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Loneliness Vs. Alone— Which Describes YOU?

How many times do you observe a person sitting alone in a restaurant and wonder, "is he/she lonely?"

Perhaps they aren't lonely. Perhaps they are actually just enjoying their own company. So what is the difference?

Loneliness is often perceived as negative and a symbol of personal struggle and abnormality. But loneliness is a normal process associated with life changes, particularly loss. Loss of a loved one creates a void and feelings of frustration and sadness that a person is no longer there. A spouse may feel like a "victim of life" because they are left behind by death or divorce. Empty nesters feel a void when children move out. Even though it is a positive change, the difference in the family structure also leaves a void (and an empty bedroom to prove it). All of these examples are different but have something in common. Although a person is lonely, it presents the need for a new journey. Staying focused on the life that was there before prevents growth and allows the negativity of loneliness to win.

The question of what to do with life now may open new opportunities. For example, my mother-in-law led a very traditional life until my father-in-law died. She managed a home, five children and never worked. She was surrounded by a large family. The children and extended family moved on to create their own lives and her husband died in his 60s. She was young in spirit and health, and faced a very empty house. So what did she do? She managed to get a job and later moved to another state to an apartment that was within walking distance to everything she needed. She met tons of new friends. She has now lived alone for over 25 years. Until recently, she walked three miles a day and was an usher at a Broadway show series near her home. She is certainly living a

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totally different life than the way things started out.

Do I feel she has been lonely at times? Absolutely. But... isn't everyone lonely at times? It is not a great feeling by any means, but growing from it and creating changes in life's journey can feel better, and at times, even good.

I have seen people of all ages turn to the internet. They are feeling lonely and have a need to connect somehow. Sometimes it works when utilized with caution. The cancer patient going through difficult rounds of chemo/radiation therapy may find support via online chatting with someone in the same situation. Anonymity is always the concern, but with every system there will always be abuse.

My husband works very long hours and sometimes our work schedules conflict and we may miss each other for a day or two. We look forward to the time we have together, and I have learned to enjoy my "alone" time by filling the hours with meaningful relationships. I also enjoy special time alone with our adult son.

My alone time means doing things whenever I choose. I can watch the television shows I choose, and eat a meal at a time that is not "mealtime." I spend time holding our two dogs on the couch while relaxing at home.

The difference between being lonely and being alone is the gift of enjoying one's own company. The lesson in this part of life's journey is going from the victimization of loneliness to the courage to be alone.

Susan Charney, MSW, LCSW, psychotherapist, has a private practice in Scottsdale. She provides counseling services for individuals, families and couples. Additionally, she handles Employee Assistance programs associated with any trauma or changes in the workplace. Charney also works with people with chronic illness and their families to help them find balance in their lives. 480.467.0223.

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