

## Chapter Five

### Loneliness: The Voice of the Empty Place

Definitions:

**Loneliness:** Isolation causing sadness, unhappiness, forlornness, despondency

Loneliness is a complex and usually unpleasant **emotional** response to **isolation**. Loneliness typically includes anxious feelings about a lack of **connection** or **communication** with other beings, both in the present and extending into the future. As such, loneliness can be felt even when surrounded by other people.<sup>1</sup>

**Boredom** is an **emotional** or **psychological** state experienced when an individual is left without anything in particular to do, is not interested in his or her surroundings, or feels that a day or period is dull or tedious.<sup>2</sup>

Boredom is a craving in our mind; loneliness is a craving in our heart.

*Loneliness and the feeling of being unwanted is the most terrible poverty.*

*Mother Teresa*

Loneliness is a sinking feeling, usually in the area of our solar plexus (the pit of our stomach or heart). It is not a pleasant feeling. Most of us will go to extremes to avoid it. God gave us the empty place in order to help us be healthy human beings, functioning the way he designed us. The empty place cries out with the emotion loneliness, making us aware of our need not only for relationships, but intimacy. The area where we feel the empty place is the same area that most people attribute to our heart and soul.

In order to be healthy human beings, we need a place where we can be ourselves, a place where we are known by others, appreciated and encouraged, with support to move toward fulfilling our potential. Most important, we need a place where we can be involved in each other's struggles. We all crave to be known, but there lies the problem. To be known is to be vulnerable. For many of us, our limbic memories about trusting and being vulnerable also mean pain and betrayal. Remember--recovery is the process of learning to trust again.

Here are a few recent studies on the effects of loneliness.

*Social isolation, loneliness could be greater threat to public health than obesity, researchers say:*

WASHINGTON — Loneliness and social isolation may represent a greater public health hazard than obesity, and their impact has been growing and will continue to grow, according to research. These trends suggest that Americans are becoming less socially connected and experiencing more loneliness.<sup>3</sup>

The potentially harmful effects of loneliness and social isolation on health and longevity, especially among older adults, are well established. For example, in 2013 a report found that loneliness can raise levels of stress hormones and inflammation, which in turn can increase the risk of heart disease, arthritis, type 2 diabetes, dementia and suicide attempts.

Obesity and alcoholism may be bad for your health, but there's a less obvious condition out there that is just as dangerous – loneliness. According to a study, the support of family, friends and neighbors can increase your chances of living to a healthy old age by 50 percent. The findings, based on an analysis of more than 300,000 people, suggest social isolation is as bad for your health as smoking 15 cigarettes a day or being an alcoholic. It also does more damage to your health than not exercising – and is twice as harmful as obesity.<sup>4</sup>

Global health services company Cigna recently teamed up with market research firm Ipsos, to investigate loneliness in America. They conducted a nationwide survey, which found that 47% of Americans lacked meaningful interpersonal interactions with a friend or family member on a daily basis. 43% reported having weak relationships, experiencing feelings of isolation, and an overall lack of companionship. 46% said they felt lonely often, while 47% reported feeling left out.

27% said no one really understood them. 20% rarely felt close to anyone and 18% felt like there was no one they could talk to. Researchers utilized the UCLA Loneliness Scale, a well-regarded metric. The scale runs between a score of 20 and 80. 43 and above is considered lonely. The average score for an American was 44, according to the Cigna survey. It's ironic that we're more connected than ever before, and yet lonelier than ever.

In the last few decades, the number of close friendships in America has dropped. Between 1985 and 2004, the General Social Survey reported that the average number of confidants Americans felt they could talk to about important matters in their lives fell from 2.94 to 2.08. Worse still, 25% of people surveyed responded with "zero." Andrew Horn, CEO and co-founder of Tribute, calls this the connection crisis: "This dearth of relationships is not just making us sad, it's literally making us sick," he says. "There was a recent meta-analysis of 300,000 patients and it found that having weak social ties was as harmful to your health as being an alcoholic, and twice as harmful as having obesity." To turn this worrying trend around, Horn hopes we can become more intentional about communication. Social skills are foundational to our success, both personal and professional; why don't we teach it in schools at the same time as other core skills like math, science, and English? The benefits go beyond our personal wellbeing; Horn believes it could make society safer. "If you don't have friends, that is what opens you up for extremism. It's that when you don't belong you will do anything to belong," Horn says. Andrew Horn is the CEO and co-founder of Tribute.

I have a friend who is the director of a large one-year residential treatment program. They use the *Genesis Process for Relapse Prevention*, which has a component to help the client understand the unconscious emotions and behaviors that lead to relapse. He said that the number one reason for client relapse was loneliness. Loneliness is such an uncomfortable feeling that clients were not actually aware of experiencing the feeling, but only the cravings for whatever behavior or substance they have used to avoid it, thus resulting in the powerlessness they experience in relapsing.

We have a Genesis component called *false belief systems*. We have discovered that it is the false belief systems that were created out of trauma (and are now mostly unconscious) that cause us to do the very thing we don't want to do and be the person we don't want to be. These false belief systems have something in common—they cause us to become isolated. The most common false beliefs are “I don't trust anyone” and “I don't need anyone.” I think the number one strategy of the enemy to cause us to self-destruct is isolation, which leads to loneliness. God designed us to thrive in relationships, so anything the enemy can do to hinder that will give him control in our lives.

Janie was a new resident in a recovery home and was just beginning the Genesis Process. Her behavior seemed mystifying. She had suffered sexual abuse from a young age and was afraid of men. Sexual abuse can cause someone to confuse lust with love. She had a difficult time walking by herself—and would often suffer panic attacks if a car slowed down while passing her on the road. But at the same time, Janie would often meet up with men for brief sexual encounters in cars or at the park. She would sleep with anyone on the first date, and text sexual pictures of herself to men she had just met. This was the one area that Janie wouldn't explore in Genesis, and she tried to keep it a secret. One day, as her counselor was gently questioning her, Janie realized that she was deeply lonely. She couldn't trust enough to really be vulnerable with anyone, but she still sought connection with other human beings. This resulted in a lot of one-night-stands—human connection without real intimacy.

When we can't trust, we subconsciously push other people away. If we've been wounded in the past when we were vulnerable, the limbic brain will associate isolation with safety. While we might say that we're lonely and longing for connection with other people, we can be completely unaware of all the behaviors that keep us isolated. The most dangerous thing about the empty place is when you get comfortable living with it—or worse, you're not aware of it at all.

### **Areas that can push people away and cause isolation**

- Anger
- Defensiveness
- Depression
- Codependency
- Control
- Workaholism
- Electronics
- Social Media
- Pornography
- TV
- Social media
- Religiousness/legalism
- Judgmental and critical
- Addiction
- Secrets
- Independence/ inability to ask for help



Let's look at some of the areas that our society is struggling with—behaviors that cause increased isolation and loneliness through self-gratification.

## **Social Media**

There's never been a time in history that so many people have become addicted/dependent in such a short period of time as in the last 10 years with the flood electronics.

For the first time ever there are more gadgets in the world than there are people, including a growing number that only communicate with other machines, according to data from digital analysts at GSMA Intelligence. The number of active mobile devices and human beings crossed over somewhere around the **7.19 billion** mark. Oct 7, 2014 The Independent UK.

The number of mobile phone users in the world is expected to pass the five billion mark by 2019.

An October interview in The Guardian quoted former Google, Twitter, and Facebook workers, saying the products they worked on were designed to be addictive, and that “our minds can be hijacked.”

A Kaiser Family Foundation study found that kids between 8 and 18 spend 4 1/2 hours a day watching TV or video on mobile devices. Add gaming and social media on top of that, and you have a good part of the day taken up by digital media.

I read an article where sociologists and psychologists were calling the upcoming generation socially retarded. The reason for this social and emotional retardation is that 80% of what we communicate is non-verbal, it is through body language—facial expressions, tone of voice, and especially just being able to pick up on someone's vibes. When we're communicating through

electronics, we're only reading the words, which is only about 20% of our content. The result is that people are avoiding social situations because they feel inadequate. In our current culture, most people don't even want to talk on the phone. You call a person and he won't pick up, but if you text, he'll get right back to you.

60 minutes did a segment on why we can't put down our smart phones, called brain hacking.

“The rising problem of smart phone addiction is because the apps and content are purposefully designed to be habit-forming, says former Google product manager Tristan Harris. He tells Anderson Cooper the apps and content — especially social media — carried on phones are purposely designed to be habit-forming. Cooper's story also explores the brain science that explains how people are so susceptible to what some programmers call “brain hacking.”

“There's a whole playbook of techniques to get you using the product for as long as possible,” Harris tells Cooper. Kids are often the biggest users. The strategy of engaging the user for as long as possible is just good business, even if it can have a bad effect on people. “They want you to use it for long periods of time. Because that's how they make their money,” Harris tells Cooper.

No wonder our phones are so addictive. Every time I check my phone, I'm playing the slot machine to see, “What did I get?” This is one way to hijack people's minds and create a habit. When someone pulls a lever, sometimes they get a reward, an exciting reward. This actually manipulates your brain to release more dopamine—which is your pleasure and reward



neurochemical—and it produces the same feeling and excitement as gambling. It turns out that this design technique can be embedded inside of all these products.

Socially, Ken struggled all through school. He was awkward and often said the wrong thing. Every time he was in a social situation, he felt a great deal of shame. It just seemed easier to spend most of his time in his room alone, playing video games. When he got his first smart phone, he found himself looking at it multiple times a day. He checked the phone in secret, too—under the table when others were talking, or he'd excuse himself to the restroom and check the phone there. Soon he was sleeping with the phone and checking social media during the night. On the screen, he could create any persona he wanted. He was more handsome, more cool, more witty than in real life. It was so much easier than facing the nervousness he felt around real people. Whenever he felt stressed, he found himself scrolling and scrolling through content on the phone. Even though he was hardly reading or understanding what was on the screen, he couldn't seem to stop himself. He knew the phone had become something much larger in his life than he'd intended. His pastor suggested that he try "fasting" from the phone. But without it, he felt anxious and depressed. He craved his phone the way other people craved sugar or drinking.

The bottom line is that the whole gamut of electronics allows us to get all our needs met without human contact. In other words, we don't need anybody.

## **Pornography**

Let's look at another area in our society causing us to be more independent, self-gratifying and isolated—pornography.

It is a powerfully addicting means to temporarily anaesthetize the awareness of the empty place.

Here are a few recent statistics.

64% of youth pastors and 57% of pastors have struggled with pornography currently or in the past. 54% of youth pastors who currently struggle “live in constant fear of being discovered.” 41% of adult Christians think pastors should resign if they are found using porn; only 8% of pastors think so. No wonder they live in constant fear!<sup>7</sup>

According to the research approximately 64 percent, or two thirds, of U.S. men admit to viewing porn at least monthly, with the number of Christian men nearly equaling the national average. When divided by age, "eight out of ten (79%) men between the ages of 18 and 30 view pornography at least monthly, and two thirds (67%) of men between the ages of 31 and 49 view pornography at least monthly.

Pornography is not only a problem with men but also a very rapidly increasing problem with women.

According to a study published in the *Journal of Adolescent Research*, **about half (49%)** of young adult women agree that viewing pornography is an **acceptable** way of expressing one's sexuality. According to a survey of more than 11,000 college-age women, **more than half (52%)** of young women today are exposed to sexually explicit material **by the age of 14.**

Pornography is like looking at as the ocean where everything seems calm, but underneath the surface there is an undertow, unseen but dangerous. When I do seminars in churches, the overwhelming struggle is with pornography and sex addiction. Here are some of the effects of this undercurrent that is having a powerful impact on our society, especially youth. You will notice that all these effects have something in common, they increase isolation—more emptiness.

Porn is one of the main causes of erectile dysfunction

Pornography is a fantasy, and real life can never measure up to it. The sexual areas of the brain become over stimulated, so having sex in a normal way cannot live up to the fantasy. This causes an inability to achieve an erection. When pornography is coupled with masturbation, the brain will attach a craving for whatever we were visualizing at the time of orgasm.

Porn is causing dissatisfaction (shame) with our genitals

Pornography is one of the main reasons for the trend of pubic hairlessness. Both boys and especially girls are shaving their genitals (and some their entire bodies) because that's what they see is attractive in pornography. Also men/boys are feeling very insecure and self-conscious about the size of their penises, because in porn videos all the men have large penises. Also women and girls are increasingly having labial reductions (surgery to trim their labia minora) because they say in looks gross.

Can increase propensity for homosexuality

Because of the insecurity, confusion and shame caused by pornography, many youth find it safer to have same-sex relationships, where there is less fear of being judged.

The earlier the porn experiences, the more ingrained it becomes.

The average age of first porn contact is 11 years old (some surveys say 8 years old).

Porn tends to objectify women, making sex something you do to women, rather than with them in relationship. And 60% of divorces have porn/sex addiction as a major factor.<sup>10</sup>

I really have a heart and a burden for the confusion and insecurity youth are experiencing about their sexuality. For many of them, there is no safe place to talk about it and get support for what they are struggling with. When I talk about this at seminars, it tends to make many Christians uncomfortable, which of course makes it unsafe for those struggling with sex and their sexual identity. It seems like almost every movie and TV show is intentional about normalizing homosexuality. Also, in most shows, if people kiss they also have sex. How confusing this all is for the younger generation. Because of this, there is a growing trend of teens identifying themselves as *asexual*— a person who has no sexual feelings or desires.

*What should young people do with their lives today? Many things, obviously. But the most daring thing is to create stable communities in which the terrible disease of loneliness can be cured.*

—Kurt Vonnegut

## Stress

Another area that contributes to our culture's epidemic of isolation and loneliness is stress.

Stress is the trash of modern life. We all generate it but if you don't dispose of it properly, it will pile up and overtake your life. *Danzae Pace*

Rates of stress-induced illnesses are extremely high in every demographic, and researchers are working furiously to uncover the reasons behind the rise in anxiety disorders, eating disorders, depression, binge drinking, and worrisome patterns of self-harm in young people. Affluent children and teens are at particularly high risk. A recent survey showed that 80 percent of students in a Silicon Valley high school reported moderate to severe levels of anxiety and depression. Stress is now the number one cause of disability worldwide. We think of chronic stress in children and teenagers as the societal equivalent of climate change—a problem that has been building over generations and will take considerable effort and a change of habits to overcome.<sup>11</sup>

Stress is another word for anxiety and anxiety is another word for fear. When we live in a conscious state of fear it affects us negatively in every area of her life; physically, mentally, emotionally, socially and even spiritually. Anxiety can result in depression and depression is one of the main causes of our self-destructive behavior, including suicide. Overall suicide rates have risen 30% since 1999 and the number of kids making hospital visits for suicidal thoughts and actual suicide attempts increased 175 percent between 2008 and 2015. 1 in 5 are at risk.

Loneliness is stressful and depressing.

*Every successful individual knows that his or her achievement depends on a community of persons working together. Paul Ryan*

## **Codependency**

Let's look at a one more behavior that can cause us to be isolated and push people away – codependency.

Codependency is relationship addiction. The reason codependency creates loneliness and isolation is that codependents know what everybody needs—but not their own needs. This makes it hard to ask for help.

- Codependents **FEEL** responsible for other people's **feelings, problems, and behaviors**.
- Codependency or *Relationship Addiction* says:
  - ❖ I'm OK when you're OK.
  - ❖ When you're not OK then I'm not OK.
  - ❖ So the only way for me to be OK is to make you OK

Codependent helping is always harmful, because we do things for others that they should be doing for themselves. We do this out of our own need to rescue and our need to control. And how do people react when they're being controlled? They rebel and push the person trying to control them farther away, thus making both more lonely and isolated. This is a dance most of us have experienced with our teenagers. They're striving to be more independent and we're trying

to prevent them from making mistakes. The more we try to control them, the more they rebel, and the more they rebel the more we try to control. Worrying about and trying to control others is very stressful and can generate a multitude of pathological problems.

In Genesis, we work on the cause rather than a symptom—usually the false beliefs at the root of the isolating behavior. In my experience, the two false beliefs that drive codependency are: “I’m responsible for other people’s feelings, problems and behaviors,” and “If I’m not control, something bad will happen and it will be my fault.” What would happen if we could change the false belief system that is driving the feeling of being responsible for others? In most cases, the root of codependency (or what I call relationship addiction) comes from children feeling responsible for adult problems. The feelings that are produced from these false beliefs are guilt and anxiety, which makes codependents need to control others to make those feelings go away. If you're responsible for other people's problems, then you'll feel guilty when they mess up. This can produce a constant state of anxiety to avoid feeling guilty. Psychology tells us one of the attributes of healthy people is that they are able to get in touch with what they need and ask for it. Codependents are aware of the needs of others, but not their own. Their controlling behaviors push everyone away. This leads to loneliness, isolation, and vicariously living our lives through the needs of others.

Leslie’s adult son was lost in addiction, and she lived in terror of him overdosing and dying. She believed that she was responsible for his struggle, because as a single mom she’d been stressed, overworked, and unavailable to him when he was small. Now she let him stay with her, even though he stole from her and didn’t respect any boundaries she tried to set down. Even though he was an adult, she made all his appointments, got him up in the morning to attend treatment

classes, did all his cleaning and cooking, arranged doctor's visits, and lectured him about his girlfriend. She monitored his coming and going, often staying up late waiting for him to come home. Without realizing it, obsession over her son's behavior became her entire world. She stopped caring for herself and began going without sleep and proper meals. She lost contact with friends, who grew tired of hearing about the constant drama. One night, her son stormed out and broke off contact with her. He was tired of being controlled. Leslie found herself without friends and connections, and without a life of her own. Isolated and afraid, she turned to her own addictions for comfort—binge eating and binge watching TV.

Call out All addictive /self-destructive behavior is self-gratification

Almost every statistic of self-destructive behaviors and emotions in our society is increasing. It is pain that motivates us to change. As the pain from our struggles increases, more and more people are going to be searching for help in their community. The only place that I believe that has the resources to respond to this overwhelming need is the church. So what can we do to make the church safe and competent so when people want to change they will think of their local church as having the understanding and effective programs to help them be free? The most powerful element to enable people to thrive that are lonely and isolated is belonging to and contributing to a community. What an opportunity to lead people to Christ. The best evangelism is a changed life.

Here is a Basic Genesis Group format for breaking the power of isolation:

1. What are you struggling with?
2. Why are you struggling with it?



3. What are your reasons for changing or not?
4. What are you willing to do to change and/or resolve the problem?
5. What can we as the group do make you successful (providing support and accountability) this week.

### **Self-Discovery quantify to Questions**

1. Which are the areas from above that tend to isolate do you most identify with?
2. Do you know someone who is constantly stressed are anxious, how does it affect your relationship with them?
3. How much time a day do you spend on electronics, and how does that affect your relationships?

### **Practical Application**

Make a practical plan to meet with others this week.