is something that comes with ageing, following illness or bereavement but in my clinical practice I am frequently faced with individuals and couples at any age and stage struggling with loneliness. There is a paradox here: how can we possibly be lonely when we have a partner and we are living together side by side. Unfortunately, lonely marriages are all too common.

During this past year of Covid where we have been forced to stay at home and be with each other 24 hours a day without the usual distractions of social interactions we all desperately need, so the realisation of what we have in our relationships and how we feel about each other has come sharply into focus. Loneliness in our relationships seems to be even more highlighted.

Interestingly a 2017 study published in the American Journal of Preventative Medicine, found that people who reportedly spent more than two hours a day on social media were twice as likely to feel lonely than those who spent half an hour on those sites.

HOW DOES LONELINESS SHOW UP IN OUR RELATIONSHIPS?

- On-going feelings of disengagement and disconnection. The relationship isn't giving me what I need.
- You feel you have no one to talk to or listen to you
- You may feel unloved and unheard by your partner and you may close down and withdraw from the relationship
- A general feeling that the relationship is not working as well as it used to. Feeling disconnected and not as close as we used to be.

- We don't make time for each other and have lost our emotional connection
- At times we need more support than usual from our partners especially around a life change event like buying a new home, having a baby, starting a new job, or serious illness. If we don't feel supported by our partners at these crucial times, feelings of loneliness can start to creep in.
- It's important to determine if your loneliness only appears in your current relationship or if these feelings you are experiencing are a pattern from your past and not isolated to this particular relationship.

WHAT CAUSES LONELINESS IN A RELATIONSHIP?

- Emotionally excluding your partner from your thoughts. Not talking in a way you used to. Not communicating your hopes, dreams, feelings and needs.
- Feeling the spark we once had has fizzled out. There is a lack of affection, loss of connection and much less sex and physical intimacy.
- The things that initially attracted us become distracting and unattractive. Resentments, intolerance and impatience with each other are emotions that show up rather than talking about the loneliness.
- When partners focus more on work and achievements than the partnership
- If one partner has to travel for work and is away from home for long periods.
- Addiction to alcohol, drugs can be used to conceal loneliness
- Focusing more on the children than the relationship
- When a partner may be dealing with a chronic illness or a serious health condition

HOW DO WE SHIFT THIS LONELINESS FEELING?

Start to re-establish an emotional connection by feeling you can share your feelings with your partner. This means a willingness to show your vulnerability, explain how you are feeling from your own experience in a non-accusatory way rather than coming from a place of anger and hostility. Try using the 'I' word rather than the 'you' word. Perhaps try asking your partner what's going on for them. Try building an awareness of what has happened to both of you and if there's willingness on both your parts to do things differently and work towards neither of you experiencing loneliness in your relationship.

Change is not going to happen instantly but if we can slowly be more open and honest with how we are feeling, even if that is difficult and painful, we have a much stronger chance of dealing with feeling lonely and building a stronger emotional connection to each other.

If these suggestions fail to improve things, please consider getting some help from an experienced couples' therapist who with the help of Emotionally Focused Therapy can help you get in touch with some difficult emotions that will help you feel more connected and thought about in your relationships.

I end this blog with a quote from Robin Williams

"I used to think the worst thing in life was to end up alone.

It's not.

*The worst thing in life is to end up with people that
make you feel alone".*

If you would like to discuss things further or to make an appointment, you can call me on **07976 403741** or (020) 8959 9528. Alternatively, you can contact me by email: dawnkaffel@couplescounselling.com. **Dawn Kaffel**