

What to Do When You're Married But Lonely

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Being married offers no protection from the dangers of loneliness. In one recent study, 62.5% of people who reported being lonely were married and living with their partner. Although that particular study surveyed only older adults, other studies indicate that roughly 20% of the general population suffers from chronic loneliness at any given time.

How Loneliness Impacts Our Physical and Mental Health

We typically don't conceive of loneliness as a condition that requires urgent intervention but perhaps we should. In addition to the emotional anguish loneliness creates it also has devastating effects on our mental and physical health. Loneliness depresses our immune system functioning, it increases inflammatory responses that put us at greater risk for cardiovascular disease, and it can literally effect our longevity. On the mental health front, loneliness puts us at risk for depression and anxiety and it causes us to distort our perceptions such that we view ourselves, our lives, and our relationships more negatively—which in turn, influences our behavior in damaging ways.

How Loneliness Impacts Our Relationships

Loneliness distorts how we see other people and makes us devalue our relationships. We perceive others as less caring, less interested, and less committed than they actually are, and we judge our relationships to be weaker and less satisfying. In an effort to protect ourselves from even further emotional hurt, we become hyper-alert to any signs of rejection from others and more apt to miss signs of acceptance. As a result, and often without realizing we're doing it, we become overly defensive and come across to others as detached, aloof, or even hostile—which only pushes them further away.

How Loneliness Operates in Marriages

Although we might believe marriage can insulate us from the ravages of loneliness, such is not the case. Loneliness is determined by the subjective quality of our relationships not their objective quantity, nor by whether we happen to be living with a spouse. Loneliness in marriages often happens slowly, as the disconnection we feel from our spouse gradually increases over years.

At some point, discussions about mutual interests, about world events, about goals and dreams, cease entirely and conversations become purely transactional (e.g., "We need milk," "Your mother called," or "Did you remember to pay the cable bill?"), or focused exclusively on parenting. We also fall into daily routines that foster emotional distance (e.g., one person watches television in the evening while the other is on the computer, or one person goes to bed at 9 PM and wakes at 5 AM and the other goes to bed at Midnight and wakes at 8 AM). In short, we lose the love and the affection but we stay in the marriage, ironically, often out of a fear of being lonely—except that by doing so, we potentially doom ourselves to the very loneliness we were trying to avoid.

How to Combat Loneliness in Marriage

The emotional isolation that encompasses us when we're lonely leads to our relationship muscles atrophying, as we rarely use them in meaningful ways. To improve the quality of our relationship, we have to strengthen these muscles. Making an effort to do so does require practice (and patience) but improving our rusty skills (even if we don't feel they're rusty) can make a significant difference in the quality of our marital bond and it can deepen our connections with other significant people in our lives as well.

1. Take the initiative. If you're lonely, chances are your partner is lonely too. But they too are probably trapped in a cycle of emotional disconnection and they too feel helpless to break it. Try to initiate conversations that are not about transactional details. Ask them for their views about something they care about and make sure to demonstrate you're listening (read [How to Validate Someone's Emotions](#) here). Don't expect them to reciprocate right away, as habits take time to change, but after a few gestures of good-will they will likely return the favor.

2. Create shared experiences. If your spouse is in the other room watching their favorite show, sit next to them (at the start of the show) and say, "You love this show so much I want to give it a try." No doubt they will be either confused, suspicious or both but just be sincere and try to see the show through their eyes (even if it's not your thing). After the show, tell them what aspects of the show you appreciated (even if the show was horrific—find something!).

You can also suggest certain activities that require little effort (which will minimize objections) such as walks around the block or in the park, cooking a meal together, watching your wedding video or your children's wedding video (reminding yourselves of more connected times), organizing a photo album together or writing a letter together to a common friend of family member.

3. Practice taking their perspective. The longer we're married the more we tend to assume we know what the other person is thinking. But research clearly indicates this is not so. Figuring out another person's perspective (known as perspective taking) is a thought exercise and not one we can skip. We actually have to close our eyes and focus for a few minutes (not seconds, minutes) on the other person's perspective; imagine their world and their point of view within it. Gaining a greater understanding of your partner's thoughts and feelings will allow you to express more sympathy and understanding toward them which in turn, will deepen your mutual bond.

Sources:<http://www.psychologytoday.com>