

What Cross-Cultural Workers Ought to Know about Loneliness

Lately you have been feeling “invisible.” It seems like everyone else has friends, but you are just “in” the crowd—not “of” the crowd. You feel empty, disconnected, and alienated from those around you—socially inadequate, socially unskilled. You are anxious and sad but feel like no one else knows how miserable and isolated you are. You feel empty and hollow, like you are separated from the rest of the world.

People around you are friendly and greet you with a smile. However, you find it difficult, seemingly impossible, to have any really meaningful interaction with others. You would like to meet new people and make deep friendships, but you just can’t bring yourself to take part in social activities to make friends.

Feeling unloved and unwanted, you are lonely. But how could you be lonely when there are people all around you? Isn’t God always with you so that you will not be lonely? Can cross-cultural workers be lonely? What can you do?

How can I be lonely?

You are certainly not alone if you live in a city of millions of people. However, loneliness has nothing to do with being alone; it has to do with relationships. If you live in a village of a hundred people, you are much less likely to be lonely than if you live in a city of a million people. You are likely to know the names of everyone you meet in that village, but you may never meet anyone you know in that city.

Many people choose to be alone, to experience solitude, and they find it a positive, pleasurable, enriching time. Loneliness is essentially unwilling solitude, wanting to be in relationship with others but not experiencing it. “Forced solitude,” solitary confinement, is one of the most terrible punishments used on people in prison.

You may be relatively new to the culture in which you live so that you find it difficult to have meaningful relationships with the nationals. You have not yet internalized enough of the culture to feel at ease with close relationships in it. Or you may have been in that culture for many years, even the leader of your group, and still be lonely. Being the leader changes your relationships with everyone in the group and it is “lonely at the top.”

Can God’s people be lonely?

You may think, “Isn’t God with me everywhere? I’m part of the family of God so how can I be lonely?” God is with you everywhere, but you need human relationships as well. You are part God’s family, but you may still not have the deep friendships you desire with other members of his family. You can still be lonely. Here are some examples.

- Adam. Even before sin entered humanity, God noted that it was not good for Adam to be alone, so God created Eve as a companion with whom Adam could be in relationship (Genesis 2).
- David. In the Psalms David said, “My friends and companions avoid me...my neighbors stay far away” (31:11), and “look to my right and see; no one is concerned for me” (142:4).
- Elijah. While deeply discouraged just after a great spiritual victory, Elijah said,

“I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me too” (1 Kings 19:10, 14).

- Jesus said, “You will leave me all alone. Yet I am not alone, for my Father is with me (John 16:32). Only hours later even the Father was gone, and Jesus said, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matthew 27:46).

Do other cross-cultural workers feel this way?

Everyone feels lonely at times, and cross-cultural workers are no exception. Living in a strange culture away from family and friends, most people feel lonely.

Near the end of his second letter to Timothy, Paul (a veteran cross-cultural worker) wrote about several things that made him feel lonely.

- Demas, because he loved this world, has deserted me (2 Timothy 4:10).
- Crescens has gone to Galatia (2 Timothy 4:10).
- Titus (has gone) to Dalmatia (2 Timothy 4:10).
- At my first defense, no one came to my support, but everyone deserted me (2 Timothy 4:16).
- Do your best to get here before winter (2 Timothy 4:20).

Paul was so lonely that he even asked Timothy to bring Mark, a man who had deserted Paul and Barnabas years before. Paul had held this desertion against Mark many years and would not even let Mark go with him on his second term of cross-cultural service. Lonely now, Paul said:

- Get Mark and bring him with you, because he is helpful to me in my ministry (2 Timothy 4:11).

What causes loneliness?

Loneliness is common because it has so many causes. These causes may be found in your situation or within you. Here are some possible causes.

- Your moving. Part of being a cross-cultural worker is moving from one place to another, either reentering your passport culture repeatedly or moving from one culture to another.
- Friends moving. If you do not move, other people from your agency are likely to. Expatriates are constantly on the move.
- Away from family and friends. Part of working cross-culturally is living in a place far from acquaintances in your past.
- Expectations not met. Perhaps you had heard how friendly people were in your host culture, but you find them quite distant.
- Rejected. You may not be accepted by the people you came to serve and feel rejected even by people serving in your agency.
- Discriminated against. You came to serve, but you find that political or social forces in your host country discriminate against you because of your passport country, your race, or your religion.
- Surface relationships. 1. You long to share deeply with others, but you are not able to find anyone in your agency or in your host culture who wants to do so.
- Surface relationships. 2. You do not want to become too close to anyone because you know that either they or you will be moving soon.
- Lack of social skills. You do not understand how to interact well in your

- host culture—or maybe your passport one.
- Self-conscious or shy. Having low self-esteem or lack of self-confidence. You find it difficult to get close to anyone in any culture.
- Anxiety, depression, feelings of worthlessness or social phobias. Personal problems in adjustment prevent you from interacting adequately with other expats or nationals.
- Fear of rejection. You had some intimate friends, but they turned on you so that you now fear it will happen again.
- The city feels so unfriendly. You grew up in a farming community or small town, and the large city in which you serve has no similar sense of community.

What can I do to get over loneliness?

The good news about loneliness is that you CAN take steps yourself to get over it. It is the only “disorder” that can be cured by adding two or more cases together! However, the more lonely you feel, the harder it is to take the steps needed, so remember that it takes time, effort, and commitment. You may need the help of a counselor to begin to take those steps.

Basically what you want to do is to find the cause (perhaps from the ones listed above) and then do things to counteract that cause. You may have to make changes in your situation or changes in yourself. Do not wait for your feelings of loneliness to go away—act first, and the change in feelings will come later. Here are some suggestions.

- Look for ways to get involved with people around you, such as eating with them, sitting near them, exercising with them.
- Put yourself in situations where you will meet new people, such as joining a club,

- attending a new church and doing volunteer work with others.
- Develop your social skills, practice getting to know others, and become vulnerable enough to let people know you.
- Do not assume new relationships will be the same as old ones. Look at each new person from a new perspective.
- Respond to others and their interests, but do not pretend to be interested in something you are not. People will sense that
- Go do things you like to do even if you have to go alone. Attending a concert or film, even taking a walk you may meet someone with similar interests.
- Being a friend or helping someone may result in a deeper relationship.
- Take a class in an area of interest. You may meet someone with similar interests.
- Ask people about themselves because people usually want to share with someone who is interested in them.

A word of caution!

Modern communication technology, such as e-mail, instant messaging, webcams, VoIP, and low international phone rates has resulted in some people becoming so interested in maintaining old relationships that they fail to build new ones.

These distant relationships may make us think that we do not need intimate face-to-face relationships. This is not the case. Even though you may be able to hear and even see the person, it is not the same as interacting with a real person.

Trying to maintain such a relationship is often not satisfying and may result in not developing adequate relationships with others.

Ronald Koteskey is
Member Care Consultant
New Hope International Ministries

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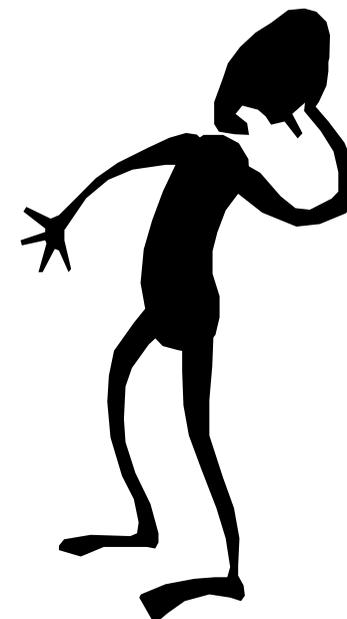
Ronald Koteskey
122 Lowry Lane
Wilmore, KY 40390

Phone: (859) 858-3436

e-mail: ron@crossculturalworkers.com

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Ronald L. Koteskey

New Hope International Ministries

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