

Being Alone in 2020

Loneliness has been written, talked about, researched, and studied for ages, but even more so during this ghastly pandemic. It's true that all humans experience loneliness at many points in their lives; that's normal. And the feeling of loneliness is not limited to seniors or retired people. But for many older folks, the harm caused by loneliness can be intense and unhealthy.

In a 2020 article in *Psychology Today*, researchers at the University of California San Diego, wrote that there is

a public health epidemic of loneliness with serious physical and mental health implications. In past research, some researchers of loneliness have equated the potential life-shortening impact of loneliness with that of smoking and obesity.¹

That's a dramatic statement. But admitting loneliness can often carry a stigma, making some people feel as if they are a "social failure." ² Perhaps they are parents or grandparents, unable to see their offspring, or unable to handle technology like Zoom or Facetime in order to connect with loved ones. Perhaps they are single whose friends have moved or passed away. Perhaps they have physical conditions that keep them isolated.

We know that loneliness has been the subject of artists and musicians forever. The great American composer, Stephen Sondheim, wrote a song in his 1970 musical *Company* that is deeply moving, capturing the paradoxes of loneliness. So many of the lyrics richly describe how we crave human connection:

Someone to need you too much,
Someone to know you too well,
Someone to pull you up short
And put you through hell...

Somebody, hold me too close,
Somebody, hurt me too deep,
Somebody, sit in my chair
And ruin my sleep
And make me aware
Of being alive.³

As the character sings, "let me be used, vary my days" because "alone is alone, not alive."

¹ <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/brain-and-behavior/202004/loneliness-among-seniors>

² <https://www.aarp.org/home-family/friends-family/info-2019/medical-cure-for-loneliness.html>

³ <https://www.google.com/search?client=safari&rls=en&q=%22being+alone%22+by+stephen+sondheim&ie=UTF-8&oe=UTF-8>

Whatever the cause, loneliness is a complex health problem, which doctors or psychologists cannot simply fix.

We know there are people out there, alone, who may be suffering. **How can we, as an OLLI community, address this problem? I ask this question to you: *what varies your days and makes you feel alive, not alone?*** Send me your responses at memlewis@gmail.com, and I will compile them for our next Spotlight newsletter. You may, of course, remain anonymous—that I promise—but your ideas may help others who need such comforting words. By Maureen Maguire Lewis