**A Way Out of Loneliness**

Every one of us will experience loneliness in our lifetime. It may hit us when we’re single and spending Saturday night on our couch watching reruns or when we’re smack at the center of a packed and pulsating party. There is one clear reason for this, and that is that loneliness is not just being alone; it is a perception of seeing ourselves as alone.

Obviously our circumstances will play a part in how we feel. Break ups, losses, separations and moves can make us feel pretty lonely. However, a great amount of what leads to chronic loneliness is the way we think and feel about ourselves and the world around us. Studies now show that people who struggle with loneliness may perceive the world differently. In one [study](John%20Cacioppo) published by the American Psychological Association, researcher John Cacioppo found differences in the “lonely brain” both structurally and biochemically. Someone who struggles with loneliness may have more difficulty recognizing positive events, as the lonely brain shows suppressed neural responses to positive images and events. They also seem to have more trouble picturing the thoughts of others or “mentalizing.”

Another [University of Chicago Study](%09Source:%20http:/psychology.uchicago.edu/people/faculty/cacioppo/jtcreprints/ch09.pdf) showed that “Lonely individuals are more likely to construe their world as threatening, hold more negative expectations, and interpret and respond to ambiguous social behavior in a more negative, off-putting fashion, thereby confirming their construal of the world as threatening and beyond their control.” If this is the case, then those who are lonely may be more likely to miss social queues. They may fail to recognize a welcoming look, a subtle invitation or an act of acceptance, thus perpetuating the cycle of loneliness.

It’s helpful to recognize that loneliness is very much a state of mind, and unfortunately, that mind is lying to us. It is even putting our mental and physical health at risk. As the same study by John Cacioppo points out, social isolation is “a major risk factor for morbidity and mortality.” Yet, if the worst news is that loneliness can kill us, the best news is that we can save our lives.

Because loneliness has a lot to do with how we think about our circumstances and less to do with our actual circumstances, we have a lot of power in changing it. As another study revealed, “The way in which people construe their self in relation to others around them has powerful effects on their self-concept and, possibly, on their physiology.” So, if we change the negative way we see ourselves, we can actually change our feelings of loneliness.

We can start by challenging our inner critic. The critical inner voice is a self-destructive dialogue that plays in our head, a running commentary that coaches us with cruel observations and terrible advice. When we meet someone we like, it’s that little voice inside that chimes in, “He has zero interest in you. Do NOT show him that you like him.” It’s there to frighten us into holding back, “Why be vulnerable? You’ll make a fool of yourself.” It warns us against others. “You can’t trust anyone. They’ll lose interest sooner or later.” It lures us into negative behavior patterns. “Just relax and stay home. You’re tired. You don’t need to make an effort.” And finally, it punishes us when we take its advice. “What a loser! All alone again. You’ll never have anybody!”

This critical inner voice fuels feelings of loneliness. It feeds us a steady stream of warnings, instructions and critiques that undermine us and make us feel more insecure, suspicious and just plain down on ourselves. These feelings of uncertainty and low self-esteem make it much more of a hurdle to get out in the world and feel confident in meeting people. It affects our behavior in subtle and unsubtle ways. We may cower in the corner at a social event or fail to make eye contact. Moreover, we may miss out on extensions of warmth or interest from others, because we are busy entrenched in the vicious chatter of our inner critic.

A woman I worked with experienced this to an extreme when she first moved to a new city. She described to me how she just didn’t feel like she fit in. She perceived people as not liking her or not giving her the time of day, and yet, she’d been invited to parties by neighbors and out for coffee with coworkers. In each social scenario, she was flooded with critical self-attacks. She’d feel so bad about herself, she could barely look up at a party or make conversation over coffee. She even started to feel critical toward the people who did engage with her, finding petty details to pick apart. Her critical inner voice was showing up in her behavior, and people were responding accordingly, picking up on the invisible ‘do not disturb’ sign spread across her face.

At first, the woman responded by keeping to herself, which is exactly what her inner critic wanted. The critical inner voice drives us to be isolated, but when we are isolated, we tend to hear more “voices.” She started to hear thoughts like, “Poor you. Can’t make any friends, can you?” Eventually, she got sick and tired of the self-deprecating diatribe in her head, and she made herself go out and start a conversation on the train. Immediately, she felt a sense of relief just being among people, and seeing that the world is very different from what her critical inner voice had been telling her.

There are many ways we can learn to quiet the inner critic that causes loneliness, a subject I will talk about in the upcoming Webinar, “A Way Out of Loneliness.” We can uncover ways to challenge long-engrained ways of thinking and the destructive and scary way we view ourselves and the world around us. We can overcome loneliness by seeing, knowing and believing that we are worthwhile, and we are absolutely not alone.