

Isolation  
Examined

Isolation is a dangerous and lonely place to be and many of us addicts are all too familiar with this. This is something that affects us mentally. It is something that can bring you down and keep you there. Many of us think that this doesn't matter, but it does. For some, it's just a vicious cycle. They drink because they're lonely and they are lonely because they are drinking. It's a terrible place to be in. Addiction may be the most lonely disease in the world, or at least it feels that way.

Research has linked social isolation and loneliness to increased risks of mental health issues like depression & anxiety, as well as chronic physical conditions like high blood pressure, heart disease & diabetes. But there are actually benefits of being alone like:

- improves concentration & memory
- makes your interests a priority
- boosts creativity
- improves relationships
- improves productivity
- makes you more empathetic

But someone who has isolation tendencies needs to know when isolation is becoming dangerous to one's physical and mental health. People like to self-medicate when they are lonely. They crave something to make them feel they can connect with others, like alcohol. Isolation makes it very difficult to stay motivated in recovery. It's very common in early recovery when we are trying to separate from our "using" friends, and trying to find a new group of clean and sober friends to hang out with. Isolation in recovery makes the chance for relapse far more likely. Strong feelings of loneliness can lead to depression. Get help if you experience any of the following:

- persistent sad feelings, hopelessness, and despair
- loss of interest in activities that once brought us joy
- change in eating habits, eating too much or not enough
- change in sleep patterns, sleeping too much or not enough
- slow movements
- feelings of guilt, shame, or worthlessness
- fatigue
- difficult concentration
- suicidal thoughts

Some ways to improve isolation would be joining support groups, volunteer work, or seeking opportunities to meet people.

A side effect of isolation is having increased anxiety, fear and many of us are living in denial. Denial of what is going on in our lives and how we are heading down the wrong path. When you're isolated you can have a number of feelings such as feeling disconnected, sad, abandoned, feeling no one cares and hopeless. It's a vicious cycle that keeps us feeling these feelings.

I think one of the reasons many of us isolate is we are feeling some sort of a shame as well as guilt while in our active addiction. Let's start with what the difference is between shame and guilt. Guilt is something that is a direct response to something that someone did such as a person yelling at or lying to a loved one. Guilt usually has to deal with an action, thought, or event, and shame spreads out to cover all aspects of who the person is. People with shame believe they are a bad person who is incapable of doing good.

I think it's really important to distinguish between the two if you are to properly manage your recovery. How are you to correct something if you're not even sure of what you're feeling at the moment? This is a critical part of your recovery.

Let's also look at the relationship between loneliness and isolation. So many of us isolate ourselves. When we isolate ourselves it leads to feelings of loneliness. And then these feelings of loneliness lead to us isolating more and more. It's a vicious cycle. It's also been shown that isolation and loneliness lead to substance abuse.

Allowing withdrawal and social isolation to continue unchecked, will only make your situation more challenging. When you find yourself demonstrating antisocial behavior, it is important to figure out what is causing you to want to be alone. It may be the last thing you feel like doing, but reach out to friends or family members. Research has shown that spending time talking with loved ones improves your mood and has a positive effect on your health. If it feels too overwhelming to reach out to multiple people, start with small steps. Identify one person you could reach out to and follow through. Continuing with small goals can help you break out of a pattern of withdrawal.

In general, addiction is a lonely disease. Loneliness and isolation can give rise to addiction. It's hard to be inside our own heads. It is a place that is hard to escape, especially when addiction is involved. Isolation and loneliness have overwhelming effects on drug addiction and alcoholism.

We know studies have shown that those of us who feel more socially isolated, generally deal with increased mental health and substance issues. The opposite holds true as well; addiction to substances may not

just be an effect of isolation, but also the cause of isolation. Many people turn to substances because they are lonely, and many people are lonely because they are addicted to substances.

People who are actively using substances to cope with depression, anxiety, and stressful situations, use drugs and alcohol to avoid their feelings and reality. They live in fear, denial, and guilt. Trapped in those overwhelming emotions, you can see why people who are addicted to drugs & alcohol, often cover up their fears with anger, verbally and emotionally abusive behaviors, and false bravado.

"Hurt people, hurt people." Those struggling with addiction are hurting, and in turn, they hurt those around them. As the disease of addiction progresses, many people lose friends and damage relations with family members. The realities of isolation and loneliness in addiction can leave people feeling:

- feeling unable to connect with anyone, physically or emotionally
- feeling disconnected from others
- feeling sad that there is no one available to talk to, be with you, or understand
- feeling that no one cares
- feeling abandoned
- feeling as though no one wants to be with you
- feeling discontent
- feeling left out
- feeling hopeless
- fearing you will always feel this way

Here are some suggestions on how to beat isolation in addiction recovery.

1. Allow yourself to grieve the loss of drugs and alcohol. In active addiction, they can seem like your best friends: the only ones who are there for you in the darkness and loneliness. The loss of that relationship can cause pain, anger, and loneliness in early recovery. Keep in mind however, that your relationship with your drug of choice was a one-sided, destructive friendship.
2. Make amends and make peace where amends are not possible. During active addiction, we cut people out and hurt those who we love the most. Hurt and confused, your loved ones may have written you off. In recovery, you have the opportunity to apologize and take action to make amends. Not all relationships may be salvageable. In situations

where relationships are damaged beyond repair, make peace with knowing you had apologized and accept that there are some things beyond our control.

3. Some relationships and social connections are unhealthy. Some people will not support your recovery and they have no place in your life, regardless of your loneliness or desire to connect. Cut out the negative influences and move forward.
4. Do not get yourself into a rut. Mix things up! Diversify your activities and the people with whom you connect. Try different meetings each week, try a new activity or even a new restaurant! Getting caught up in the daily grind can make it very difficult to climb out of isolation.
5. Build self-confidence and boundaries! It is important to build your own self-confidence and be comfortable in being alone and choosing who you interact with and when. Building a support network requires building boundaries in your relationships and being a good friend, relative, or significant other in return. It is possible to break the cycle of isolation and addiction. Connecting with others in recovery through meetings, sponsors, groups, or social functions means sharing a bond with others on a similar path as you.

Isolation is something that so many addicts face, so it is important that we don't let it sneak up on us. We need to gain a better understanding of our withdrawal symptoms if we plan to live a healthy and productive life. Be in tune with your body and mind and that will prevent that wheel of negativity from spinning in your mind. Be social and be aware, and always live in the moment!