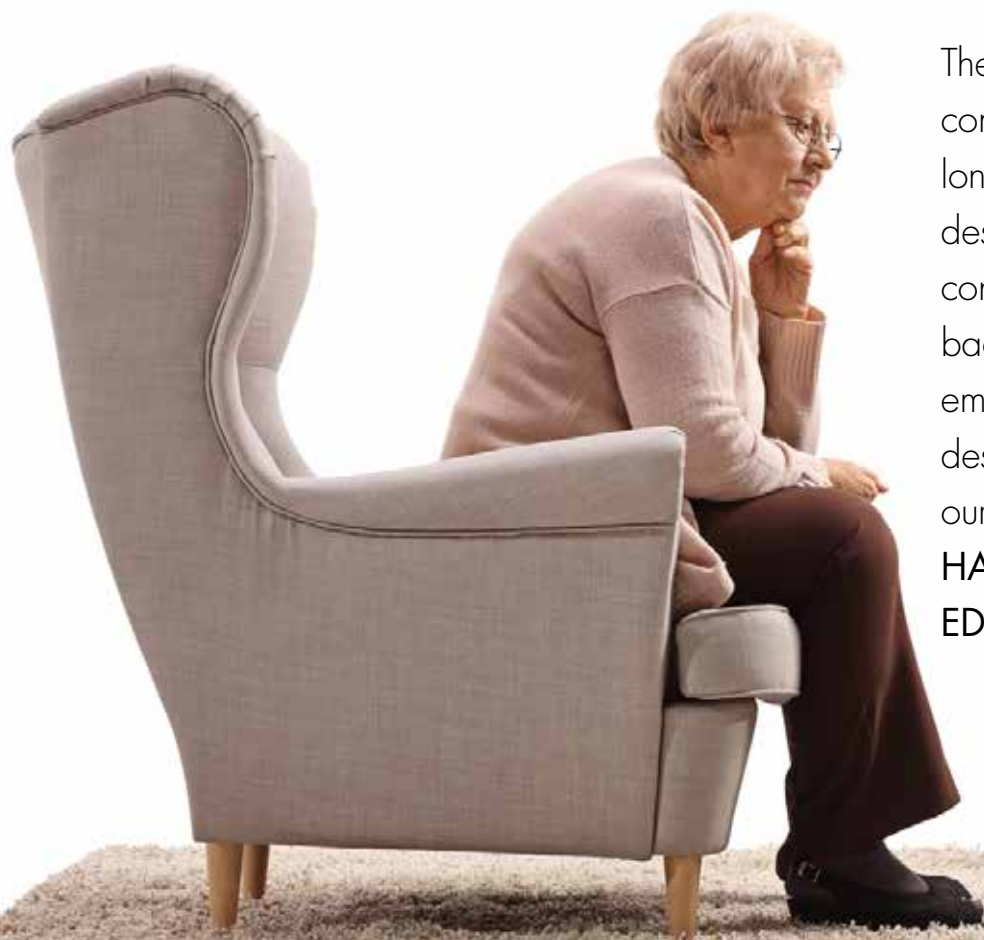


The unbearable LONELINESS of being



The great paradox of the communication age is that loneliness levels are rising, despite greater digital connectedness. So, let's go back to basics and find our emotional GPS. Let's set our destination and improve our connectedness, advises **HANNETJIE VAN ZYL-EDELING**

If depression is a big black dog, then loneliness is like being in a thick grey fog. On a recent trip to Dullstroom, such a fog descended onto the road 30 kilometres outside the town. Visibility dropped to almost zero, and driving became dangerous. In my mind, every second in this fog increased the risk of disoriented animals and other vehicles weaving out of nowhere into our path. Thankfully the GPS could show me where to turn, but it still required a great deal of concentration to stay on the

road. So it is with loneliness. Sometimes we can predict when we will be lonely, such as when our friends move away, but at other times loneliness overwhelms us unexpectedly, leaving us helpless and incapacitated.

Loneliness is an assessment and judgement of a situation, particularly of the adequacy, depth and intensity of our contact with others. It refers to the discrepancy between the kind and frequency of contact we would like (our expectations) as opposed to

what we have (our reality). When the current level of closeness does not meet our expectations, we feel lonely. Just how lonely we feel depends largely on the depth of our connectedness to at least one other significant being in our environment. We can feel totally alone in a group of people or really contented when connected with a pet. It is all a matter of perception. Solitude, on the other hand, is the feeling of enjoying alone time, more so if it is chosen rather than foisted onto us.

Recent research has shown that loneliness can kill – physically and emotionally. Not only is it worse for our health than obesity or smoking, it exacerbates depression, anxiety and other mental issues. But it is the danger to self-esteem that is most devastating. Negative self-perceptions erode our capacity to reach out and may easily send us into a downward spiral of undesirable self-fulfilling prophecies about not being liked. As a result, we do not make enough effort to connect or reach out to others, and then prove to ourselves that we are indeed unlovable. The fog closes in. It obscures our reason and makes it difficult to reach out to people, because those erroneous beliefs keep us trapped in an under-resourced place in our minds.

Did you know?

About one in three adults feels lonely, and loneliness levels seem to vary over the course of one's life. A New Zealand study, for example, found that centenarians were less lonely than those in the 65 to 99-year-old bracket. This was ascribed to better family support, living with others, and lack of depression.

Manly men are likely to suffer from loneliness because of stereotypes that encourage them to be "strong, silent, and suffering".

The great paradox of the communication age is that loneliness levels are rising, despite greater digital connectedness. What seems clear is that cyber contact is no replacement for real human physical and emotional contact and caring.

So, let's get back to basics and find our emotional GPS. Let's set our destination and decide to improve our connectedness. This requires an active decision and persistent effort on our part.

From transactional analysis we know that we human beings need attention in the same way that we need food, water and air for survival. Without attention we shrivel up and die – and not only metaphorically.

The best attention in the world is unconditional and positive. We just love someone or are loved, and do not



have to do anything for it. We can give someone a hug or a pat on the back, a smile or a squeeze of the hand to show solidarity and compassion.

The second aspect is conditional and positive attention, of which work is a great source. The better we do, the more attention we get. On the negative side, people often resort to difficult behaviour, quarrelling and hypochondria to win attention. When we reward this behaviour with attention, it is likely to continue. Let's be aware of this trap and pay more attention to positive behaviours.

For human beings, no attention, that is, loneliness – which feels a lot like solitary confinement – is the worst punishment of all, and to our subconscious minds the experience is one of rejection and abandonment.

Necessary steps in the right direction:

- First, accept the situation, then decide to do something positive about it.
- Get out of your house if you can and go for a walk.
- Find other human beings and a community to join. Make the first contact, even if it is scary, and remind yourself that they too may be lonely and afraid to initiate contact.
- Start small and resolve to smile and greet others wherever you go.
- Help others, visit the sick and

elderly, volunteer at a children's home, hospice or an animal shelter.

- Get a pet – even a bird or a reptile – something for which you can care.
- When alone, choose solitude over loneliness. Do this by counting your blessings, enjoying the environment, and finding things for which to be grateful.
- Do mindfulness meditation and, above all, be kind and compassionate to yourself and others.

Let's flourish together. 🌱

* Read more about mindfulness and how to structure your social life in my book titled *Over the hiff moon - a guide to positive ageing*, which is available on Amazon and at selected book stores. Also please watch the inspirational TED talk by Guy Winch on "emotional hygiene" at https://www.ted.com/talks/guy_winch_the_case_for_emotional_hygiene

Dr Hanneljie Van Zyl-Edeling is a counselling psychologist in Johannesburg.