

Chapter 1

Feeling Lonely

If you stop for a moment and think of the most beautiful songs composed in the past century, you will realise that they are rarely written with optimistic lyrics, filled with cheerful melodies, bouncing with peppy beats or sung with elated emotional gusto. Whether it's Sinéad O'Connor breathlessly telling someone after seven hours and 15 days of separation that 'Nothing Compares 2 U' or Eric Carmen singing how he doesn't want to be 'All by Myself', the songs are written as a calling of sorts, from people who are, now, all by themselves. Artists who we have never met validate exactly how we are feeling, or may have felt, at some point in our lives. We all know what song to dig out of the playlist when we need some validation for our own loneliness, to help us process the mess of heartbreak and to motivate us to get up and get on with our life alone. I've wallowed my way through more than a few Phil Collins songs in my time ... or perhaps it wasn't too many, but rather just enough.

Usually, these powerful songs are the ones that vibrate our chests, bring tears to our eyes, send tingles up our spine and force our hairs to stand on end, all the while managing to align with something inside of us—maybe a distant memory or a feeling we are experiencing in the present moment. These songs convey emotions

of heartbreak, loss, unrequited love and, of course, loneliness. For many adults listening to these types of songs, whether on a crisp record, CD or favourite playlist, they have a resonance that is universal and familiar, along with their proverbial tugging at the heartstrings. These songs are the ones that we intentionally play to not only soothe ourselves in times of struggle, but to reassure ourselves that someone, somewhere, 'gets' the emotional pain we are feeling. Lyrics, music and melodies depict the forlorn nature of our disconnection from someone who meant something to us, our longing to get them back or the unbearable void left in their absence.

The Oxford Dictionary defines loneliness as 'sadness because one has no friends or company', while the Cambridge Dictionary sums the feeling up as 'unhappy because you are not with other people'. It's an emotion that can encompass a multitude of feelings, including sadness, emptiness, longing, isolation and not belonging, with the overarching theme of being unhappy or dissatisfied about not being with other people. However, it is also a subjective feeling too, with many people feeling lonely even while they are around people because they are not connecting with them. Anyone who exists daily amongst people and still feels 'othered' will know what I'm talking about here.

Essentially, loneliness involves people (being there or not) and *not feeling connected*.

The myriad emotions we feel in the modern world all serve a purpose. The emotion of loneliness is essential. Our lonely *Homo sapiens* ancestors would have felt extremely uncomfortable in the emotional pain of becoming lost from or even kicked out of their group. Without the safety, security and strength of being in a group, wandering around alone in the harsh wilderness would have made them a likely target for threats in their environment. Their brains

would have sent chemical messengers in the form of emotions to alert them that they were alone in a harsh environment and more vulnerable to predators. A feeling of loneliness creeping over them would have led them to take certain actions to feel safe again (such as reconnecting to their group), which would have been crucial for survival.

Fast forward some 10 000 years or so, and many of us no longer have wild animals stalking us for their dinner, so we tend to marinate in some of our more negative-but-necessary emotions for far too long. If we're not driven by the innate need to act to survive, we may not only ignore some of these important emotions, but we might also use rather unhelpful coping mechanisms to numb them.



'I'm just so lonely'.

This is what my client Melissa said to me one session, cross-legged on the couch in my office, hugging a blue cushion. We had just had a lengthy conversation about what she'd been doing in the past couple of months since she'd separated from her husband. As it was quite early in the initial stages of separation, Melissa was finding the quiet evenings without him in the house almost unbearable. Coming from a large family growing up and then going straight into a relationship upon moving out when she was 18, Melissa had never really spent time totally alone. Not only was it an unfamiliar feeling, but it was also uncomfortable, and she was not prepared to sit with the loneliness for too long. She worked all day with people, which was a suitable distraction that in many ways gave her a reprieve from intruding thoughts about her ex-husband and the associated angst. She also had two little children, which provided another diversion and added plenty of things for her to do at either ends of the day. But in the evenings, when she'd read the kids their

bedtime stories, tuck them into their beds and wander back into her empty lounge, she just couldn't bear it. Quick to fill the silence, she would reach for a glass of wine and her phone, then talk for hours to different men through a dating app. This was quite uncharacteristic behaviour for her, but she was doing this because she knew she felt lonely. The emotional pain of not having her husband around anymore was something she wasn't prepared to wade in.

Some people, like Melissa, can feel the loneliness and articulate what it is, or at least notice that their behaviour is likely to be a result of feeling lonely. These people *feel* lonely, so they try to do something to shift it. But not everyone is like Melissa. Many people are not even aware of their feelings or, even if they are, they are not curious about them. They just feel lonely, then behave in what may be an uncharacteristic way, without too much self-inquiry between their feelings and their behaviours.

We have all done this with some of our 'uncomfortable' emotions:

- Feeling angry in the moment and then saying something stupid (and regretful) to a loved one
- Feeling shame about making a mistake, so spluttering out a lie to cover it up
- Feeling frustrated at work because of the unrealistic demands placed upon us, and then just quitting
- Feeling anxious about going to a social event, so we send a 'sorry, something's come up' message at the last minute
- Feeling lonely and then talking for hours to different men.

All these behaviours, which might not be problematic in themselves (although some might be), are usually not thoughtful responses but rather are emotionally driven—driven by the feeling, rather than a well thought out...thought. Reacting, rather than responding. Beneficial in the short term, but maybe not so beneficial in the

long term. These automatic behaviours may ease the emotional pain at first, but they won't be as helpful as an action with more positive long-term outcomes—the kind we'd take if we'd only given ourselves some more time to think things through.

Being emotionally driven is something many of us do. But there's a quiet, almost insidious mechanism at play with loneliness. Unlike anger, which can literally hit you in the face, loneliness can just creep up silently and then simmer away, causing you to become someone entirely different to who you were before. You're not really bothering people with your loneliness, so it can stay longer and is often unnoticed by others, even ourselves. Many people have likely been feeling lonely for a while and have unwittingly been covering it up.

People almost become defensive about their disconnection, not realising that the likely reason their psychological wellbeing has gone awry is because they are lonely. When visiting a psychologist, therapist or counsellor, the presenting problem might be something else and then, after a bit of digging and disclosing, it becomes clear that the root problem lies in escaping the loneliness. If I think about my clients over the past few decades, it's easy to reflect on the number of people whose irrational thoughts, out-of-character behaviours and uncomfortable feelings were driven by loneliness, even if they were not aware of it at the time, such as ending a relationship on a Wednesday and being out dating again on a Thursday, life-hacking their way through the loneliness as soon as they possibly can. After both of my long-term relationship breakups, I pretty much skipped the loneliness part, almost like a predictive text that presumed what I needed next, busying myself with bar-hopping with friends and, of course, dating. I moved past the silence and the unknown I unconsciously knew would be there if I stopped. And I'm certainly not alone in doing this.

So, lonely doesn't always mean 'feeling lonely'. Loneliness presents differently in different people. Sadness, emptiness and feeling unseen are common descriptors. But people also unintentionally mask these uncomfortable feelings with certain behaviours that may not be ideal for them. It might be one too many wines in the evening, endlessly talking to people online, hours of gaming in one's bedroom, or staying in bed and sleeping way too much. It might be binge-watching TV, too many Tinder dates, constantly scrolling through social media, staying with the wrong person for way too long, seeking validation through likes and comments on posts, working overtime to keep busy, or even making impulsive purchases or developing negative habits. I once had a client that was talking to a Hollywood TV star online and transferred them \$5000, likely because they were so lonely (unfortunately, the person was not a Hollywood TV star, go figure). Each of these behaviours serves as a temporary distraction or disguise, helping individuals momentarily escape feelings of loneliness or emotional emptiness.

Many behaviours that can become addictive vices are caused by loneliness. Journalist and author Johann Hari, in his book *Lost Connections*, goes as far as to say, 'The opposite of addiction is not sobriety. It is human connection'. And I would dare to agree.

Loneliness can feel painful. It's kind of supposed to feel like this. At first, anyway. If our ancestors didn't feel this emotional pain, they could easily have become separated from their pack and been eaten by a sabre-toothed tiger because they didn't get the 'lonely' memo to warn them. Those who felt lonely were propelled to get back to their people, quick smart! This is a reductionist example, of course, but loneliness, like all our emotions, served a purpose for our survival.

The thing about our emotions in the past is that when we felt them, we would have been driven by the feeling and 'acted' to survive.

In modern times, we don't do this so much. We might feel these emotions and then, instead of inquiring about the feeling or even using the valuable information they are giving us, we either don't notice the feeling (because we are so caught up in other things and not that self-aware), ignore them, blunt them, unhelpfully soothe them, or just do absolutely nothing and stew miserably in them (sometimes for years). We don't use those emotions to think about what the best thing to do might be—the thing or things that we really need to do to make our lives sustainably better.

As author Oscar Wilde said in his novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*: 'I don't want to be at the mercy of my emotions. I want to use them, to enjoy them, and to dominate them'. Let's all start to do this a little more when we start feeling lonely. Let's not skip it. Let's feel the emotion and listen to what it is whispering to us.

