

Understanding Loneliness

Starting university or navigating student life can feel exciting, yet it can also be unexpectedly lonely. Even when you're surrounded by people in lectures, residence, or campus events, you might still feel disconnected. If that sounds familiar, you're not alone.

What is Loneliness?

Loneliness is not simply about being by yourself. It is the uncomfortable feeling that happens when the connection we want doesn't match what we're actually experiencing.

In 2023, the U.S. Surgeon General warned that social disconnection poses serious health risks, comparing its impact to smoking 15 cigarettes a day. Research shows that ongoing loneliness and social isolation can affect both mental and physical health, increase the risk of anxiety, depression, substance use, heart issues, memory problems, and even lead to a shorter lifespan. In Canada, 13% of people aged 15 and older report often or always feeling lonely.

Some people view this as a "loneliness epidemic", while others think that digital environments, busier schedules, and more academic pressures reflect broader changes in how we connect. What's clear is that social connection and having meaningful relationships are essential to our wellbeing. They influence not only our mental and physical health, but also our sense of safety, resilience, and the strength of our communities.

Types of Loneliness

1. **Emotional Loneliness:** Lacking a deep, intimate connection

You may:

- ✓ Miss having a partner or a very close friend
- ✓ Feel unable to share your authentic self
- ✓ Grieve a lost relationship
- ✓ Feel alone even when surrounded by friends or acquaintances.
- ✓ This type of loneliness is about the depth of the relationship, not the quantity. These deep emotional bonds take time, which can make "instant friendships" challenging.

2. **Social Loneliness:** Lacking a sense of belonging to a group or community

You might

- ✓ Feel excluded in group settings
- ✓ Have a partner but no network of friends
- ✓ Feel different from others

- ✓ Withdraw after social discomfort

This type of loneliness is about belonging and shared identity. Because belonging develops through repeated exposure, showing up consistently matters more than instantly feeling comfortable.

3. Existential Loneliness: Feeling disconnected from meaning, direction or purpose

You may:

- ✓ Feel disconnected from your life direction
- ✓ Question your value or purpose
- ✓ Feel alone in big life questions
- ✓ Experience a sense of meaninglessness

This can show up during major transitions, like starting university, changing programs, or questioning your future. Even people with strong emotional and social networks can experience this type of loneliness.

Ways to cope with Loneliness – Do not expect instant results

If you're experiencing Emotional Loneliness you might try:

- Reaching out to a trusted person and saying, "I need to talk."
- Suggesting specific plans instead of vague invitations.
- Reopening an old connection.
- Exploring therapy or support groups to build deeper bonds.

If you're experiencing Social Loneliness you might try:

- Joining structured activities aligned with your interests (clubs, classes, intramurals).
- Attending events where others are also new.
- Going to campus events consistently.
- Volunteering in your community.

If you're experiencing Existential Loneliness you might try:

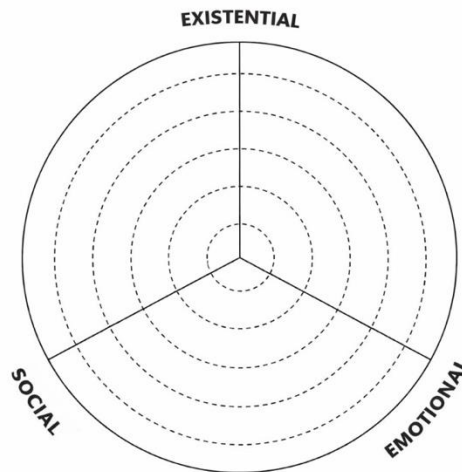
- Journaling about your values and what matters most to you.
- Engaging in activities that feel purposeful.
- Practicing mindfulness or present-focused awareness.
- Talking openly with others about big life questions, others often share similar doubts.

General Reminders

- Feeling lonely does not mean you are unlovable, and alone.
- Take one small step at a time: one message, one invitation.

- Practice self-compassion.
- Offer connection to others; generosity and compassion builds belonging.
- Seek support if loneliness feels persistent or overwhelming.

Wheel of Loneliness - Each section of the wheel contains five statements. For every statement you can confidently answer “yes” to, shade in one segment of that section of the wheel. If you’re unsure or answer “no,” leave it blank. Blank spaces are not failures; they simply highlight areas that may need more attention or support.



Existential Loneliness

- I can describe what gives my life meaning right now.
- I feel understood in who I am at my core (values, beliefs, identity).
- I feel connected to something bigger than myself (community, purpose, social cause, etc.).
- I can sit with myself without feeling overwhelming emptiness.
- When I think about my future, I feel a sense of direction (even if it’s unclear).

Social Loneliness

- I have at least one group (friends, club, class, team, community) where I feel I belong.
- I regularly engage in social activities that feel meaningful (not scrolling or proximity).
- I feel included rather than on the outside in most group settings.
- I have people I can casually reach out to without overthinking it.
- I feel seen in the spaces I spend time in (school, work, home).

Emotional Loneliness

- I have at least one person I can talk to about things that matter to me.
- I feel safe being vulnerable with someone.
- I feel emotionally supported when I'm struggling.
- I feel known (not just liked) by someone in my life.
- When I'm upset, I don't feel like I must handle it alone.

Reflection Questions

- Which areas feel strongest to you?
- What patterns do you notice?
- What is one step you could take this week?

Loneliness is a normal emotion to experience at university, especially during times of change or transition. However, if loneliness feels overwhelming or persistent, reach out to Western Student Health & Wellness counselling services, a healthcare provider, or a trusted support person. You deserve meaningful connection, and it's okay to seek support as you work toward it.

References

<https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/surgeon-general-social-connection-advisory.pdf>

<https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/211124/dq211124e-eng.htm>

<https://theconversation.com/there-is-no-loneliness-epidemic-so-why-do-we-keep-talking-as-if-there-is-259072>

<https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/37792968/>

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/ca/blog/lifetime-connections/201907/the-3-types-loneliness-and-how-combat-them>

<https://ipractice.com/symptoms/loneliness/dealing-with-loneliness/>