

An Encounter with a Lonely Person

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Abstract

Loneliness is often perceived as a private struggle, yet it is a universal human experience. This reflective essay explores the journey of understanding and addressing profound loneliness through self-connection, social service, and empathetic engagement with others. Drawing on personal encounters, philosophical insights from Jainism, and psychological perspectives on kindness and boundaries, the essay highlights how purposeful activity, emotional self-awareness, and compassionate action can alleviate the sense of isolation. It emphasizes that while relationships provide support, true emotional fulfillment stems from inner connection, self-respect, and meaningful contribution to society.

Keywords: Loneliness, Self-Connection, Empathy, Social Service, Jain Philosophy, Emotional Well-being, People-Pleasing, Boundaries

1. Introduction

“A profound unmitigated loneliness is the only truth of life.” – R.K. Narayan. Loneliness is a deeply personal yet universal experience, often emerging unexpectedly, regardless of social circumstances. I understood this only when I once received a call from a woman who was profoundly lonely despite being single, a state research often associated with happiness. The least I could do was help her connect with her Self and ask her to devote time to social service and serving the destitute. She readily agreed and later shared that, the way dopamine is released by exercising, good hormones are released when we do social work. The Dalai Lama also says *“Charity increases our immunity”*.

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2. Loneliness and Purposeful Action

She shared a quiet worry about the future. While her peers were planning for their children's schools and family holidays, she felt she had no long-term purpose. Her voice trembled as she said, "I don't know what's ahead for me." It was a valid concern. In a world driven by comparison and timelines, not having the 'next step' can make one feel lost. I had no immediate solution to offer. Instead, I encouraged her to stop waiting for someone to support her and to consider becoming support for someone else.

3. Philosophical Perspectives

“आप अकेलो अवतरे, मरे अकेलो होय ।

यूँ कबहूँ इस जीव को, साथी सगा न कोय ॥”

This verse from *Ekatva Bhāvanā*, the fourth of the twelve contemplations (*Bārah Bhāvanā*) in Jain philosophy, reminds us that we enter and depart the world alone. The belief that a spouse, family member, or friend is always with us is an illusion. This contemplation urges us to find meaning and peace not through dependency, but by connecting our emotional life with something deeper than companionship. Helping others, knowing oneself, and practicing kindness are not ways to avoid loneliness, but ways to deal with it. It's a good reminder that you have to depend on yourself. No matter how many people are around, it's up to you to find your own peace and know what you want. Relationships may help us but they do not make us complete. The journey towards meaning, stability and fulfilment is ultimately one we must walk on our own. I suggested she visit orphanages or schools for the visually impaired. She did not hesitate, despite her personal struggles, and later said it gave her “mental peace.” That line hit me hard. What truly helps is empathy, connecting with those less privileged. Helping others isn't a distraction; it transforms suffering into presence. Her story made me wonder: why do we





wait for loneliness to crush us before we reach out? Society trains us to hide our loneliness behind gathered smiles. But really, feeling lonely isn't something to be ashamed of, it's something everyone goes

through at some point. The answer doesn't always lie in finding new people, but in finding deeper purpose. While serving meals at an orphanage, she was not merely feeding children; she was nourishing her own soul. In giving to others, she rediscovered herself.

When you visit an orphanage or an old age home, suddenly your own problems don't seem so big. You realise your “emptiness” is not unique. There are people who haven't spoken to a family member in years, children who are waiting eagerly for visitors just to be hugged. This reality check isn't about feeling bad or ignoring how you feel, but about realizing that listening to someone else can really help break down the walls of loneliness. Loneliness feeds on inactivity. And by activity, I mean purposeful presence. Being available to listen, even if you can't solve anything. Showing up, even when you have nothing fancy to offer. That's how people begin to feel seen and sometimes, that's all they need.

4. People-Pleasing and Boundaries

People-pleasers often say “yes” to avoid conflict rather than from true generosity. However, in this process, people often take advantage of you and start giving you menial job(s). Though no work is small work, it is important to have boundaries defined. Yes, boundaries defined for what to say “No” to! True kindness feels light, not burdensome. It arises from “*I want to*” rather than “*I have to*.” Learning to say no is not selfish; it is self-respect. When a people pleaser learns to say no it's not rejection but a declaration that their time and energy have value.

The first refusal may surprise both the asker, who never considered being declined, and the pleaser, who discovers that the world doesn't end when they set boundaries. When they start saying no, something amazing happens. Where there were once just expectations, there's now understanding. Being kind to others must also include being kind to oneself. Healthy relationships work both ways- you give AND take. Sometimes, the most compassionate act is allowing others to manage their own responsibilities while preserving one's own emotional well-being.

It's Okay To Say...

- NO, if you don't want to do it.
- NO, if you don't like the people.
- NO, if you'd rather relax.
- NO, if you're already over scheduled.
- NO, if you don't have the time.
- NO, if it doesn't fit your values.
- NO, if you feel forced to say "yes".
- NO, if it makes you feel uncomfortable.
- NO, if it doesn't make you happy.

5. Reflections on Sleep, Solitude, and Connection

Sometimes, I wake in the middle of the night and instinctively reach for my phone, straining my eyes, not even sure what I'm looking for. Some faces cross by; some memories are relived and in the deep silence I at times even connect with those who might be having thoughts about me. I tallied it many times later and they said "Yo, I was thinking about you too". These midnight wake-ups feel like being stranded between two worlds, the one I left behind in sleep and the one I'm not yet ready to face in daylight.

The cold glow of a phone cannot substitute genuine connection, yet I scroll, hoping for something familiar to fill the quiet. And when I discover that someone else was thinking of me at the same moment, it feels like proof that we're all connected in ways we can't fully understand. I don't think there's any perfect substitute for sleeping. Not even meditation can substitute for it. Sleep isn't just rest, it's when my body heals, when my brain sorts through the day's clutter, when I recharge for whatever comes next.

6. Everyday Acts of Connection

Loneliness doesn't need a grand solution. A timely call, a shared meal, an unplanned chat with your sibling, or sitting quietly beside parents after dinner, these small acts often heal

more than we realize. We often wait for rescue from loneliness, yet what we truly need is a reason to show up for others. The woman I helped found peace in serving strangers; the habitual “yes”-sayer found strength in saying no. If you ever feel invisible or alone,



remember you are not alone. We all have our moments. What matters is meeting ourselves with gentleness. Whether through service, kindness, boundaries, spending time with family, writing or simply sitting with your feelings- every act counts. And progress isn't always visible. As the saying goes: “A stonecutter hammers at his rock a hundred times without visible effect, but the hundred-and-first blow splits it in two. It was not the last blow that did it, but all that came before.”

7. Conclusion

Loneliness is not merely the absence of people, but the absence of meaningful engagement with oneself and the world. Transformation occurs through purposeful activity, empathy, philosophical reflection, and cultivating boundaries. By serving others, nurturing self-connection, and engaging in everyday acts of presence, individuals can navigate solitude and achieve emotional stability. True fulfillment does not come from eliminating loneliness, but from meeting it with understanding, compassion, and self-awareness. As Lord Mahavira teaches, “*He who knows one, knows all.*” By understanding ourselves, we can empathize with others, transforming loneliness into an opportunity for growth, connection, and purposeful living. Ultimately, we do not need perfect lives; we need gentle reminders that we belong : somewhere, to someone even if that someone is ourselves.