

Please Try This at Home

Monthly Tips for Increasing the Joy in Your Life

Listen to Your Loneliness

What kind of loneliness have you experienced in your life?

The loneliness of walking into a new situation where you didn't know anyone? Of losing someone you cared about? Of attending twenty-five million weddings as a single person, feeling like your still-lack-of-partnership is being paraded before the whole world? Of lying in bed next to the person who is supposed to be closest to you and knowing they really don't get you at all? Of feeling like a stranger in a crowd that is supposedly made up of your closest friends or family? Or the kind that's like chronic pain, a weight that sits on you every morning when you wake up, then subsides just a touch when you are busy or distracted, only to pounce on you with full force the moment the distraction goes away?

If you've experienced any of those, I'm with you. Been there, done that, and sometimes still do. It's awful. And it feels like we can't talk about it, because if we were honest about exactly how bad it felt, everyone would look at us sideways and then run like we're wearing a shirt made of tarantulas. Because who wants to be with a lonely person, right? When we sense that another person is lonely, doesn't it stir up a fear that their need may be bottomless and we'll be sucked dry if we try to help? Or maybe it's a reminder of our own loneliness that we are trying to pretend is not there? Yuck.

If we do talk about being lonely, we get advice like: "Just be patient. Trust that the right person or friend group will come along. You just need to get out there and socialize more. Put yourself in places where you are likely to meet people. Just get involved in more activities. Keep yourself busy so you don't think about it and it will go away." Yeah, right! Like we've got the energy to sign up for a rabidly extroverted extracurricular schedule with this horrible weight sitting on us and the voices in our heads screaming, "You will always be alone. You will never belong. No one will ever really get you." Besides, we've learned that we can be just as lonely in a crowd of people, or sometimes with a significant other, even, as we can be home alone in front of the TV.

Why Just Getting Socially Busy Doesn't Work

What this no doubt well-intentioned (and partially valid) advice misses is 1) that there is a difference between being *with* people and being *known*, and 2) that activity helps numb the symptoms of loneliness, but it doesn't treat the root cause of the pain. Now, I do believe that using busyness to make sure we don't feel loneliness *all* of the time is a really good strategy. What good is there in feeling depressed all the time? But between times of busyness, we also need to pay attention to what the loneliness is actually trying to tell us: that we need to get more deeply known.

If loneliness happens when we do not feel deeply known, what exactly does it mean to be known, and even more importantly, how do we *get* known? Two things about known-ness clue us into the fact that we need to pop the hood on our Limbic Brain for the answer. First, known-ness is a *feeling*. Second, it has to do with safety. When we feel known, we feel more confident

in the world because we know that however bad it gets out there, there is a “home” place for us, a safe place where our needs will be understood and met, so fundamentally we are okay. Any time we are talking about emotions and safety, we are talking about the Limbic Brain.

The *what* brain? If you’ve read some of my other newsletters, you know that the brain can be divided into three according to the different functions it performs. Issue 32 talked about the Neocortex that handles conscious learning and reasoning and the Reptilian Brain that handles fear responses, but today we need to check out the Limbic Brain, the part that handles emotional relatedness (known-ness) and relational safety.

What’s bizarre about this brain is that it is *not* a closed system. It only, only, only forms in relationship. When a mom (or other caretaker) looks into the eyes of an infant or toddler and says, “Ohhh, you look sad,” picking the kid up to provide some comfort, the mom’s actually helping that little one’s brain to form. Because first, it is only by seeing another human being accurately name the emotion that we experience that teaches us to recognize what “sad” is, so that eventually we can make sense of our emotions for ourselves. And second, it is only by having another person understand and respond to our internal experience that we learn that our existence in the world is acknowledged and that we can be effective in getting the world to respond to our needs. In other words, that experience of being accurately seen and appropriately responded to is what gives us the feeling of being both known and safe in the world. *Without that interaction of reflection and response the Limbic Brain will not fully develop.* Being seen and responded to in *a wide variety of our experiences* is such a core need that if we don’t get it, our brains will not fully form or function. It’s *that* important in our early stages of life.

Well, it turns out that it’s not really that different in later stages of life. The Limbic Brain is still not a closed system. To feel known and safe in the world, we *still* need other people to witness not only what we experience but how we experience it as well, and to respond to us in ways that show that we are understood. We can’t just do this for ourselves. Susan Sarandon’s quote from the movie *Shall We Dance* captures it:

[The reason people get married is] because we need a witness to our lives. There's billions of people on the planet. I mean, what does any one life really mean? But in a marriage you're promising to care about everything, the good things, the bad things, the terrible things, the mundane things, all of it, all the time. Every day you're saying your life will not go unnoticed because I will notice it. Your life will not go unwitnessed because I will be your witness.

Of course, not all marriages actually do that for the spouses. But it’s one of the primary things we hope marriage could do for us. Because if loneliness were an equation, it would go something like: the more parts of one’s whole life get witnessed and responded to appropriately, the less painful or frequent the feeling of loneliness. Most of us get married because it feels like having someone who is with you most of the time would be the best way to minimize loneliness.

Increasing Known-ness, Married or Not!

Okay, but what does that mean for those who are single, divorced, widowed, or in relationships that provide neither accurate perception of experience nor appropriate responses? Is loneliness just a cruel joke, a misfiring pain for which there is no cure? No! It’s a message saying, “I am causing you pain to alert you to your need, not just to be around other people, but to be around them in ways that allow them to see more of the ways that you experience life than you have been showing them. Only then can they reflect back your experience to you and respond to you.

It's only when this need is being met for a good deal of your life experience that I will stop nudging you with this pain."

If that's the message of loneliness, what exactly would it look like to respond to it? Let's do one longer example and then some shorter ones. Say we're not dating, we live alone, and we've got ten folks we'd call friends or close family. With five of them, we mostly do activities—scrap booking, working out, golfing, motorcycling—and that's about all we talk about. With three others, we kind of talk about what is going on in our lives, but just about what's going well, because they seem like they have it all together and we don't want to look bad. With two of them, we can talk about what's not going well, but we only talk maybe once every two or three months because they are really busy.

In this scenario, the parts of our lives that are regularly seen and responded to by others are just our successes and our activities. That means our day to day boring stuff, the thoughts that cross our mind in our down time, our sad or hard stuff, our romantic needs, our musings about what life is all about, what we dream of doing someday, and lots of other things rarely get witnessed. And it's these things that are setting off the loneliness trigger.

So maybe we can't get Match.com to pan out and send us a significant other—that part's not within our control. And we've already got enough activities and a respectable number of friends. But what we're missing is taking the risk with our current friends 1) to be more honest with the "success story" ones about our experiences—the more mundane or not-so-successful ones, and 2) to more intentionally and assertively make time with our close friends/family so that we get more time with those trusted-but-busy people (e.g., "Dan, I know we both live really busy lives, but the times that we get to talk are really valuable to me and I hope they are to you, too. I'd really like to see if we could get together more often. Would there be a time every other week or so that we could just set aside and know that's our time and try not to let anything else get in the way?")

Risks to Take for Your Loneliness Level

While this example may fit part of your story, there are a number of other levels loneliness that each hold particular challenges for moving into greater known-ness. Here are some risk challenges based on a few different levels of loneliness:

- 1. It's hard to talk with anyone, anytime.** Perhaps start by getting a mammal pet like a cat or dog versus a turtle or fish. Since mammals also have Limbic Brains, they can provide us with a certain level of feeling "witnessed." Once per week, challenge yourself to tell one person who crosses your path something minor about yourself and to ask them one question about themselves as well.
- 2. I only talk with coworkers about work or people I do activities with about that activity.** See if you can ask one of the people at work or an activity if they would like to grab some coffee or a meal before or after work or an activity gathering. While together, ask them some not terribly personal questions about what other things they enjoy, or about their important relationships, and tell them some similar things about you. If you enjoy your time, see if they would like to get together again sometime.
- 3. I get together from time to time with friends or family I enjoy, but there are parts of my life I never talk about with them.** Try gradually pushing the limits of the topics you are comfortable discussing with the people in your life. Share a thought, dream, or struggle that

feels a little more personal to you and see how they respond. Ask a question about a dream or struggle they have had and see if they talk with you at that next level. Keep engaging with them at the level that they can receive without getting weirded out.

4. **I have friends or family that I talk about a lot of things with, but it's hard to find the time to get together.** Ask one or two close friends to experiment with you, for a few months at least, in shifting the way you think about your time together so that it's more like the way you'd think about a doctor's appointment, a graduation, a weekly class you can't miss, or something else that you'd schedule the rest of your life around, rather than canceling. See if you both can come to count on this time where you get known rather than not knowing when the next time will come.
5. **I get together regularly with close friends and we talk about a lot, but certain ways they respond to me keep me from being fully open with them.** Take the risk of lovingly letting your friends know that you'd like to be able to be more open with them, but that certain ways that they respond to you keep you from being as free with them as you'd like to be. Kindly explain the specific ways that you would like them to respond to you and ask if they would be willing to try that. Be open to receiving their invitations for you to respond differently to them as well.

Now, lots of us avoid the risks I described above for fear of being rejected, shamed, or discovering that people in our lives who we thought were close and responsive weren't as responsive as we thought. I realize that these are real risks. People do reject us. People sometimes cannot handle closeness, even as they crave it. And sometimes we have to leave friends or even hurtful family behind and develop new relationships with people who are more okay with vulnerability, openness, and witnessing others' lives without having to be the center of attention or without responding negatively to hearing others' struggles. Unfortunately, that's a part of life. Really, the only reason for us to consider taking these risks is that loneliness is so darned painful that even if we try to ignore it, it just won't go away. It's kinda like surgery. We don't risk anesthetic, recovery, and rehab unless the pain or tumor is having a big effect on our lives. Loneliness is the pain that makes us risk connection despite our substantial fears.

So even as I'm *always* having to do in my own life, I challenge to you risk the next level of known-ness, trusting that there *are* people out there who can go with you to the next level, even if it takes time and a lot of effortful scheduling to get there.

If you or someone you know would like help with getting more known and less lonely, feel free to call me at 303-931-4284 for a free 20-minute consultation or email info@jenniferdiebel.com.

Thanks for reading!

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