

Alone vs. Lonely - Fact vs. Feeling - Learning, Living and Loving the Difference

One is a state of being - there are many points in a lifetime when a person is alone. The other is a feeling, one of the ones with which we're hard wired from birth. So why is it so hard for us to acknowledge and accept the difference? Because even the word lonely is something people don't want to say. Even the word alone brings up painful or hurtful memories and old emotional wounds. Yet one word doesn't always lead to the other. The two are totally different concepts and often have nothing to do with one another.

The truth is we can be alone and be contented and happy, productive, satisfied, owning and even embracing our solitude. Alone can be a calm, comfortable and quiet place in our heads and hearts. It is an opportunity to think clearly, to work out our concerns with no distractions or interference of any kind. Alone can be about bliss and peace and well-being. It is a powerful place to exist if we are able to do the emotional work to go there.

Think about all of the things we do alone on a regular basis. Often we drive alone to various places - food shopping, gym, work or school, doctor or dentist, etc. We spend much of our lives alone, even if we are emotionally and/or physically connected to others. Some of us are living on our own - alone - for varied reasons. Some of us choose to work alone. In any of these instances, alone doesn't need to come with the negative 'stamp' of fear or anger or sadness.

The other truth is we can also be lonely, even when we are not physically alone. I have felt lonely throughout my entire life, and for much of that life I was surrounded by other people. There were other people in certain places where I lived, other people where I worked, other people with whom I socialized, etc. Still, there are lonely times I can point to throughout my life, whether I was physically alone or not. I have been in family of origin relationships, romantic relationships, work relationships, friendships where I felt the lonely feelings. I have been at crowded parties or other events where I felt profoundly lonely. The trigger of lonely feelings for me is when I have a sense that I am not being heard, understood, validated, accepted. Often my reaction to the lonely feelings caused by the above is I find myself in tears. It used to bother me when the crying thing would happen. Now I look at it as a gift, the gift of a physical response that sends me a signal. This signal tells me it may be time to remove myself from whatever situation I'm in that is generating those lonely feelings of not heard, understood, validated or accepted. Whether it's a work situation, family dynamic, romance or friendship, if I'm in tears about it, then it's time to let it go. I have heard two good phrases to describe the value of tears. The first is "Tears are liquid feelings." The second is "Tears are God's way of unlocking a heart frozen with grief."

I was not always as good as I needed to be at walking away from situations that were sending me the tear-filled signals of lonely, and I still fall back into those old patterns of behavior, though thankfully not as frequently as I used to. That took some hard work and vigilance in order to learn to pay attention to those signals. Then came the action which was to remove myself from the hurtful situation of a toxic relationship. I had to learn to distinguish the difference between

the negative aspects of the word lonely - which was what I was experiencing by staying in that negative relationship - and focus on the positive aspects of the word alone which inevitably resulted in a better sense of peace, harmony, well-being and relief.

From childhood, I can recall spending lots of time on my own. I had friendships here and there, but I also know I spent many hours on my bicycle by myself riding places alone. I have been going to movies alone since high school, and think nothing of traveling alone if nobody is available to travel with me. I was never one of those people who had to be in a romantic relationship at all times to avoid being on my own. In fact, my romantic relationship history tends to be the opposite - something romantic is in my life for a given time after which there is a period of time spent on my own. For me this is preferable. I need the time in between for my heart to heal. I take the time to catalogue my feelings about the relationship and its impact on my life, both positive and negative. I need the space to grieve the loss of the relationship from my life, to catch my breath, to let myself become reacquainted with life on my own. Am I lonely during these periods? Of course. At times the loneliness feels like a physical ache, or a yearning not necessarily for what just ended but for the unknown, the unknown being when will the next relationship begin and with whom will it be? While I know logically there are no answers to these questions it's hard not to ask them anyway.

At other times I feel safer inside myself in my time alone. There are times when if I've been hurt by other people in whom I thought I could place my trust, I need to remind myself that I have trust in myself, and that I can depend on myself. It is during these times that I am grateful to be alone, because it is helpful in the healing process of repairing the wounds of emotional hurt. Along with the healing comes the rebuilding of self-confidence and the self-awareness in order to hopefully avoid the mistakes that led to the hurt the last time out.

I once read the following quote: "When you're single and lonely, tomorrow can be another day. When you're married and lonely, tomorrow is the same day." What I take from that is how blessed I am not to have been in a marriage that I know would have been lonely. Several times in my romantic past I have been with men with whom marriage was an often-discussed topic. Once or twice there was even a proposal in the midst of those discussions. I have gratitude today that I was never married to any of these men, because I was lonely while in romances with them, so I know I would have been lonely in marriages with them as well. Certainly in my single life there are lonely times. But today I realize lonely doesn't get stirred up just because of a lack of romance at any given time. More than likely, if and when I feel lonely, it is because I am feeling emotionally abandoned, isolated or unsupported. That can come from lack of a healthy network of support, not necessarily because of a lack of romance.

In working with clients I discuss lonely quite often. The status of the client doesn't matter, nor does the age. Whether young or old, married or single, male or female, child or adult, we all struggle with the distinction between the positive aspects of alone and how not to equate the word 'alone' with the word lonely. Once we let go of fearing lonely, we can much more easily adjust and accept the concept of being alone. And we also learn to identify and understand our needs in terms of emotional support in all relationships. After that, we can strive to create the network of support we all deserve and from which there are so many benefits.

By accepting the distinction between alone and lonely, with continuous work and constant re-tooling, it is possible for anyone to have a healthy emotional support network in his/her life. I'm grateful for my own support network, in that when I make the effort to reach out via email, phone or in person to any of the people on it, I know I will be heard and validated and supported and understood and accepted. In those moments of connection, I don't feel lonely. And knowing I have that network of support, in the times of alone, it's nothing more than that - not a scary feeling, just a state of being.