

# TIP SHEET FOR MANAGING LONELINESS



THE UNIVERSITY OF  
NEWCASTLE  
AUSTRALIA

## LONELINESS

Have you ever heard the expression “you can feel lonely in a crowd”? It is something we all can feel. Unfortunately it is one that is only too true and all too common at university. Here, surrounded by people of a similar age and, supposedly, with lots in common we can nevertheless feel terribly isolated and awkward. This is made worse by the sight of others who seem perfectly at ease, are rapidly making friends and are becoming part of groups from which we feel excluded or only tolerated on the margins.

However, looked at from another angle, it is not surprising that loneliness at university is common. Loneliness can be experienced at different times throughout your time at university. It is common amongst new students, students who work long hours in paid employment, or in courses with high student numbers.

Coming to university is a major stage in a student’s life. It could be the first time you have left home, be it locally, interstate or from overseas, it could be the transition from High School to University, or it could be a retraining experience as a mature age student. It may indeed be the first time you are away, not just from the supportive familiarity of home and family, but away also from friendships that may have been built up over years.

Coming to university involves a number of changes: in lifestyle, culture, friendships, work patterns, and degree of independence. The accumulated effects of these can make people feel uncertain of what to do or how to be. Social insecurities can creep in, even for people who normally feel quite socially capable. So, for some, loneliness is a new and disconcerting experience, while for others it is more familiar, but may now be accompanied by disappointment that university has not brought a hoped for change.

The following are some pointers on what it is like to experience loneliness and some ideas for helping you to deal with loneliness.

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### **We feel lonely when:**

- we are alone and feel it isn't our choice
- we have suffered a loss or bereavement and feel we're lacking the loving secure environment we had in the past - when leaving home or after the break-up of a relationship
- we are facing changes in our life - a new form of study, a new city, or a new country
- we feel disconnected and alienated from our environment and the culture around us
- we feel there are few people in our lives with whom we can share our feelings and experiences - not feeling part of a group or event
- we feel people do not know who we really are

### **When we are lonely we can feel:**

- unloved, unwanted, and not worthwhile
- socially inadequate, self-conscious and ill-at-ease with others
- like an "outsider", invisible and unknown
- convinced that there is something wrong with us
- depressed and/or anxious and afraid about the future
- angry and critical of others and cynical about the world
- hurt, powerless and despairing of things changing
- misunderstood, self-critical and self-pitying

### **We make it worse when we tell ourselves.....**

- "Loneliness is a sign of weakness, or immaturity."
- "There is something wrong with me if I am lonely. These should be the best years of my life."
- "I am the only one who feels this way."
- "Everyone else seems to have friends except me."

When we feel lonely we are very susceptible to negative misconceptions about loneliness. Unfortunately, the more we think this way, the worse our loneliness becomes.

### **The negative effects we experience from loneliness include:**

- problems with your physical and emotional health and wellbeing
- becoming discouraged, and losing your sense of desire and motivation to get involved in new situations
- difficulties in being assertive, becoming afraid to stand up for your rights and saying "no" to unreasonable requests
- avoiding meeting people, becoming self-conscious and worrying unnecessarily about contact with lecturers, classmates and peers
- perceiving yourself in a negative way - becoming overly critical of your physical appearance
- depression and suicidal thoughts
- feelings of worthlessness and low self-esteem
- excessive use of tobacco, alcohol and other drugs
- feeling disappointed about coming to university
- being cut off from the academic help and support that others students can provide

## **What we can do to help deal with loneliness:**

### **Develop yourself**

- use your alone time to get to know yourself. Think of it as an opportunity to develop independence and to learn to take care of your own emotional needs
- think of yourself as a total person. Do not neglect other needs just because your companionship or friendship needs are not being met. Make sure you follow habits of good nutrition, regular exercise, and adequate sleep. Don't let your studies, hobbies, and other interests slide
- recognize that there are many creative and enjoyable ways to use your alone time. Get involved in things that excite your interest - music, art, sport
- be alone, not lonely - by learning to enjoy and value your own company, you'll find that others may also value and enjoy your company
- be self-accepting - you may blame yourself for your loneliness wishing you were different ("If only I were ..."); it can be helpful to break the vicious circle of such negative thoughts by realising it may be your situation you need to change, rather than your personality or appearance. You are all right, the situation isn't - you can change aspects of your situation

### **Develop friendships**

There are a number of ways to begin meeting your needs for friendship. Consider the following:

- in doing the things you ordinarily do in the course of your daily schedule, look for ways to get involved with people. For example, you can eat with others, or sit with new people in class, or find a study or exercise partner.
- put yourself in new situations where you will meet people.
- look up events and activities where you might find people who share similar interests/values as yourself (such as. poetry reading, an environmental group, a music/art/sporting/cultural event).
- do some volunteer work. Helping others will boost your self-esteem, increase social contacts and make you feel good about yourself.
- some people are more at ease in groups than others in 'one to one' situations. Consider your own preferences and 'style'. Find others with similar outlooks and interests. Remember that, despite appearances, not everyone is interested in bars or sports.
- intimate friendships usually develop gradually as people learn to share their inner feelings. Avoid rushing into intimate friendships by sharing too quickly or expecting that others will. Let the process develop naturally
- build upon your relationships by being a good friend to others: listen carefully, be responsive, show understanding and even challenge sometimes, if it feels appropriate. (you may find that deepening a few relationships can be more rewarding than pursuing many casual ones)
- value all of your friendships and their unique characteristics rather than believing that only a romantic relationship will relieve your loneliness.

## ***Remember***

Loneliness is a common experience among university students that can be overcome. Don't see yourself as a lonely person. No matter how bad you feel, loneliness will diminish or even disappear when you focus attention and energy on needs you can currently meet. In time you will learn to develop new ways to meet your other needs.

**Start doing things and good feelings will eventually catch up with you. Don't wait around to feel better before you start doing things.**

## **Seek additional help**

If you find that you are having difficulty dealing with these feelings on your own, you may want to:

- Talk to a counsellor at the Newcastle campus (02 4921 5801) or at the Central Coast campus (02 4348 4060).
- Make contact with the Chaplaincy Centre at the Newcastle campus (02 492 15571) or at the Central Coast campus (02 4348 4036).
- Make an appointment to see your doctor if you have any health concerns.
- Lifeline 131 114 offers a 24-hour service, as does the Psychiatric Emergency Centre (1 800 655 085) for the Hunter region or Central Intake (4320 3500) for the Central Coast area.



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