

Why Alone Is Not the Same as Lonely

By Bella DePaulo,
Ph.D

With more and more people living single and [living alone](#), and so much hand-wringing about loneliness, it has never been more important to understand the difference between the kind of aloneness that people seek out and savor (*not* loneliness) and the kind of aloneness that hurts (loneliness). That's what I talked about when Peace Talks Radio asked me to participate in their special show, "Considering Loneliness." Other participants were the scholars Louise Hawkey and Steven Asher, and the psychotherapist Robert Thompson. I've copied the transcript of my part of the conversation below (and added some links and such). You can find the [complete transcript](#) here or you can [listen to the entire show here](#).

Peace Talks Radio Host Paul Ingles talks with Dr. Bella DePaulo, Project Scientist, University of California at Santa Barbara, author of "[Singled Out: How Singles are Stereotyped, Stigmatized, and Ignored, and Still Live Happily Ever After](#) and [How We Live Now: Redefining Home and Family in the 21st Century](#)."

Paul Ingles: Dr. Bella DePaulo is an author and visiting professor at the University of California at Santa Barbara. Dr. DePaulo, you've also authored a blog called "[The Happy Loner](#)" that begins: "Loners get a bad rap. Loner is the label we affix to criminals, outcasts and just about everyone else we find scary or unsettling."

Then you quote author Anneli Rufus who wrote a different take that a loner is quote "[someone who prefers to be alone](#)" which you say is different from those who remain on the outside feeling isolated but desperately want to be on the inside. Help me understand the distinction. It sounds to me like you accept the more troubling definition of loner, but just want to make room for Loner 2.0 or Loner B who just prefers to be alone. Is that fair?

Bella DePaulo: Yes. Well, [Anneli Rufus](#) says that a loner is someone who prefers to be alone, so that's her central basic definition and she thinks that when we call these serial killers "loners" and we affix that kind of dark, menacing meaning to loner, we're distorting the true meaning of loner.

But let me say that whether being alone, living alone is a good or bad thing depends on how you got there. So if you got there because you want it and you love it and you crave it, that's great. If you got there because, let's say a spouse died, that's more difficult although some people find that once a spouse dies, they come into their own in their own space and time.

The real problematic person living alone is the one who has been rejected, who has been ostracized, particularly if they've been chronically ostracized. I think that can be an ingredient to real deep anger and the potential for violence.

Ingles: So let's say your "Loner B" in our little construct here, you prefer to be alone. Is it valuable to be even concerned about the claims of researchers that they might be at risk of becoming "Loner A" like distrustful of society or prone to feeling rejected? Is it valuable, if you choose to be alone, to be aware of your place on the continuum and have an awareness of this conversation?



DePaulo: I suppose so, but you know what's really interesting? There's a whole cottage industry of loneliness. If you went on Google and typed "loneliness," you'd probably get tens of thousands of returns and yet the kind of research that would look at whether people have chosen to be alone or not is strikingly missing. So we really don't know if the people who choose to be alone, who savor their solitude, who get great creative work done, get great restorative benefits, we don't know if they are prone to some of the same negative risks that we've heard about so often in the general literature on loneliness. We just don't know. That's my scientific answer.

Ingles: Okay and do you have another answer?

DePaulo: Yes, I wonder about it. Imagine if we tried to force everyone to live with other people because we think that would somehow cure loneliness. Would it really? I think especially about the change over time and how older people live. It used to be that older people, say if a spouse died, they would almost automatically end up living with other people, often their grown children. Now that older people have Social Security and other ways of actually buying their own independence, more and more of them are [choosing to live alone](#) and they're certainly choosing to stay outside of institutions if they can possibly afford it and so it seems like people are making a choice and so I think we should be cautious about demonizing people who live alone or thinking: you poor thing. Your life is going to be nasty, brutish and short because they've chosen this. Many people who live alone could find other people to live with, but that's not what they want to do.

Ingles: Well let's see, let me go here with this then; one of your books is entitled [Singled Out: How Singles Are Stereotyped, Stigmatized and Ignored and Still Live Happily Ever After](#), so let me look at the first half of that title to start because it sounds like it's kind of what we were talking about here. It sounds like that you're citing a societal preference for coupling.

DePaulo: Yes, absolutely.

Ingles: Are you suggesting that by stereotyping, stigmatizing and ignoring signals that society could be amplifying feelings of loneliness?

DePaulo: Yes, it is and ironically, what it could also be doing is pushing people to marry who really don't feel like it's right for them and what happens then is you have people who end up lonelier than they would have been because they're marrying because they think they should marry, because they think it's the only legitimate, respected, celebrated option and so then they end up with what is probably the most painful kind of loneliness; the loneliness you experience when there is someone lying there right beside you.

Ingles: What would you call on society to do for its part in quelling loneliness brought on in part by those attitudes about singles? I mean if someone listening says, "Oh yeah, I guess I have thought that about singles," what would you suggest they change in their behavior or their attitude that might tone it down a little bit?

DePaulo: I think they should realize that there are [so many ways to live](#) in contemporary American society. That's one of the joys of living in this time and place.

[Little girl playing alone photo](#) available from Shutterstock

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