Can loneliness kill? [1]

Dear Alice,

I've thought and thought about this, but can loneliness kill you? I've lived through my teenage years, twenties, three-quarters of my thirties, but am still hoping that just around the corner will be the one. If not? can loneliness kill you?

Answer

Dear Reader,

The short answer is no. Although loneliness and social isolation can negatively impact your well-being and increase risk of mortality, neither of them can kill you. And while meeting "the one" is one way to make a meaningful social connection, all sorts of relationships, such as those with friends, family, or other members of your community are likely to positively impact your health. Even having just one or two close ties can counteract the negative effects of loneliness and social isolation.

While closely related, loneliness and social isolation are not the same concept. Social isolation is measured by number of contacts with family or friends and by your level of community involvement. Loneliness is the subjective, personal experience of social isolation. Loneliness is also sometimes described as the difference between the social relationships you have and the relationships you want, which might resonate with your desire to find a romantic connection.

Researchers have proposed several ways that loneliness and social isolation influences health and well-being. Social isolation may increase stress. It may also negatively impact how you respond to stressors and increase anxiety and depression. Loneliness, similarly, may cause someone to become less motivated to take care of themselves, more likely to engage in self-destructive behaviors, and may not seek out social support as often. Finally, loneliness and social isolation have been linked to a number of health conditions like high blood pressure, poor stress response, cardiovascular disease, depression, and sleeping disorders.

Actively reducing social isolation and loneliness, as suggested by research, may benefit your health. Having social networks may encourage healthy behaviors (e.g. exercise and sleep) and discourage unhealthy ones (e.g. drinking too much alcohol). Social ties may also give you access to a wider network of health-related resources. And what's more, reducing social isolation has been found to have the most impact in terms of lowering mortality risk.
So, how do you build up your social network? There are a number of ways you might consider:

- Pick up a new hobby, such as joining an improvisational comedy group, taking a cooking class, or going to a book club.
- Volunteer.
- Attend religious services.
- Initiate activities such as staff lunches or outings with coworkers.
- Throw a potluck and invite the people you’d like to know better.
- Organize a family vacation.
- Use social media to reconnect with old friends or alumni from your school or university.
- Join a Meetup [2] for people in your area with similar interests.
- Start online dating or attend local speed-dating events to help you in your search for a romantic partner.

Hopefully, you will find that bit by bit initiating regular social interactions decreases your feelings of loneliness and increases the number of your social ties. If your feelings of loneliness don’t subside, however, you may want to consider talking to a mental health professional to get additional support, advice, and resources. Check out Finding low-cost counseling [3] for more information on locating resources near you.

Here’s to your health, maintaining good relationships, and looking forward to forging new ones!

Alice!

Category:
- Emotional Health [4]
- Blues & Depression [5]
- Stress & Anxiety [6]

Related questions

- Social support [7]
- Making friends when I have low self-esteem [8]
- Healthy versus unhealthy relationships [9]
- What causes laughter? [10]

Resources

- Counseling and Psychological Services (CPS) (Morningside) [11]
- Mental Health Service (CUMC) [12]

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