**Coping with Loneliness**

**By Dr Bill Webster**

Mother Theresa described it as “the world’s most urgent problem”. She was not referring to poverty or injustice. She was talking about loneliness.

Probably most of us have experienced loneliness at one time or another. Maybe it was our first time away from home, or traveling somewhere half a world away from family and friends. Most of us would agree that it is not always a pleasant experience. Lonely feelings come because something is missing from our lives ... a person, a relationship, the absence of a sense of well-being, a loss of self-esteem or confidence.

I think loneliness is probably one of the biggest challenges facing people after the loss of a loved one. But what surprises many of us is:

*Loneliness has nothing whatsoever to do with whether or not you are alone.*

After my wife died, people said, “Well you have your boys so you won’t be lonely.” I was (and continue to be) thankful for my two sons. The boys and I did everything together. I was never alone, but I sure felt lonely.

Some years ago, a young lady came to our support programme with her mother after her father died. At one of the breaks, she took me aside, somewhat annoyed, and said, “I just don’t understand mother. Since my dad died, I call her every morning first thing, I stop in and see her on my way to work, I call her from the office in the morning and the afternoon, I stop in on my way home, we talk every evening. Weekends she is over at our place or we are over there. I’m seeing more of mother than I’ve ***ever*** seen of mother.

“And,” she continued with some exasperation, “Do you know what she said to me last week. She actually had the nerve to tell me she was feeling lonely. How can she be lonely when I am spending so much of my time with her?”

It happens more often than you realize. Like many of the challenges of the grief process I have tried to understand the “Why” of this. There’s a definition of loneliness that I find helpful. “Loneliness is the sense of isolation that is caused by the absence of a needed relationship.” When someone dies, we feel so terribly alone … that is the isolation, or as someone aptly described it, the “unwanted individuation”. And the cause of that is the absence of a needed relationship.

When we feel lonely we are saying “I had a relationship with that person. I needed it, wanted it, counted on it, and now that it is no longer here, I miss it … and indeed, I wonder how I can go on without it.”

And that is a very important point. We can have all kinds of other relationships … family, friends, church, community … but ***this*** is the relationship we miss. We can feel lonely in a crowd, because we are missing that needed relationship.

Tom was well into his 90’s and he and his wife had been married for 70 years when I first met them. But life was difficult. Tom was totally blind and completely deaf, so communication was almost impossible. He would talk, and he was very clear in his thinking, but he could not hear any responses, not see who was talking to him. Tom’s wife had been unwell for several years and was often in the hospital.

However, after she died, I went to see Tom, and with tears running down his face, he said, “We may not have been able to communicate very well these last few years, but what I miss is the ***absence of her presence***.” That phrase says it all, doesn’t it? That’s what we miss … the absence of their presence. The biggest adjustment is getting used to the fact that life now has to be lived without that person or the relationship that has been lost.

So how do we overcome loneliness? One of the most helpful things I have found is to distinguish between “loneliness” and “aloneness”. Although the words lonely and alone are from the same linguistic root, psychologically they are opposites. It is possible to be lonely without being alone. You can be lonely in a crowd. It is equally possible to be alone without being lonely.

Paul Tillich gives us an important grief guideline: “Loneliness can only be overcome by those who can bear solitude.”

Loneliness is the absence of a needed relationship. Aloneness on the other hand is a relationship with ones-self. It means coming to the place where we can say, “Although I no longer have this needed relationship, I am going to be OK.” That doesn’t diminish the importance of the presence of others in our life … family, friends, community, or even the presence of God. But we have to finally get in touch with the resources that we have available within ourselves that enables us to say to ourselves, “I will survive. I will be OK.”

Remember, loneliness is the absence of ***that*** needed relationship and the presence of others does not cancel out that feeling. The only lasting solution to loneliness is to find the confidence to know that I will be OK even though I no longer have that relationship in my life. The answer is in realizing that if I can move forward in my journey to where I feel content to be with myself, in spite of the fact that I am alone, and confident enough to know that I can manage that I will be OK on my own. It is in knowing that no matter what I have lost, I still have MYSELF.

Robert Weiss writes: “There is no need to panic, for things can get better. This does not make them better NOW, but it is nonetheless essential to keep this rather strong possibility in mind.