

EIP

Loneliness is more than just a bad feeling, it's a strategy against Our Souls

When I was asked to prepare something for Mental Health Awareness Week with the theme of "loneliness", my first thought was "well I don't ever feel lonely so what could I write" and thought I would have to go and ask someone else who appears to be lonely i.e. living on their own, no friends, no community etc. Then when I thought about it, there must have been times when I felt like I was the lone person feeling the way I did or felt like I was the only one feeling a particular way, alone in a situation without being able to share what I was experiencing.

So thinking back I can remember going to senior school and being highly aware (which I don't think I had experienced before) that I was the only black girl in my class and wondering whether anybody would want to be my friend, would anybody invite me back to their house after school or pick me to be in their sports team; there were a few times at the beginning when I was the last person to be picked but they soon came to their senses. I did have a great group of friends and was one of the "cool kids" but always very aware that I was the only black girl amongst us and how quickly growing up in the 80's in Essex, things could go west very quickly and whether any of my friends would be there for me (nothing ever did happen and I still count a few of those girls as my dear friends). I am still aware of whether I will be in a diverse group of people and how being the only person of colour can feel but I have grown in confidence now unlike my 11 year old former self.

Then there was changing my role from a secretary within a large secretarial function to managing that group of strong characters and sometimes tricky people. I had gone from being part of a set of friends/colleagues to being the manager that they no longer knew whether they should be friends with anymore. My position of being privy to the office

gossip and politics was gone and although I had been told that being a people manager is a lonely role, I never thought it would be that bad! I had to strengthen my resolve because I wanted the progression which meant I would feel somewhat uncomfortable and learn to live and deal with that.

The time when I felt most lonely though was being in my mid-20's and diagnosed with a rare condition that very few people had heard of – although I did feel a bit better when it was mentioned in a Carry on Doctor film... some level of fame at last. Whilst my friends were out having a great time partying, I had to stay home because practically everything that was socially enjoyable made my condition worse. Why was this happening to me?! To try and gather more understanding of my condition and to gain more knowledge and support, I joined a support group which was great in one aspect because I did get the knowledge I needed but then felt lonely within the group because I didn't (and still don't) want to be defined by it so again decided to deal with the condition head on and tackle it when I need to.

The fact is that statistics shows that loneliness is likely to increase your risk of death by 26%, 500,000 older people go at least 5-6 days without speaking to anyone at all, 25 million people sometimes or often feel lonely and women are reported to feel lonelier than men! These are terribly sad statistics, however, there are ways to try and combat loneliness which could be to try talking to a friend, your Mental Health First Aider or the Samaritans (116 123 or email jo@samaritans.org). Perhaps join a class or group for an activity that interests you, listen to podcasts/webinars about wellbeing or find ways to join peer support groups with people that have had similar experiences and where you may be able to support each other.

I gave a lot of thought to why I was so quick to say that I'd never felt loneliness and wondered if it's because I may have felt ashamed or embarrassed or like I had failed at that time of my life. It could have been for all of those reasons but I'm pleased that to maintain my good mental health I tackled loneliness did what I could to not feel separated and alone.

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