

Handbook For Hope:

The Cure For Loneliness



by
Ken Wilcox

"O Lord, way down yonder by myself.
And I couldn't hear nobody pray."

- Jubilee Singers



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Not A Destination

If you are feeling lonely, you are not alone. The reason why I put this book together is because I know what it is like. Loneliness is a topic that is very close to my heart because I have been through the depths of empty, meaningless feelings many times.

I have felt every gripping moment of it: the long, long hours which seems like day; the lonely night; the lack of desire to face the next day.

It doesn't matter if you have a girlfriend, boyfriend, husband or wife. No matter how close you are with them, there are parts of you that they just don't understand! The pain doesn't fade after confiding with your best friend, your group of buddies, or even your counselor! Nobody seems to understand you, yet you long for them to feel your pain.

But I have good news for all of us lonely hearts out there. I have survived, and I have a way to ease the pain, if not solve it completely.

My stories and writings in this book aim to help you:

- Understand the theory behind loneliness to better understand yourself
- Understand the feelings associated with loneliness
- Develop a healthy feeling of love with which you can overcome problems
- Implement practical steps to break the lonely cycle
- Replace the feeling of loneliness with healthy thoughts

"Loneliness is the clearest of crystal insight into your own soul. It's the fear of one's own self that haunts the lonely."

- Keith Havnie

You may be going through a lonely period of your life, but don't give in to despair. You won't always be here. Loneliness may be your current path, but it is not your destination.

Is it just me? We've all asked ourselves that question. But there is nothing wrong with you. We all go through these periods. No one is above the desperation of loneliness.

There is a feeling that if you're lonely you're not successful. It's not true. Loneliness is just a condition. There are several times in your life where you may go through an acute period of loneliness and the most important thing you can do is accept it as being OK.

I have a friend who has just lost his partner of thirty years. He tells me that even though the pain is almost overwhelming, that he's OK with it. He says, "After loving her for so long and so deeply, shouldn't I be in pain after losing her?"

I often talk to young adults who have just moved into the professional world. Throughout this transition, many of them feel loss because it's not as easy to form bonds in the office as it was in the dorm room. Often they don't feel connected to those in the work place.

When I was around age ten or so, my mother would complain to the women of the church that she was always so busy that she didn't have any spare time. Within months she lost her husband in an accident and two of her daughters moved out on their own. She went from a person with too much to do, to one with nothing to do. She did not adjust to it well at all. In fact, she wallowed in depression for well over a year. My father, the man who once was a lazy, no-nothing when he was alive became the reincarnate Jesus Christ in her memory. She only recovered when she found Conway Twitty, Jack Daniels and the dance floor of the D.A.V.

My momma began a great love affair with Conway Twitty, to the degree that she could sing note for note and word for word every line of his song "*Hello Darlin'*". On that dreadful day when Momma's hair stylist called to tell her of Conway's death, she took a valium and went to bed. My mom taught me how to mix Jack and Coke, the importance of taking a bottle of Valium to a funeral, and how to move through loneliness.

When you're lonely, you have simply fallen out of love with life.

The problem is that when we lose something in our lives, we often try to find its replacement.

I believe that there are four components to our lives: work, health, love and creativity. If you hit on disappointment in one, try expressing gratitude in one of the others. There is some element of your life where the creativity of the Universe is flowing. God doesn't promise us that we won't meet with disappointment, but that in some part of our life we will be witnessing Divine creativity.

Find something that speaks to you.

From Mom it was the music of George Jones. For you it can be an art-class, a political campaign, something that you can identify with and that asks more of you.

The "asking more of you," is the part that scares many. My mother used Jack Daniels for her coping. But there are other techniques that won't leave you with a hang-over. For many lonely people the thought of social interaction is painful. But I've found that it's easy to get people talking with just a few standard questions: Where are you from? Where did you go to school? What's your favorite movie? You can always impress people as being very intelligent, if you can get them talking about themselves.

Then get moving. My mom took up dancing at the D.A.V. I think she was pretty good at it too, with her polyester jump suit and her hair piled high on her head.

Now, I don't recommend George Jones and Jack Daniels, but I suppose to a single woman with no education and a neurotic kid in Macon, Georgia in 1974, it might have seemed a good option.

What do we mean by loneliness?

Loneliness is an emotional state where people experience a disconnection from people around them as well as a deep feeling of emptiness, which renders their present company around them meaningless.

That person could be in a big crowd or by him/herself; they could be married or single, young or old. They find it very hard to connect with others and experience meaningful relationships.

It's important to note that loneliness should not be confused with being alone. Being alone does not equate to being lonely because it is sometimes good for a person to be alone. Having time alone can allow for the opportunity to refresh, recuperate and rediscover otherwise forgotten parts of our lives.

What are the common symptoms of loneliness? If you are reading this book, I bet you might be feeling one of these symptoms.

- You think your problems are so unique that other people do not understand.
- You feel that other people in the world have friends and you don't.
- You feel extremely self-conscious in everything you do.
- You get extremely embarrassed when you do something wrong.
- You feel drowned by voices when you are in a crowd.
- You feel disconnected with the crowd even though you are with them.
- You feel shy and scared of others.
- You experience low self-esteem.
- You feel angry, defensive, and critical at everything even if it is not directed at you.
- You feel afraid of strangers.
- You don't engage in a hearty conversation.
- You are convinced there is something wrong with you.
- You feel anxious and sad, believing no one knows how miserable and isolated you feel.
- You have lost your capacity to be assertive and feel invisible.
- You refuse to accept change and don't want to try anything new.
- You feel as though nothing else matters and contemplate suicide.

The Worst Mistake

If you're going through a period of loneliness there is one mistake that you absolutely cannot afford to make: believing there is something wrong with you because you're lonely.

Loneliness is a situation; it need not be a condition. And even if it is a condition, it is one that you have the power over to change.

We all go through periods of loneliness in our lives. You move to another city for a job, you go through a divorce, or you just find it difficult to connect with others.

We are all members of the family of humanity and have come into this life to connect. I love the line from the movie, *Harold and Maude* when Harold says to Maude, "You're so good with people." Maude replies, "Well, they are my species."

Like Harold, when we have problems connecting it's because we think we're too weird to have someone like us. Sometimes, we can turn our weirdness into a self-armor.

At the core, loneliness is a rejection of your own company. You move away from this rejection by learning to not only like yourself, but to absolutely adore yourself. You know you are the only person in your life that will never leave you. So get used to yourself, and actually enjoy spending time with yourself.

Yes, there is a big difference between being alone and being lonely. And modern technology, while seeming to allow us to be more connected, often exacerbates the problem.

Ever had that feeling that your wife or husband doesn't understand you? Your spouse or significant other is right beside you yet somehow a gap remains.

You may be surrounded by people, yet their company 'drowns' you, and you seem to sink deeper into loneliness! There is truth in the saying, "There is no place lonelier than being in a crowd." And certainly many people are drowning in a sea of technological loneliness. It's an oddity of the age that our growing reliance on technology has brought us more together, but at the same time it is causing more distance.

Have you ever noticed a couple in a restaurant, both individuals were using their phones to text and/or talk to someone not sitting at the table? Social commentators regularly talk about our "need" to be in communication twenty-four hours a day. I have seen people texting at concerts and at church services. I even know of a woman who wore her Bluetooth to her mother's funeral!

Social media is wonderful and is changing the way we stay in touch, but that connection seems to come at a high cost: The more we're connected through technology the easier it is to hide behind a social mask.

If we're only seeing each other through this filter of the highlights of one's life, then intimate interactions can seem boring.

In a social media relationship, you get to come and go as you please leaving bits and pieces of your best one-liners. A relationship in real life looks much different. In real life, if you stay with someone long enough eventually you're going to run out of things to talk about. But that's really what we're all seeking -- a relationship that goes beyond entertainment to a foundation of acceptance and caring.

Emotional Pains In A Loveless World

How does the agony of loneliness seem to penetrate the hearts of men and women throughout the world? Even superstars who have been the icon of generations and admired by millions feel unfulfilled (e.g. Janis Joplin, Kurt Cobain). The discomfort of loneliness stems primarily from our failure in loving others. The symptoms of loneliness magnify the effects of the pain, causing an intense focus of attention on ourselves. And that, in turn, creates a even greater self-preoccupation, which creates more obstacles to loving others.

Have you ever had a stomachache? Who were you thinking of at that moment?

This illustrates the point that we are only thinking of ourselves. It shows a terribly pain filled world in which we live in. Furthermore, the pain does go away just like a stomachache eventually does.

The so-called Mid-life crisis is turning more into a 'young adult' crisis now. Suicide rates are hitting the roof and most diseases in the world today are mentally induced or cured in psychiatric wards.

The basis of trust between people is eroding and less and less people are opening up to one another. By failing to open up to others, the lonely symptoms spring up. Other people will not open up to you if you do not open yourself to others first.

In my years of counseling, I have found several categories of people who experience loneliness. Many of them are ashamed of their loneliness, as if they're at fault. What they fail to realize is that there are many situations we can pass through in life that can subject us to loneliness.

The Loneliness of New Mothers

There are a couple of stinking lies that we tell women in this society, and unfortunately it's the women who do most of the telling.

The first is that cooking Thanksgiving dinner or being the bride at a wedding is as fun as it looks.

A second lie is that all your emotional needs will be filled by having a child.

Yes, having children is a wonderful thing. But don't deceive yourself that being around a three year old day in and day out is going to satisfy your needs to connect with other adults.

You must allow yourself time where your child is not the topic of every conversation. Don't compare yourself to other mothers. Don't allow yourself to think that others are enjoying the experience more than you.

"We're all lonely for something we don't know we're lonely for. How else to explain the curious feeling that goes around feeling like missing somebody we've never even met?"

- David Foster Wallace

Working Out of the House

For years I worked out of the house. I would meet people out who were so envious of my not having to fight the Atlanta traffic. But there is a dirty little secret to the world of home offices - it can be painfully lonely.

It got so bad that I found myself watching re-runs of Oprah and shouting advice at Judge Judy. Now there is a funny little quirk about loneliness - the less you are around people, the more energy it takes to make yourself social. I found myself grocery shopping during the middle of the day so I wouldn't have to have the crowds on the weekend. I remember that one time I became so isolated that I actually found myself looking forward to a dentist appointment.

To break out of it, I began to force myself into taking clients to lunch. While that helped some, I still felt cut-off. I then began to take business courses related to my field. For a long while, I actually studied computer optimization and tried to convince myself that it was interesting.

I finally had a break through, I began to do things that I enjoyed doing. Not all the time, but as little incentives to my hard work. If I made a certain number of contacts, I would allow myself to go work in the yard or go to a matinee.

It was only when I began to bring more enjoyment into my life that I was able to find the energy to break through my cocoon.

Looking for a New Job

Right now we're going through major disruptions in the job market. The last time we had such sustained unemployment job searching was handled in a much different fashion. Back then, you got the jobs section of your paper or you started going door to door. Now the unemployed stay chained to their computers scanning the job banks.

If you find yourself in this situation, it may be the last thing that you feel like doing, but it is totally necessary that you stay connected. And you won't be able to do it all through your old contacts. You can't expect your former associates to call for lunch.

Instead, join as many groups as you can. It may be as painful as a visit to the dentist, but it is absolutely necessary.

The Second Year of a Marriage

One of the greatest lies is that romantic love solves all problems. While romantic love is wonderful, it does not solve all your problems. It in fact doubles them.

In earlier times when people were less mobile, they had their needs met from a host of relationships. Sometimes through their romantic partners, but equally from children, extended family members or community members. But now, many of us expect all of our needs to be met by our significant other. It's simply too much to expect from one relationship. It's relationship overload.

This is why a year or so into a relationship there can become a period of loneliness. It's that time when couples sit across the dinner table and have nothing to say to each other. And it's not a bad thing. There's richness in the silence, because you have reached the place where you are accepting the other person just as they are.

The trouble I see is that too many couples are too busy texting or talking on their cell phones to actually get to know each other.

By understanding that other people are not obliged to fulfill our needs, we somehow learn to expect less from others which in turn eases the pain because we stop expecting more the impossible from others! We learn to judge others less, so it creates the first step to curing loneliness - giving others slack!

Remember that we are the sum of the five people we spend most of our time with. If you are mixing with a crowd that is negative and makes you feel down all the time, it is no surprise why you feel lonely and negative. It is no surprise that children move out of their family home to get away from negative parents. Don't let the poison drain your energy.

Loneliness during the Holidays

Loneliness during the holidays can be particularly painful. Our culture seems to be wrapped up in completely losing its sanity when it comes to Christmas. I started boycotting my family a couple of years back when one of my great-nieces had to be threatened with punishment because she had gotten tired of opening presents.

And of course, if you're not with family and friends around the holidays you are made to feel like a complete loser. The ideal is that not only are you supposed to have lots of family and friends, but they're all supposed to get along too.

There's an awful Coca-Cola ad that comes out at the movies each Christmas season. A teenager is having a Christmas party, and as he walks through the house we see all of his friends, family, and even an old high school teacher enjoying a Coke.

Well, that's wonderful, but really. How many of us have that experience? Even if you have had that experience once, you're certainly not going to have it every year of your life!

If you're feeling a bit lonely and the holidays are coming, prepare for them like Eisenhower prepared for D-day. Decide that just because you may not be able to celebrate the holiday as you have in the past, it doesn't mean that you can't celebrate the holiday in your own, new way. Also, know that there are lots of people who are in the same boat with you. For at least one holiday each year, I open up my house to anyone needing a place to celebrate. I'm always amazed that we have a house full.

The best holiday gift you can give people is to be fun and uplifting to be around. Several years ago, I met two grandmothers. Actually one is a grandmother and the other is a granny. The grandmother lives in a mansion close to where the Governor of Georgia lives. A real mansion, not the fake versions they started building in the last ten years. Like most grandmothers, she desperately wants to spend time with her grandchildren. Each year she puts up over seven Christmas trees to decorate the house. There's a Scottish tree in the den, a University of Georgia tree in the husband's study (or the room where she lets him watch football). The biggest one is in the foyer, and it is covered in only the best Waterford crystal ornaments.

I met her because I was helping out a florist friend who had been hired to help her decorate. I know next to nothing about decorating, so I was assigned the husband's tree. As I tried my best to figure out what to do with the manger scene with the UGA bulldog watching protectively over the baby Jesus, Elizabeth, the grandmother and lady of the mansion, talked about the holidays. She desperately wanted to spend time with her grandchildren, but they always seemed to be in a rush to leave. She knew the kids and particularly the, "Son in-law," didn't like having to dress up or wait until after dinner to open presents. God forbid if one of the grandkids got within ten feet of the Waterford tree! She was determined not to let her Holidays become a grab bag.

Now the Granny I know is a completely different story. June lives in a modular home in South Georgia. It's a modular home, not a trailer. Those kinds of distinctions are quite important in the low-lands.

The weekend after Thanksgiving "the girls," her daughter and daughter-in-laws, start their Christmas shopping. At home, "the boys" and the kids begin to pull out the decorations. The littlest kids are in charge of putting up the inflatable decorations outside. There's the carousel with Santa, Rudolf and Natalie Wood for the front lawn. The slightly older ones get to work on the den and when they're done it looks like someone has exploded Frosty the snow man. The older kids work on the nice tree in the living room.

Several days before the holidays everyone piles in. There are air mattresses in every room and an RV parked in the backyard for additional beds. June, aka Paula Dean, is the saint of the kitchen and most of the family at least tries making at least one dish. Successful dishes are appreciated, but the disasters get to be part of the family lore. There are only a few house rules. You can drink, but you can't get drunk. No arguing and no guns or rifles are allowed in the house - we're talking South Georgia here.

After Christmas, June and her husband go to a cabin in the mountains to share a quiet New Year. While their gone the kids pack up the decorations for another year.

Now who of these two women would you rather spend the holiday? When it comes to the Holidays we can't allow expectations to ruin our enjoyment of the possible. Where ever you are, enjoy Holiday in the best way you can.

"Pray that your loneliness may spur you into finding something to live for, great enough to die for."

- Dag Hammarskiold

Love - The Verb, Not the Feeling

Love, or rather the lack of it, constitutes the loneliness breeding in a person's heart. It is a scary fact to note that we are largely shaped by others (remember the sum of five people we spend most of our time with) who hold our destiny in THEIR hands.

We are what we are today - a product of those who loved us or have refused to love us. Love gives life to others. But what is most important is to remember is that in order to love someone else effectively, we must love ourselves first! You can't give what you don't have!

You may think you 'love' a beautiful girl or a handsome guy even while you don't love yourself (there is a song that goes: I am nobody until I met you or my life is meaningless until you came into the picture), but that is not love.

You may admire that person because he or she is good looking, you may worship that person because you think he or she is smart and suave, you may even sacrifice your life for him or her for your own selfish, self-gratifying ego. But that is not love.

Love is a verb. It is an action. When we are living our lives in love, we absolutely have no idea the positive impact we can have for those around us.

Working for a Tyrant

I had one boss who was such a nasty and greedy person that he canceled the paycheck for one of my assistants who died unexpectedly. He also chewed me out because I had passed the check along to her parents who had come into the city to collect their child's body.

So while I hated my job I was also living without a love interest, not even a prospect, in debt over my heels, and with many of my friends dying from Aids. To give myself respite when I got home at night I would watch political talk shows where four angry old white men would yell at each other while I drank the better part of a quart of scotch. I hated the taste of it but had been told that it was the most efficient way to get drunk with the least amount of calories. Oh, life was good!

One day while walking along Wisconsin Avenue heading back to the office, I was navigating the busy sidewalk. I was storming ahead of the crowd of people and had to walk out on the curb to move past the throng. As I did a city bus came flying up the street. It came so close that I could feel it brush the outside of my coat.

Just as it did a thought came to me, "You know, you can lean a little bit further in the street and the next bus that comes along will take you right out and no one will think of it as anything but an accident."

And just as I had that thought I looked up into the crowd of oncoming people, and a woman quite deliberately caught my attention and smiled.

Now, it wasn't anything dramatic. It didn't come with angels singing or horns blasting, but that one smile did something for me. It gave me hope that there were kind people in the world. And that one idea was enough to keep me going.

My life now is full of love, but it might not have ever been if not for a momentary smile on a crowded busy sidewalk.

Dealing with Loneliness

How did I take the first step to deal with loneliness? By learning to love.

But first we must examine the paradox to love.

When we are lonely, we feel like we are in an unbearable prison. By its very nature, loneliness is just like the stomach ache - the attention centers only on us. So we try and fill this emptiness by finding others who will give us that very love we need.

People often try to do things for others to gain their love. They barter and trade favors with each other, thinking that they are loving people. We believe that our loneliness can only be filled by the love of others; and therefore, we must feel loved by others.

The paradox of love is this: If we seek to fill the void of our own loneliness in seeking love from others, we will inevitably find no consolation but only a deeper desolation. In other words, if we seek the love that we need, we will never find it.

When a person orients his life towards the satisfaction of his own needs, when he goes out to seek the love which he needs, he is basically self-centered, no matter how pitiful he is. As long as he focuses on himself, his ability to love will always remain stunted.

Learning How to Love

Lonely people have a tendency to be super judgmental, and they're particularly hard on themselves.

I use to give a Wednesday night talk at a spiritual community. For several months, I would get a phone call from a guy that heard one of my talks on line. He had been raised Jehovah Witness and had been thrown out of the church when he was sixteen for being gay. Two of his best friends from childhood had committed suicide and his mother had drunk herself to death. He desperately wanted to be in a relationship, but had a whole set of demands about whom his potential love interest had to be.

I use to try to get him to see that if he would look past his expectations, he might find some really wonderful people. The problem was that he didn't particularly like himself and so it was hard for him to see something likeable in the world.

He would always tell me that he didn't fit in with the world. He didn't feel at home. I think I shocked him with my reply, "And you never will."

We come from consciousness seeking affirmation from one another in Love. Nothing else will satisfy us, but we can get lost in looking for love in dogmatic terms, six foot three with eyes of blue. We narrow how we expect the love of God to reach us, but God has the whole universe to get love to us.

What is the solution then?

If a person seeks not to receive love, but rather to give it without strings attached, he will become lovable and he will most certainly be loved by others in the end. We must stop being concerned with ourselves and begin to be concerned with others. Beginning with the end in mind - which focuses the results of the act of loving others without concerned with self-gain, is the first step to gaining love and easing the pain of loneliness.

Every single person on earth has some capacity to love. We all have some ability to focus the attention off ourselves to the needs and concern of others. To the extent that we are willing to give, are we able to receive that amount of love from others.

Deciding to love others with no strings attached is like a donation - we don't expect anything in return, not even a satisfied ego or relieved guilt. It is not a barter trade. When we ask others, "What have you done for me?" we have failed to love.

Even if at the beginning you are only able to love a little, you will be loved a little. That very love, even though small in amount, will empower you to grow and produce more love and in return receive greater love from others.

But always remember that in making this self-donation or self-sacrifice, our minds must always be focused away from ourselves, or it won't work.

My Friend the Dog

Once after running a losing political campaign in Lincoln, Nebraska, I returned to Washington D.C. with just enough money to rent myself a room and buy a pair of black pants so I could return to a job waiting tables, a career that I had desperately hoped to escape.

To get myself back on my feet, I worked every shift I could. I was practically living at the restaurant. When I was off, I was so tired that all I wanted was to stay in bed.

For the world it seemed like my only friend was a little black dog in one of the row houses on my path from Union Station to the restaurant on Capitol Hill. Every evening he would be waiting for me to pet. I began to look so forward to our visit. Then I began to bring him a doggie bag from my shift.

My outlook on life had become so bleak. But this little mutt with a taste for prime rib kept me reminded of the possibility for love in my life.

When we're lonely we often are so desperate for the knight in white armor that we can't see the love already coming into our lives.

Make a point to delight where ever you see loving coming into your life, and soon you will feel love pouring into every point of your life.

"No one would choose a friendless existence on condition of having all the other things in the world."

- Aristotle

How to Reconnect -- Practical Steps To Overcome Loneliness

There are a number of ways to begin dealing with loneliness that involve the need to develop friendships, doing things for yourself, or learning to feel better about yourself in general. Start by choosing two or 3 of these to practice daily. Once those two or 3 become natural, add a couple more.

Before you know it, you'll have the list mastered and loneliness will haunt you no more.

- Constantly remind yourself that the feeling of loneliness is TEMPORARY and you will get over it in time
- Make an effort to talk to someone NEW. I know it is hard, but you must develop momentum, and the first step is usually the hardest but most necessary.
- Put yourself in new situations where you will meet people. Engage in activities in which you have genuine interest. Meet with people of similar interest
- Join societies like church groups, sporting clubs, non-profit organizations, and etc.
- STOP listening to lonely songs (e.g. All by Myself - Celine Dion)
- OPEN yourself to others first. Don't expect people to share their problems with a closed person.
- Don't judge new people on the basis of past relationships with old people. Try to see each person you meet from a new perspective instead of bring judgmental.
- Intimate friendships usually develop gradually as people learn to share their inner feelings. Don't rush into intimate friendship by sharing too much or expecting that others will.
- Don't just seek romantic relationships. Platonic or even casual buddies can be extremely satisfactory.
- Lead a well-balanced life. Never neglect good nutrition, exercise and sufficient sleep. One of the main causes of depression which leads to loneliness is the lack of those things.
- Spending time alone will help you examine yourself more closely.
- Don't be a parasite to your friends. If you seek them for compassion and sympathy, they will be there for you. But if you repeatedly drone over and over about your problems, it becomes a nuisance and your friends will at best just entertain you.
- Reflect back on good memories and count your blessings.
- Learn a new skill. Success in achieving something will make you feel good about yourself.
- If you are having long term depression, seek MEDICAL advice. It is perfectly normal to seek medical attention to determine if a lack of certain chemicals in the body is the source of depression. Should that be the case, it could be treated easily. If we feel hungry we seek food. In the same way, seeking the right medicine in proper dosage is the right way to tackle depression and feel less lonely.
- See a counselor and talk in privacy.
- Spend time in Prayer.

The Ultimate Answer

You are the only one who will never leave you. Therefore, if you want to feel connected, love yourself.

In the interior of your consciousness, you come as close to the Creator's consciousness as you can in the physical world. When you are in quiet contemplation you are also standing on the threshold of the Beloved. Come with good tidings of the Love you see in your life. You will not be denied entry.

Love yourself. Love your desire to be with others for it is nothing more than the Love of God seeking to reconnect with itself. And the good news is that you always have that ability within yourself to make that connection.

You are here for good purpose.

You are not an accident.

You are not wounded.

You are the Divine Idea of God seeking expression. By knowing yourself as this, you become a source of acceptance and love for those around you. In doing this, you can become a joyful benefactor to a world in dire need.

And in this you then become that illumination from which you were created.