

CHAPTER THIRTY

Coping With Isolation and Loneliness

AGENDA

- Welcome and reactions to previous session
- Homework discussion
- Break
- Topic: Coping With Isolation and Loneliness
 - Introduction
 - Understanding Isolation
 - Understanding Loneliness
 - Reflections on Your Experience of Isolation and Loneliness
 - Tips for Coping With Isolation and Loneliness
- Homework
 - Reread the chapter.
 - Complete Homework Sheet 30.1, Reflecting on a Time of Isolation and Loneliness.
 - Complete Homework Sheet 30.2, Skills to Resolve Isolation and Loneliness.

Introduction

In this manual we have discussed many reasons why people with a dissociative disorder might isolate themselves and feel lonely. Isolation is the state of being alone and separated from others. Loneliness is a sense of utter aloneness at a time when you most need someone to love or support you, and it can evoke panic and desperation. The fear or emptiness of being alone is a major precipitant of crises, including self-harm and suicide attempts. Even

if you have friends or family, you may feel like an outsider who does not belong. Or you may experience relationships as exhausting, complicated, and frightening, and thus isolate yourself. Mistrust is a pervasive hindrance to feeling connected in the present with other people and a force that pushes you further into isolation. This type of isolation may breed loneliness. In this chapter we will discuss these feelings of isolation and aloneness, some of the factors that maintain them, and suggest some first steps to change patterns of isolation.

Understanding Isolation

In her classic book, *Trauma and Recovery*, Judith Herman (1992), one of the pioneers in the field of chronic childhood abuse, describes how trauma destroys bonds between the individual and his or her community. This is especially true when abuse or neglect involves trusted caregivers. Feelings of abandonment and betrayal, and a sense of alienation or disconnection, may interfere with subsequent relationships, regardless of the degree of closeness or distance of the other person. And of course, *feeling* isolated and *being* isolated may not be the same things. One can feel utterly isolated and alone even while he or she is surrounded by people.

Maintenance of Isolation

Social isolation may be maintained and reinforced by certain perceptions, predictions, emotions, and thoughts. Core beliefs, such as “*People can’t be trusted*” or “*If anyone really knew me, they would be disgusted,*” support ongoing withdrawal from others. The fear and shame of “being found out” can be paralyzing if you think you are a bad person or if you are holding secrets that feel shameful to you, contributing to an increasing sense of isolation and disconnection. Mistrust is a major impediment to becoming less isolated. People with a dissociative disorder typically have many predictions about how people will betray, disappoint, or hurt them. Many find it difficult to take risks to be in relationships (see [chapter 28](#) on phobias of attachment). And once inevitable conflicts occur, they are often quick to withdraw, expecting the worst (see [chapter 29](#) on relational conflicts). Some people are isolated simply because they do not have adequate social skills to make friends and stay connected. But usually a lack of social skills accompanies the more

complex inner experiences described earlier. Fortunately, social skills, like any other skill, can be learned.

Isolation Among Dissociative Parts

For those with a dissociative disorder, inner isolation of dissociative parts is a painful additional struggle. Some parts are stuck in a time of trauma during which they were isolated, feeling perpetually alone and in need. These parts feel alone no matter how much other parts may feel connected with some people. Other parts may have been “banished” from inner awareness out of shame, fear, or disgust, or are neglected behind inner barriers. The more inner disconnection among parts of the self, the more likely isolation and loneliness are problematic. These inner “barriers” between parts are maintained by ongoing shame, fear, and subsequent avoidance (see [chapter 5](#) on the phobia of inner experience).

Isolation as a Reenactment of the Traumatic Past

Many traumatized individuals were quite isolated from supportive others during their childhoods. They typically endured the aftermath of abuse alone. On the one hand, this likely generated terrible loneliness, but on the other hand, isolation was also a signal that “*it’s over now,*” that is, the abuse had ended. Thus, some people, or parts of themselves, automatically retreat to isolation to gain a sense of safety and relief. They may develop a habit of isolating when they are stressed in the present, often without even realizing what they are doing or why.

Isolation and Dysfunctional Boundaries

In [chapter 32](#) you will learn about the disadvantages of lax or rigid personal boundaries. Both of these can lead to problems with isolation and loneliness. Lax boundaries mean that people can intrude into your life more than you want, and thus some parts of you may isolate to protect themselves from too many demands instead of setting appropriate and assertive limits with others. Rigid boundaries keep people out perhaps more than is helpful for you, leading to a self-imposed isolation that may result in profound loneliness. It is important to be able to identify your personal boundaries and how they affect your sense of isolation or loneliness.

Understanding Loneliness

Loneliness is a complex condition involving problems with social skills, difficulties with attachment, particular emotions, thoughts and core beliefs, situational issues, and sometimes, unrealistic expectations. Loneliness is not the same as being alone. We all have times when we are alone either due to circumstances or by choice. Alone time can be pleasant and rejuvenating when you choose it (see [chapter 11](#) on using free time and relaxation). But when you do not want to be alone, when you are yearning to be with others, when you experience the need to be with others and are unable to soothe yourself, you will feel lonely. And as we mentioned earlier, you may feel lonely even though you are in the company of people, because you feel so disconnected. Loneliness can lead to further feelings of rejection, low self-esteem, shame, and even despair. In fact, loneliness can feel similar to intense grief following the death of a loved one, and it can be overwhelming in its unbearable sense of separateness.

Loneliness, Fear, and Shame

You, or some parts of you, may isolate because you feel afraid or overwhelmed by other people, and perhaps because you feel ashamed of who you are. On the one hand, you feel some relief that you are avoiding what you experience to be stressful and vulnerable situations. But on the other hand, you may feel lonely, because we are social beings at heart and have an innate drive to be with others.

Loneliness and the Phobias of Attachment and Attachment Loss

As you learned earlier in this manual, you, or parts of you, may have a phobia of attachment loss, that is, of separation, rejection, or abandonment, while other parts of you may be afraid to be connected with others (see [chapter 28](#)). Thus, you have a major conflict about being alone: Some parts wish to be alone and find safety in solitude, while other parts feel lonely and find safety in connection with others. It is important for you to acknowledge both and to resolve each side of this powerful conflict.

Loneliness as a Reenactment of the Past

People who were abused or neglected as children often experienced profound loneliness on top of lacking support for overwhelming

feelings and experiences. This traumatic loneliness can be reexperienced in the present as a kind of flashback in which those feelings are relived. Because isolation and loneliness might have commonly followed on the heels of abuse, some people automatically isolate and feel lonely when something painful happens in the present. They are reenacting the lonely past.

Reflections on Your Experience of Isolation and Loneliness

- As always, the first step in overcoming a problem is to reflect on it. Take some time (with or without the help of your therapist) to have an inner meeting among parts to begin talking about isolation and loneliness instead of just experiencing them.
- Begin by asking all parts to participate, as they are able. Even if some parts cannot, you may be able to sense or know something about how that part experiences and deals with isolation and loneliness.
- Notice conflicts among parts of yourself about being isolated or lonely.
- Are there parts of you that prefer to be alone? If so, do they enjoy alone time, or are they avoiding other people or stressful situations? Do they ever feel lonely? Are they aware of and attend to the needs of other lonely parts who may not want to be isolated? What do they feel and think about these parts of yourself? Is there any communication among these two types of parts?
- Are there parts of you that are very lonely and want to be with other people? If so, what keeps them from reaching out to others? Are they stuck in trauma-time, fearful of other people, socially anxious, lacking in social skills? Are they aware of parts of you that might prefer to have alone time or be isolated? Using an inner meeting space, try to encourage parts that isolate to communicate with parts that feel lonely without judgment, and visa versa. Can they find common ground; for example, is there agreement that it is good for all parts not to feel afraid, ashamed, or lonely?
- Notice what prompts you to isolate. Does it happen when you

are stressed, after a hard therapy session, when you want to avoid a conflict, or when you feel ill? Are there other alternatives for you to take instead? For example, calling or e-mailing a friend about your stress or problems, being assertive in dealing with a conflict, asking someone to help you if you are ill. Notice any inner obstacles to making different choices than your usual ones.

- Pay attention to what you and all parts of you experience when you are isolated. Do you feel panic, disconnected, shameful, lonely, or numb?
- What happens in your body when you feel lonely; for example, do you feel tense, cold, paralyzed, or frenetic?
- Notice your thoughts and core beliefs.
- What do you expect if you reach out to others when you feel lonely? What do you expect if you are alone and cannot reach someone?
- Are parts of you able to empathize with each other in their need for isolation or their yearning not to be lonely? How might you and your therapist further facilitate and strengthen that empathy, which can lead to cooperation and resolution of the conflict?

Tips for Coping With Isolation and Loneliness

- Begin with grounding yourself, using the exercises in this manual and other ways you have learned to help yourself be in the present.
- Next, reflect inwardly (using the previous section as a guide, if you want) to determine your conflicts and what all parts of you need and want.
- First focus on *internal isolation and loneliness*. You may use all of the skills in this manual to support yourself and all parts inside in becoming less isolated and lonely internally: accepting and connecting with each other; reflecting; orienting parts to the present; helping parts develop empathy, communication, and cooperation; soothing and calming parts; developing safe places; developing pleasant or fun activities that all parts of you can enjoy as a whole person.
- The more you connect with all parts of yourself, the less

overwhelmed you will be, which will help you feel more comfortable in connecting with others.

- The more you can accept yourself and all parts of you, the less ashamed and afraid you will be to connect with others.
- If you have severe problems connecting with others or making friends, begin with what is easiest. Is it easier to talk with one person, or with more than one? Does it help you to have a shared topic (such as volunteer work or a hobby)? You might consider taking a class to learn something new, where you will have a chance to meet new people, or volunteer where you will be with others.
- Some people with a dissociative disorder prefer to meet people on the Internet and chat or have a pen pal. This is not ideal, but it is a start.
- Some people find having a pet helps them to feel less isolated. And a friendly pet is a great source of conversation with other people if you go out for walks.
- Isolation can be a habit. Make an effort to get out or be with friends on a regular basis, even though it may be hard to do. If needed, encourage overwhelmed parts of you to stay in a safe space while you connect with others.
- Make necessary alone time pleasant (for example, with nice music, a good book or movie, healthy and tasty food, a walk, etc.) and productive (see [chapter 11](#) on using free time).
- If you have religious or spiritual preferences, make use of meditation or prayer during your alone time to feel more connected to God or the universe. (You might reflect on whether your concept of God as loving or vengeful reflects your past experiences with other people.) And of course some people feel supported by attending the religious house of their preference or by spiritual meetings with others of like mind.
- Stay present so you can at least connect to the world around you. Walk outside and listen to the birds or look at the trees. There is life all around, and it will help if you can feel at least a little connection to it.
- Make an effort to reach out to others instead of waiting for them to call you.

Homework Sheet 30.1

Reflecting on a Time of Isolation and Loneliness

Choose a recent time when you felt isolated, lonely, or both and then answer the questions below.

1. Describe the situation in which you felt isolated and lonely.

2. Describe any specific triggers for you to isolate or feel lonely, if you are aware. Were any of these triggers present in the situation described above?

3. Describe any parts of you that might have been involved in isolating or feeling lonely. Describe any conflicts among parts that isolate and parts that feel lonely.

4. Describe your experience of being isolated or lonely (including the experience of various parts of yourself). You may include thoughts, feelings, sensations, perceptions, and predictions.

5. If someone had reached out to you, or you had reached out to someone, what would you have wanted from that other person in this situation? What kept you from reaching out?

6. List two or three small, manageable steps you could take to begin addressing your isolation and loneliness.

Homework Sheet 30.2

Skills to Resolve Isolation and Loneliness

Most of the skills you have learned in this manual can help you in some way to cope with and resolve your isolation and loneliness. Below you will find a number of these skills. Choose any four of the skills and describe one of the following next to each of the four skills:

- A situation in which you used the skill to cope successfully with isolation or loneliness. Describe what worked well.
- A situation in which you tried the skill but it did not help or you were not able to complete it. Describe what interfered or was too difficult.
- A situation in which you would like to try the skill.

Skills

1. Staying grounded and in the present.
2. Orienting parts of yourself to the present.
3. Reflecting on your experience of isolation or loneliness.
4. Using inner safe space.
5. Using alone time productively.
6. Being aware of and challenging core beliefs and thoughts.
7. Being aware of and regulating emotions.
8. Empathic communication with inner parts of yourself (including

use of a meeting space).

9. Negotiating with parts phobic of attachment and those phobic of attachment loss.

10. Coping with a trigger for isolation or loneliness.

11. Regulating yourself within your window of tolerance.

12. Coping with fear or shame.

13. Being assertive.

14. Changing a dysfunctional personal boundary.