

## Coping With Loneliness During the Holidays

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Loneliness is common during the holidays.

Empty nesters, the elderly and individuals who are grieving — the loss of a loved one or a relationship — may be particularly vulnerable to feelings of loneliness, according to psychotherapist Joyce Marter, LCPC.

Expectations are high, and comparisons run rampant. “Many people feel tremendous pressure to be happy and socially connected.” There’s a prevailing sense that everyone is living a Hallmark movie with the ideal family and perfect celebrations, she said.

That is, everyone but you. And this can trigger feelings of isolation.

Loneliness also can cut deep. Rather than a response to the current environment, individuals who experience chronic loneliness may carry profound scars from past emotional experiences and traumas, according to Ross Rosenberg, M.Ed., LCPC, CADAC, a national seminar trainer and psychotherapist who specializes in relationships.

In short, your sense of loneliness may be a reflexive reaction that has roots in an unhealthy childhood, he said. People who experience chronic loneliness tend to have a shaky sense of self-worth and self-esteem. They may misinterpret feelings of loneliness as confirmation of

their inadequacies.

Loneliness lies on a continuum, Rosenberg said. And it can be painful. It may lead you to turn to unhealthy habits and toxic people. Below, Rosenberg and Marter share their suggestions for coping healthfully with loneliness.

### **Seek company.**

The best way to deal with loneliness, [Rosenberg](#) said, is to override your instinct to isolate. “Loneliness feeds on itself.” Instead, attend a holiday celebration. Call a close friend. Go out for coffee or to shop for gifts.

Visit a place of worship. Find a local group that matches your interests, using sites like Meetup.com, a favorite of Rosenberg’s.

When you’re out and about engaging in enjoyable and interesting activities, you’re less hyper-focused on your negative thoughts, and you’re able to break out of the self-defeating spiral that loneliness may ignite, he said.

### **Share your feelings.**

Be honest with the people you trust, and tell them you’re feeling lonely, Rosenberg said. Divulging these feelings is a vulnerable and daring act – which most people will appreciate. They’ll want to help, he said.

### **Ask for what you need.**

“Sometimes we hope others are clairvoyant and become disappointed and feel disconnected and lonely when our needs are not met,” said Marter, founder of the private counseling practice [Urban Balance](#). It’s important to clearly communicate your needs to others. For instance, you might ask your spouse to give you a hug or your mom to make your favorite dessert.

### **Avoid social media.**

“People compare their insides to other people’s outsides and feel their lives pale in comparison,” said Marter, who pens the Psych Central blog [The Psychology of Success](#). And it’s people’s perfect outsides that are often splashed on sites like Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. If you find yourself getting upset by these sites, limit or stop your use during the holidays.

### **Honor your feelings.**

According to Marter, “Your feelings are normal responses to everything you have been through in your life.” Give yourself permission to feel those feelings, and then separate yourself from them, she said.

“Imagine you are unplugging or ‘zooming out’ and seeing your feelings from a neutral and objective place. Allow yourself to ‘surf’ your feelings of loneliness rather than be engulfed by them.”

### **Practice self-care.**

Focus on taking good care of yourself. Get enough sleep. Engage in physical activities you enjoy. Practice deep breathing.

“Breathe in what you need – such as serenity, peace, strength — and out what you don’t – such as sadness, pain, loneliness,” Marter said. And create structure in your days, she said.

### **Have realistic expectations.**

You may be feeling lonely because you have unrealistic expectations about the holidays. As Marter said, “If your mom is incapable of being empathic, don’t expect her to be so ... Maybe she is better suited to make you your favorite pie and your sister is better to turn to for empathic support.”

In other words, Marter suggested requesting the type of support each person is capable of giving. Avoid expecting things to be good or bad, she added. “[A]ccept things as they come.”

### **Question your social group.**

You may still feel lonely when you’re with others. But this isn’t necessarily a negative thing. In fact, according to Rosenberg, it may give you important information for moving forward: You might be hanging out with the wrong people. For instance, maybe the people you’re surrounding yourself with don’t appreciate you or put you down.

### **Volunteer.**

Marter suggesting volunteering your time. For instance, serve in a soup kitchen or help organizations such as Toys for Tots, she said.

### **Seek therapy.**

When you’re experiencing profound loneliness, therapy can help, said Rosenberg, also author of the book *The Human Magnet Syndrome: Why We Love People Who Hurt Us*. Work with a therapist to explore your loneliness and feel better.

Remember that loneliness is not the same as being alone. “[S]olitude can be a beautiful experience,” Marter said. “Solitude is the ability to really be with oneself without the ‘noise’ of outside influence and expectations.”

It’s an opportunity to get to know ourselves and love ourselves on a deeper level, she said. (Here’s more on savoring [solitude](#).)

However, if you’re experiencing feelings of loneliness, reach out. Seek support from others, whether loved ones, a therapist or both.



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