

# Attraction and Rejection (Part 14)

Wan Noraini bt Wan Razab

## 4.2 Loneliness

Loneliness is the painful feeling of wanting more human contact or connection than you have. The stereotype of the lonely person is a socially inept loser who doesn't know how to get along with others who perhaps has little to offer other people, who has few or no friends and who spends much of the time alone, perhaps envying other people who have friends and lovers- but recent research has begun to paint a very different picture. There are very few differences between lonely and nonlonely people. They do not differ in intelligence or attractiveness. They spend about the same amount of time interacting with other people. Thus, lonely does not mean alone: Loneliness is essentially independent of the quantity of relationships or social interaction (Wheeler, Reis & Nezlek, 1983).

By the large, the lonely do not lack social skills, though they somehow fail to use them as much as others (they can get along well with others but they don't; Cacioppo & Hawkley, 2005). The main deficiency that has been established is that lonely people are poorer at figuring out other people's emotional states (Pickett & Gardner, 2005). This lack of emotional sensitivity could be either a cause of loneliness (because it makes it harder to attract and keep friends), or possibly a result or perhaps both.

In principle, loneliness can also be an issue of either the quality or the quantity of relationships. You might be lonely because you don't have enough contact with others, or because the time you spend with others does not satisfy your needs. In practice, the data suggest that most loneliness stems from a lack of close, satisfying relationships. Lonely people may spend plenty of time with other people but just talking to many different people is not good enough, and they may suffer if they do not feel that enough people care about them and want to maintain a long-term, close relationship. Put another way, loneliness is typically rooted in the quality rather than the quantity of social interaction (Cacioppo & Hawkley, 2005): Lonely people spend plenty of time with others, but they do not come away from these interactions feeling

satisfied. To be sure, most research on loneliness has focused on people who live in large cities or universities, and people who are lonely when there are many others around are probably suffering from a lack of quality rather than quantity. Living far from others, such as if you worked as a forest ranger in the Arctic, might produce loneliness for lack of quantity of interaction. Still, in the modern world, most loneliness is linked to quality rather than quantity of interaction.

There is a people fight off loneliness by forming quasi-relationships with nonhuman entities. For example, they might bond with dog or cat, or treat a potted plant like a person. Some people even name their cars and treat them like family members (Gardner et al., 2005). A vivid depiction of such a strategy was provided in the movie *Castaway*, in which Tom Hanks played a Federal Express worker who was stranded on a desert island for many months with no human contact at all. To keep himself sane and stave off loneliness, he painted a face on a volleyball that washed up on the island with him, named the ball “Wilson”, and talked to it as if were a close human friend. In fact, he almost risked his life to “rescue” Wilson when the ball floated away from his raft.

Loneliness takes its toll on the body. Lonely people sleep as much as nonlonely people, but the sleep is not as good or as refreshing and they may end up feeling chronically tired. Loneliness also seems to be bad for one’s physical health. Lonely people take longer than others to recover from stress, illness or injury (Cacioppo & Hawkley, 2005). The poor health stems from several factors, including sleep problems. A good sleep is very healthy, but the poor sleep of lonely people prevents their body from getting rest it needs. They spend the same amount of time in bed as others, but a lonely person is more prone to lie there awake or to wake up during the night (Cacioppo et al., 2002).

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