

Ari Marjovuuo, Jenny Julkunen and Maria Lähteenmäki



# LONELINESS

A WORKBOOK BY  
YOUR SIDE

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and Maria Lähteenmäki**



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**A WORKBOOK BY YOUR SIDE**

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# A BOOK TO HELP YOU WITH LONELINESS

This book is for you who is tired of feeling lonely. This book is specifically for you if you feel lonely too often and want to do something about it. Loneliness may be something you have lived with for a long time, or it may be something that has only recently entered your life. Perhaps you are so used to loneliness that it seems impossible to imagine or hope for something that could even replace the space currently occupied by loneliness.

What if life didn't have to be like this; could loneliness be an experience, which you could have an impact on? How could you take better care of yourself? How could you feel more comfortable in social situations and relationships? This book aims to help you explore thoughts about yourself and your relationships with a sense of curiosity. The purpose of this book is not to give you ready-made answers. Instead, it aims to provide you with a mirror and tools for reflecting on the good aspects of your life, the aspects you want to hold on to, and to help you to think what you might want to change in your life. What could improve in your relationship with yourself and others upon reading this book?

Social well-being is something you can and are encouraged to invest in, regardless of what your current and prospective relationships might look like. It's extremely useful to stop and examine who you are, the kind of relationships you have had and the kind of relationships you want to have going forward. Most important, however, is to pay attention to your relationship with yourself and how you view yourself. So, before you get started, we hope you decide to want what is good for you –to side with yourself and your own story.

This book can act as a compassionate and encouraging companion for you as you make changes in your life. It is not a replacement for another person, but hopefully it can act as an empowering listener. You can share with it your story so far and reflect on how you would like the story to continue.

## **From loneliness to social connection**

Loneliness is often accompanied by the thought that it is something we have no control over, making the experience feel even more isolated. Indeed, the first and biggest steps in alleviating loneliness, include stopping and recognising, sharing and reflecting on the experience. After doing so, it will be easier to see what brings you joy and satisfaction in life, whether alone or with others.

This workbook will enable you to pause and reflect on your experiences of loneliness, self-awareness, and social relationships. The primary aim of this book is to help you find tools that are specifically suitable for you as you work towards loosening the grip loneliness has had on your life. What this means in practice is that, after doing the work, you will have a new relationship with loneliness – new ways of thinking and acting. These new ways of thinking and acting will guide you towards a life that feels just right for you, and towards relationships in which you feel better seen and heard.

When experiencing loneliness, we often yearn for a deep and meaningful connection with another person. We long for someone who would care and show compassion towards us.

These wishes also represent something we desire from ourselves. Deep and meaningful connections start from first accepting yourself and caring for yourself. Similarly, the act of receiving compassion also involves being compassionate towards yourself and others. The journey of discovering who you are and what you think of yourself is no small feat.

As you use this book and its exercises to explore your innermost thoughts, try to adopt an accepting and compassionate approach to your present situation, yourself, and other people. Compassion doesn't necessarily mean that you always like yourself, rather it means you have made a conscious decision to care for yourself and others, and to hold on to what is important to you in your life. It is important to adopt this approach prior to starting work on the book, because without acceptance and compassion, change cannot take place.

Acceptance and compassion make up the soil in which personal transformation can take place. They are the nutrients that allow you to grow as a person. There is no need to try and feel something you don't feel; it's all about having an attitude that will enable you to meet yourself in an open and honest way.

This book is based on research into loneliness and ways to transform it. It draws on John Cacioppo's research and his model for reducing loneliness. This book makes use of ideas and theories from the cognitive model, motivation psychology, social psychology and both Finnish and international studies on loneliness. It is based on the loneliness self-learning and support programme carried out by the authors

of the book during HelsinkiMissio's Näkemys project (2017–2019). The work would not have been possible without the support of the Funding Centre for Social Welfare and Health Organisations (STEA) in Finland. The quotes used in this book echo the stories and feelings shared by those involved in the loneliness programme, all the while respecting their privacy. The examples in the book are also based on conversations with clients and their experiences of how loneliness manifests itself in their own thinking and actions in everyday situations. Your unique experience of loneliness may be different, and it is not necessary for you to identify with all the experiences described here. We hope that the quotes and examples we provide will help you to better understand your own experience of loneliness and increase your understanding of the different ways in which loneliness can be experienced.

This book is about loneliness and the power of social relationships. This book particularly focuses on maladaptive thoughts you might have about yourself and others, which are often associated with loneliness. Furthermore, this book aims to help you explore what changes you want to and can implement in your own thinking when it comes to everyday situations. We hope it will set you on a journey of making and maintaining a connection with yourself and others.

## HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

A great deal of responsibility is involved when working on something independently. As you make your way through the workbook, you will need a great deal of perseverance. Therefore, we hope you will feel encouraged to make a conscious decision on when to start this process. Today is always a better day for starting than tomorrow, because right now you are ready enough just the way you are.

Introspection is not all that simple. Taking the time for it is difficult and almost impossible when life is busy. However, this workbook can help you focus on what is important to you. You may find it useful to set aside some time each day for it and to pause before writing down your answers to the exercises. This way you will get the exercises done and make progress. A good way to proceed is to take your time reading a chapter of the book, along with its exercises, then put the book aside and wait until the next day to write down your answers. As you make your way through the exercises, you will discover the learning style that best suits you.

Reducing loneliness is a learning process and much like any other process where you are learning something new or changing your behaviour, persistence and consistency is rewarded. If you only glance at your workbook from time to time and do the exercises sporadically your loneliness is unlikely to decrease. You will only see changes by committing to the work.

If making these changes were simple, quick, and easy, you would have done it by now. In all its simplicity, even a workbook isn't as easy as it might seem. Some topics may resonate with

you more and completing the exercises will be quicker, while it may take a little longer to fully grasp other topics. As you proceed with the book, it's good to pause and reflect on how each topic and question relates to your own life situation. If it appears to you that an exercise will simply not benefit you at this point, focus on the exercises that will serve you better right now. Even if some of the exercises feel difficult, they can still be beneficial to you, and you can always come back to them at a later point.

Discovering what your obstacles are may in fact be the most valuable insight you gain from the book. Gaining new insight into these obstacles may help you recognise your thought patterns and understand how you react to change. Instead of avoiding the obstacle, you can boldly face it. What can the feeling or thought teach you about yourself? Is this repeated elsewhere in your life? What can you learn from it?

Indeed, as you make your way through this book, you may find yourself reflecting on various aspects of yourself, other people, life, the past and the future. This book can also hold and contain these thoughts for you. For example, you can examine what has changed in your life, what has stayed the same, what you would like to have back in your life and what you would like to experience or learn for the first time. You can utilise the book's note pages to write down your reflections and insights.

The aim of this book is to help you find tools to reduce loneliness, and therefore making a clear plan for it is an essential part of the change. Right from the start of the book you will find exercises that help you make changes in your everyday life. Practising new ways of thinking and acting in real-life social situations takes time as you gently challenge yourself. You might find that you don't even notice a change

that occurs gradually over time. You might even start to wonder if anything will ever change. However, as you come to the end of the book and start making a longer-term plan towards strengthening your social connections, you will notice that all your small, everyday actions do make a difference. On the other hand, you may also notice particular obstacles that explain why your actions are not providing the outcome you had hoped for. The exercises are designed to help you spot and face any obstacles and constraints along your journey so that you can consider how you want to overcome them.

You may wonder whether this book is for you after all, or whether it is for someone in a more difficult situation. When reading this book, you may at times feel like the issues discussed seem self-evident or do not apply to you, perhaps these relate to areas of your life you feel at ease with. This simply means that the challenges central to your loneliness are currently different to those being described. This book can also help you make observations on what is going well in your life. Either way, we hope that the book will contain topics and exercises which you feel are relevant to your current situation.

You may find it difficult to pick up this book for a variety of reasons. This is understandable, as loneliness is often associated with the idea that you must solve it alone or worse, that there is nothing you can do about it. But there is! Your starting point of simply wanting to reflect on your loneliness, is all that is needed to get started with this workbook.

This book is suitable for anyone who wants to feel less lonely and is willing to do the work by making small changes in their everyday

life. In practice this means that while you are making your way through the workbook, you should also be making an effort to change your situation and social relationships. Whether these relationships are new or existing, what matters is that you want to build on them and encounter people and social situations in a way that best suits you. All you need is a willingness to explore your ways of thinking from a different perspective, and maybe even try something new.

Loneliness is often a very painful experience, characterised by a desire to be seen and heard. If your need for this is particularly strong, it should not be ignored. Reducing loneliness is a process that has many steps. Loneliness is painful and brings up many emotions, such as fear, sadness, shame, anger and even bitterness. Some of the topics and exercises in this workbook may feel difficult, or you may start to wonder just how relevant or useful they are for you. All of these feelings are part of the journey of reducing loneliness as you explore your thoughts and feelings about it in more detail. Understanding and articulating your feelings better will lead you towards all the change that could take place if you only allowed yourself a different approach, allowed yourself to be vulnerable.

This is all part of the change and a sign that you are working on a challenging and multi-dimensional issue. To help you conceptualise your thoughts and feelings, and the changes in them, this book also includes re-occurring exercises:

- ♦ **Pause for Thought** will help you observe and understand the challenging emotions this workbook might bring up and the messages conveyed by these emotions.
- **Pause for Emotion** will help you identify your experiences of loneliness over the past week.
- **Time for Action** will help you make goal-oriented plans.
- **Time for Gratitude** will allow you space to think about aspects of your life that are good right now, or better than before.

**PART 1**

**AM I CAUGHT  
IN A CYCLE OF  
LONELINESS?**

## THE HUMAN NEED FOR CONNECTION

"I have a lot of people in my life, but I'm not important to anyone. No one asks me how I'm really doing."

"If I'm not even noticed by others, I have no meaning in life."

"I'd be happy if I just had someone I could talk to or someone who I could go for a coffee with or just for a walk."

The experiences of loneliness described above underline the importance of other people in our lives and the need to belong. We cannot survive without other people, and without them, life can feel empty and meaningless. Our need for connection is one of the most basic needs we have in life. When that need is fulfilled, it creates a sense of meaning in our lives.

Everyone experiences loneliness at some point in their lives. Loneliness is a distressing feeling of exclusion and isolation that can arise, for example, when moving to a new city, during a divorce, when changing jobs or study places, or starting a family. Loneliness is often described as a feeling involving pain, anxiety, and depression. It can manifest as a vague, intangible feeling of sadness, emptiness, or a sense that all is not well. You feel as though you are ill in some way. A person who is suffering from loneliness can also suffer from depression or anxiety, but these are not the same. Therefore, treating

depression does not eliminate loneliness.

What may have started as a momentary feeling of loneliness has become a permanent condition for millions of people around the world. In England, for example, 60% of 30–40-year-olds say they often feel lonely, while in the United States 46% say they regularly feel lonely. In Finland, on average 10–20% of the population experience loneliness. One in ten people in Finland experience constant loneliness. Loneliness is particularly common among young adults and senior citizens. Studies show that loneliness among working-age people is also on the rise. This means that there are hundreds of thousands of lonely people of all ages and from all walks of life all around us.

Loneliness is both a very natural, and shared universal phenomenon that affects everyone, and an extremely personal and individual experience that separates and divides us. We live in an interconnected, global and modern world, where we are more connected than ever,

with the ease and speed for contact constantly improving. This makes loneliness a somewhat atypical problem for our times, because, paradoxically, we are connected to each other in very diverse ways, yet we still feel isolated from others.

## **Recognising loneliness**

There are many myths surrounding loneliness that ought to be debunked. Loneliness is not the same as solitude, being alone or living alone. Solitude is something we choose for ourselves, and it can be a positive, even desirable and relaxing way of spending time alone in today's busy world. Similarly, living alone does not automatically equate to loneliness.

Loneliness is not limited to its extreme manifestation of complete isolation from other people and a lack of any kind of relationships whatsoever. However, isolation and social exclusion can be severe consequences of prolonged loneliness. The quality of our relationships, however, is far more relevant to our feelings of loneliness than the amount of people we associate with. We need to feel like we belong and are important to another person. It is possible to feel a deep sense of loneliness even when surrounded by others, such as friends, a spouse, or family. Sometimes, these feelings can even intensify around other people. Even if we repeatedly seek the company of others and actively engage in activities, we might not alleviate our feelings of loneliness. Instead, we might feel, that, despite all our efforts, we still don't belong and can't connect with others. Spending time with other people and engaging in activities together does not, therefore, always solve emotional loneliness. It does not automatically fill the need for a deeper

connection with others and relationships which allow us to share our thoughts and feelings.

Loneliness is often also associated with other stigmatising ideas and misconceptions, such as the idea that it is caused by a lack of social skills, or that only people of low social status suffer from it. It is well reported that social status, success, wealth, education, and family do not protect against loneliness. However, there is a strong link between social status and loneliness, and those in a weaker social position do experience it more often. Loneliness can lead to a reduction in social skills simply because the person does not have a chance to use them. Whatever a person's social status may be, feelings of loneliness can deepen, when there is a lack of functioning social networks and connection with others.

Loneliness is not a disease and cannot be diagnosed. This is why treating loneliness is often perceived as challenging or impossible. One might even think it's not worth talking about because there is nothing anyone else can do about it – what's the point if they can't find me a friend or become my friend? It can be difficult to find words to describe our own experience of loneliness and unhappiness. Some may wonder whether they are suffering from depression, anxiety, burnout, or some other medical condition. Loneliness often feels like an illness, and some may look for a physical explanation to how they are feeling. At the same time, loneliness is at the root of many mental and physical illnesses. For this reason, loneliness has been found to be more detrimental to your health than obesity or smoking. Determining the connections, the causal link, between loneliness and various illnesses, however, is often very challenging.



The concept of loneliness can be broadly divided into social and emotional loneliness. Roughly speaking, social loneliness signifies the absence of social contacts, while emotional loneliness signifies the absence of close and meaningful relationships. In practice, feeling lonely often involves having both a sense of inadequate social networks and a deep sense of exclusion and isolation, even when surrounded by people. Indeed, even when our lives are filled with acquaintances and everyday encounters with others, be it at work or during leisure time, our lives can still lack truly meaningful relationships.

For one person, the extent of loneliness, became apparent to them after catching a cold. They couldn't call anyone to ask for help and instead had to get up and go to the shops themselves for food and medication, despite having a fever. This concrete manifestation of loneliness had a profound impact on their feelings of security and meaning in life. The short illness caused them to reflect on their social networks and relationships. *"Are the relationships in my life really meaningful if I can't rely on someone when I most need help?"*

Social contact is an integral part of human life, and it can often feel shameful to not have any, or to only have social contacts that don't really function. This feeling of shame or failure may lead to denial or downplaying loneliness: *"But at least I have this one important person or all these people in my life", "Surely I can't be suffering from loneliness" or "I know someone else who is even lonelier, so I don't really have a problem and I can't complain."* It can be difficult to admit to yourself that what you are going through, may in fact be loneliness. But you can't get rid of loneliness by

downplaying it, ignoring it or trying to escape it. Reducing loneliness starts from recognising and accepting the feeling, taking steps towards understanding it on a personal and holistic level. There is a simple rule of thumb: if you think about loneliness and experience it repeatedly, you are lonely.

## **Loneliness is not your fault**

There are many different factors that contribute to loneliness. Sometimes it can be triggered by a big change in life, and other times it seems to accumulate insidiously as the sum of many different issues. Even if you didn't have much control over the factors that impacted your loneliness, it does not mean that there's nothing you can do about it.

Loneliness itself and the challenges faced when trying to change the situation can result in deep feelings of shame and guilt. Loneliness can feel self-inflicted, as the responsibility for forming and maintaining social relationships is perceived to be yours alone. *"If only I had been more active in my social relationships after finishing my studies", "If I weren't so shy and quiet maybe I would have friends", "Maybe if I were different, others would accept me" or "I should just go out more or do more."* In such cases, loneliness is seen as a sign of one's own failure, as if the responsibility for social relationships was entirely one's own.

Many who suffer from loneliness attempt all kinds of approaches to change their situation without first stopping to think about the causes: they call people they know, arrange get-togethers, meet new people, act friendly,

avoid unnecessary complaining, take up new hobbies and seek new friendships. Despite fulfilling this endless list, many feel that while other people's lives around them change, their loneliness remains.

*“What is wrong with me? I do everything I can, I help others, and yet nobody ever calls me or asks me out, no one ever asks how I'm really doing.”*

Social activity is often a good cure for loneliness. When you regularly meet other people, you have the opportunity to form lasting relationships. However, being with other people and seeking their company does not automatically solve your emotional loneliness, your need to be seen and heard on a deeper level.

*“I'm a very sociable person and through my profession I meet a lot of people every day. I'm cheerful and outgoing and I talk a lot. Nobody knows that there's no one in my life that I have a close relationship with. No one. I have a lot of hobbies and meet people there, too. But no one knows me. I mean, really knows me. I have now realised that the way I am in social relationships perpetuates my loneliness. By being talkative, I cover up my own insecurities so that no one can see me for who I really am.”*

It is important to remember that there is nothing wrong with you if you feel lonely. There is also no reason to feel ashamed or guilty about it. Loneliness is a deeply human emotion that affects us all at some point in our lives. It signals our need to be seen and valued, as well as supported through life's hardships. The fact that you have decided to act on your loneliness, that you are aware of the issue at hand, and you want to make a change, is in itself reducing the misconceptions and stigma of loneliness.

Attitudes towards loneliness change when people are willing to talk about it, confront it, and make their experiences visible and known to themselves and others.

## **Loneliness as a stressor**

From birth, we humans are sociable, oriented towards others and in need of other people. We are born and develop in contact with other people. Feeling left out of these connections or lacking them altogether can cause us to feel fear, pain, and suffering. The feeling of loneliness communicates exactly this vital need for togetherness. Social connection is strongly linked to basic security and happiness, personal and collective well-being, as well as physical well-being.

Whatever one's personal experience of loneliness may be, it is part of human biology and therefore part of humanity and life itself. Throughout history, people have survived life-threatening dangers by forming tribes, sticking together, and relying on each other. Historically, exclusion from the group has posed a significant threat to an individual's survival. Even today, if we are excluded from meaningful social contact or even just face the threat of being excluded, we experience social pain that is just as real as physical pain.

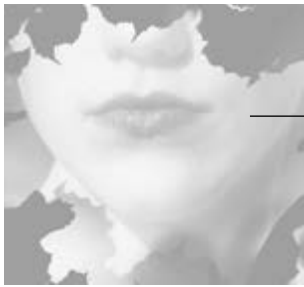
It is vital to understand the mechanism of loneliness. The social pain of loneliness is particularly intense because it is an evolutionary alarm signal for survival. It signals to us that vital social relationships are threatened or missing. We are wired to survive, and it is our brain's job

to make sure we do. Although we don't have to face the same dangers as our ancestors did, loneliness is still dangerous and a threat to our health.

Loneliness causes and sustains a stressful state in the body that is deeply rooted in evolution and our biology. Loneliness signals the immediate threat and danger of not being part of a group, to which the body reacts in the same way as if we were in physical danger or under attack. Short-term stress can help us cope and overcome challenging situations, but long-term stress is dangerous. It is an exhausting condition for both the body and the mind. It can also cause significant harm to the body's defence mechanism. When stressed, we tend to turn our attention to ourselves, our own discomfort and distracting reactions. Our stress response prepares us for fight or flight, making our higher brain functions unavailable and consequently making it more difficult for us to concentrate or remember things. As a result, people who suffer from loneliness may find it difficult to concentrate on another person or the interaction at hand. It can also feel challenging to hold on to a train of thought or sustain your concentration. It can be difficult to trace such experiences back to loneliness.

The world has changed a great deal since the days of our ancestors. Although being excluded does not present the same kind of physical risk of death as it used to, social relationships are still necessary for our survival and act as a safety net for our well-being. Western culture has transitioned from being community-oriented

to increasingly individualistic. As important as it is for us to work on our own lives and focus on self-development these can also drive us to loneliness. Social relationships can be sacrificed in favour of other important aspects of life. The world has changed at a staggering pace, yet our brains haven't. Our vital need for connection is unchanging and deeply rooted in us.



**EXERCISE:**  
**LONELY – NOT LONELY**

Above, we described how loneliness has its roots in the early stages of our evolution to ensure our survival. Even today, being lonely still activates the same areas of the brain as physical pain, triggering a stress response in our brain and body. Our mind works differently when we feel lonely than when we don't.

*What is your stressed, lonely mind like?*  
*What about your socially contented, calm mind?*

*What differences do you notice in yourself, your thinking, your actions,  
and your demeanour between these two different states of mind?*

*"I'm feeling lonely"*

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*"I'm not feeling lonely"*

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## **Maladaptive thoughts triggered by loneliness**

When we experience loneliness for a prolonged period of time, it begins to change the way we perceive our environment. Loneliness makes us more sensitive to social cues, but it also reduces our ability to understand these cues. We pay close attention to another person's facial expressions, gestures, and tone of voice, but when it comes to understanding these cues, we may interpret a neutral facial expression or tone of voice as critical or even hostile. When experiencing loneliness, the world starts to seem a colder place than it really is. In such a world, it is difficult to trust other people, to dare take initiative or find the courage to communicate with others in an open and honest way. Distrust of others can manifest itself as socially withdrawn and awkward behaviour, which in turn affects the way others relate to you. This creates a cycle that reinforces and perpetuates loneliness, even though your intention was to protect yourself from the painful and distressing feeling of isolation.

Loneliness makes you focus on negativity. Your thoughts about yourself and others become more negative. In this book, these are referred to as 'maladaptive thoughts' because they often have a negative and even inhibiting effect on our choices and behaviour, preventing us from flexibly adjusting to each situation. For example, the thought that "others don't want

to spend time with me" can change our behaviour so that we sit further away from others, don't answer phone calls or messages, or decline invitations. Our behaviour then invites others to play out 'a script of loneliness', in which our worst fears of being excluded seem to come true repeatedly. As our loneliness becomes prolonged, this kind of thinking and subsequent behaviour may become automatic. It can be difficult to recognise, let alone question these behaviours. Our thoughts seem to be true. Studies show that addressing maladaptive thinking is the best way to reduce loneliness. It is more effective than, for example, practising social skills or increasing social contact, which are often suggested as remedies for loneliness.

When experiencing loneliness, we often lack or feel we lack appropriate people to confide in, who could mirror our experiences back to us. This makes it harder for us to know the truthfulness behind our thoughts and experiences. Our way of thinking can therefore feel like the only right way to interpret the situation, further reinforcing the negative thinking patterns associated with loneliness. Even if we are aware of our maladaptive thinking and its consequences, changing the situation on our own often seems insurmountably difficult.

## HOW DOES LONELINESS AFFECT YOU?

"It all started when we moved, and I started secondary school at 13. I didn't really settle in and felt left out. I've always been shy and a bit timid. I stopped joining in, because I thought others wouldn't want me there, and I didn't know how to join in anyway. I concentrated on my studies and thought that, at some point, I would have a good job, hobbies and a family. I thought that if I work hard, things will work out. It feels like the loneliness that started in secondary school has followed me throughout my life. I constantly feel like I don't belong, like I'm somehow different from everyone else. I don't know how to make friends. And since no one seems to want to get to know me, there must be something wrong with me... I'm disappointed because I've tried different things, and it feels like it doesn't make a difference. I get anxious and irritated because everyone else has their life together, and I'm just stuck. I don't understand why my life has turned out like this."

This is how one person describes their life with loneliness. This story illustrates how loneliness can stem from different changes in life, such as moving home. Some personality traits, such as shyness, can also predispose you to loneliness as it can feel more difficult to make

friends at first. At times, our environment and other people can contribute to whether social relationships are formed or not. For example, it can be difficult to join already existing groups, and people may exclude each other unintentionally or deliberately.

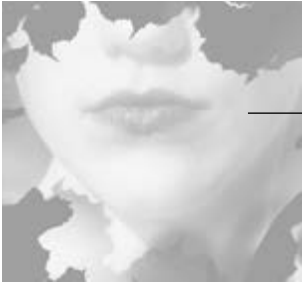
Loneliness is closely linked to significant life events and transitions at different stages of life. There is no particular age at which you have fully grown up and stopped becoming wiser. In fact, this developmental task is contradictory in itself. You are expected to grow up and become an independent adult who is 22 in charge of their own life, yet you are also expected to have created your own social networks on which to rely on. The development of the self begins in childhood and continues into adolescence as we become independent from our families and start our own socialisation processes. In adulthood, we continue to practice being simultaneously independent and part of groups, for example in our relationships with partners and friends. How can you be dependent on others and at the same time independent and self-reliant? How can you find your own identity and learn to stand on your own two feet, while also learning to socialise and connect with others? Where do you find wisdom for difficult life decisions? These are important questions and issues that we solve throughout our lives.

Loneliness can feel even more difficult when we witness a change in circumstances or behaviour, either in our own lives or for those close to us. Why are some relationships just not functioning

the way they used to? Why did you previously feel connected in a relationship, but no longer do? It is difficult to adapt to the fact that people and circumstances change and continue to do so.

Loneliness is intertwined with these changes. It is a position which requires adaptation to new circumstances.

In the story we heard earlier, the person's feelings of loneliness arose due to a variety of causes and coincidences, as well as changes related to different stages of life. Loneliness affected the person's thoughts to the point that they were convinced that no one would want to spend time with them, that they were incapable of making new friends and overall just defective in some way. Over time, loneliness became an oppressive cycle that they seemed to have little, if any, control over. Getting out of the difficult situation felt challenging and attempts to change it had not worked as hoped.



**EXERCISE:  
DESCRIBE YOUR EXPERIENCE  
OF LONELINESS**

Reflecting on your own story of loneliness can help you understand your experience of it, and the way your life has panned out. Now it's your turn to describe how you have experienced loneliness.

*What has your life been like so far?  
How would you describe it to someone you trust?*

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Above, you wrote about your experience of loneliness. Summarise the three key aspects from your story that you would most like to see a change in:

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2. ....

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3. ....

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In your story, there may be factors that explain your loneliness and how it came to be a part of your life. Often life can also just move along at its own pace until at some point, you notice that loneliness has crept up on you. There are many elements linked to loneliness that we have no control over. This is why this workbook focuses on the topics, exercises and questions that will help you keep loneliness at bay.

## Thought patterns impacted by loneliness

*"It's always me who gets in touch with people. Clearly no one is interested in spending time with me because they don't call me or invite me anywhere."*

*"Why would I contact them when they obviously don't want to see me anyway?"*

*"Other people find me completely uninteresting."  
"All my friends are so shallow."*

*"You can't make new friends as an adult."*

Often loneliness, which may have resulted from a variety of life events and other factors, can actually be sustained by the conclusions and interpretations we make. Loneliness impacts the way we see the world, think, act, and feel. The quotes above describe some of the ways in which loneliness can affect our thoughts. These thoughts, beliefs, and attitudes about your loneliness, yourself, and social situations – the ones that hold you back from living your life to the full – are exactly what this workbook is all about. Our attitudes, thoughts and feelings about ourselves and others in social situations affect the way we face these situations and how we act in them.

*"I had promised to go to my friend's housewarming party. Then it occurred to me that I don't know anybody there and some of my friend's workmates, who are all very successful, will be there. I'm nothing like them. I've never been good at socialising anyway, because I can't think of anything to say. What am I going to do at the party? I don't belong to that group of people, and no one will miss me anyway. I feel anxious. I send my friend a message saying I can't come."*

This example illustrates the way in which thought patterns affected by loneliness can influence our emotions and behaviour. Thinking of yourself as different or inferior to others causes anxiety and a feeling of being an outsider. Feelings of inferiority can lead to avoidance of social situations or a total withdrawal from them. This in turn sustains and deepens the experience of isolation.

Loneliness narrows your thinking, and you get into the habit of going round in circles, creating a thought pattern that gets increasingly more intense and ingrained. Gradually, without you even noticing, a typical thought pattern that was characteristic of you, becomes the only 'correct' way to think.

Loneliness can also manifest itself in such a way that being around people and meeting new people may be easy, but actually getting to know them well or develop a deeper trust with them can feel difficult or impossible. Maladaptive thinking can come in the form of mistrust and prejudice, to name a few. You may question other people's ability to understand you, or you might be suspicious of their motives:

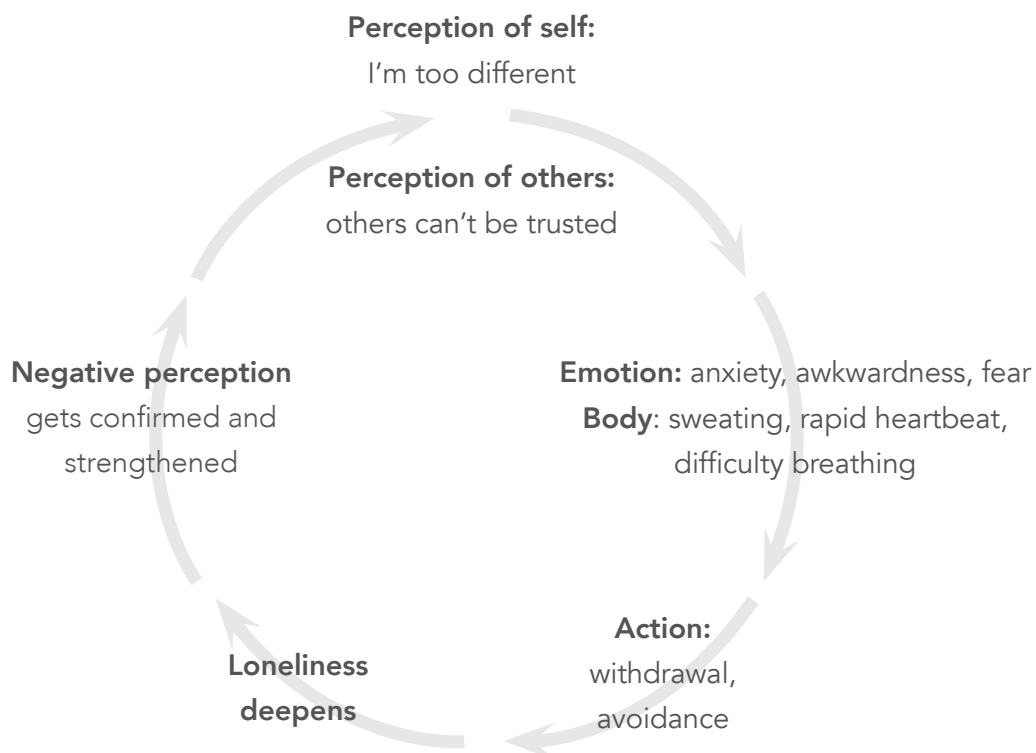
*“Why should I tell anyone about myself when no one will understand me anyway?” “If I tell them about myself, they’ll think I’m weird.” “Other people never talk about anything that interests me.”*

When experiencing loneliness, it can be difficult to notice a change in your own thought patterns and the way your thinking has become stuck. Loneliness starts to take over your life and the way you see yourself. Long-term loneliness starts to affect your view of yourself and your life story, as well as the role of other people within it, in your past, the present and the future. Your experience of loneliness starts to influence the way you interact with other people. It affects how you think others see you and these interpretations in turn shape your attitude towards yourself and others.

As your thinking and experiences narrow, it becomes more difficult to find alternative ways of thinking. One person suffering from loneliness said: *“I realised that I’ve been living in a kind of bubble of loneliness and hurt feelings. I haven’t let people get close to me.”*

You can, however, work towards becoming more flexible in your thinking, which will open up opportunities for being more open, and for finding new ways to act.

The following figure illustrates further the link between our thoughts, feelings, and behaviour, and how loneliness can become an ever-deepening spiral.



## CYCLE OF MALADAPTIVE THINKING

When trying to reduce loneliness, the following steps are crucial:

- Recognising your own attitudes and ways of thinking

*"I noticed myself thinking again, that people won't accept me in their group, which is very characteristic of me to think."*

- Challenging your own thinking

*"Is it really true that I'm not as smart as everyone else?"*

- Acting in a different way

*"Instead of always texting, I'm going to try calling."*

*"I started a conversation over lunch."*

*"I couldn't find a friend for myself, but I decided to start volunteering as a support person and help a young person with their loneliness. I'm no longer as lonely as I was before now that I'm helping someone else."*

Examining our thoughts, feelings, and behaviours is useful, because alleviating loneliness often starts with giving up or changing a way of thinking or acting that has perpetuated loneliness. It can also mean adding a new, different way of thinking to our repertoire:

*"I believe that in the future, I won't necessarily get stuck in feelings of loneliness but will find my way out of them. I will find new doors to open."*

The following figure illustrates the link between thoughts, feelings, and behaviours when the cycle of loneliness breaks and takes a different turn.



## CYCLE OF ADAPTIVE THINKING

## **Loneliness influences your way of life**

Loneliness affects our thinking and changes the ways in which we react to different situations. However, our thoughts have an even wider impact, affecting the choices we make and the ways in which we act. It's only natural that we want to do things for ourselves, as well as for others. We need others to share in our everyday challenges and responsibilities. Other people add meaning and purpose to our lives. When experiencing loneliness, it can be easy to think *"I can't be bothered to cook only for myself"* or *"it makes no difference that my home is untidy, because I'm the only one living here."* Similarly, you may stop exercising because you just don't feel like going out alone. Everyday choices and actions matter, even if it doesn't feel like they do when you are lonely. They can help you stop the cycle of loneliness from growing deeper.

*"Suddenly I realised that I was spending every night at home alone and I didn't feel like doing anything. I realised I had changed, and that I no longer felt good about myself. Then it dawned on me that this is not who I am."*

Loneliness affects our well-being comprehensively and therefore also our everyday lives and activities. One example of this is the sleep-wake cycle. When you're lonely, you may sleep too little or too much, or your sleep may be intermittent rather than restorative. Your sleep cycle can also become disrupted, as you might go to sleep increasingly later at night, or in the early hours of the morning. At bedtime loneliness may feel more tangible, making falling asleep even more difficult. As the mind races, unpleasant thoughts often come to mind. You may feel unsafe falling asleep on your own. In

some cases, loneliness can also become more tolerable at night. At night, you can't contact others in the same way you can during the day so there are no expectations about what you or others should be doing.

When you feel lonely, it's easy to forget to take care of your own well-being, or it can simply feel pointless. You might not even notice how you have adapted and adjusted to the gradual changes that have taken place. When you're tired, for example, even ordinary everyday tasks can seem difficult, and loneliness may feel like an insurmountable obstacle. However, when you feel rested, you can better deal with yourself and others, as well as any setbacks and challenging situations.

To relieve our feelings of anxiety, we may also turn to eating and drinking as a coping mechanism. Instead of making ourselves a nutritious meal, we might choose instant gratification, something that satisfies a craving or simply fills our energy needs quickly. Alcohol and drugs can also become a way of coping with our feelings of loneliness. The relief we might get from eating, drinking, and intoxication is temporary and only postpones the feeling of loneliness we're trying to escape. Eventually you might notice an accumulation of habits that don't actually help with your loneliness but instead postpone and deepen it, while also increasing your feelings of guilt and shame. Avoiding feelings of loneliness and ignoring the problem can make you feel like you and your life have no meaning. This makes it even harder to go out and participate in activities.

*"I feel anxious about my weight gain. I eat too much chocolate at home. My weight is affecting my self-esteem and makes me reluctant to go anywhere."*

*“I had a beer in the middle of the day because I felt so empty inside. It didn’t help at all.”*

It is important to remember that loneliness reduces your ability to see different options and make decisions. Even simple decisions can feel difficult, or you might not even notice that you have options available to you. Your life is on autopilot.

*“I had been living without curtains for a long time and there were other things at home that needed improvement, too. I decided to seek help. The barrier to asking for help was huge. I thought I should be able to take care of things such as cleaning and arranging things in the home by myself just like everyone else. Finally, however, I conceded that I just didn’t have the energy and couldn’t do it alone. I needed some actual help and support... It’s a nice feeling to have the curtains in place and everything in better order in my home. I might even invite a friend over one day.”*

Seeking and receiving help can be difficult when feeling lonely. In the above example, a person suffering from loneliness reflected on how their extended loneliness had an impact on their home environment. It wasn’t a place of comfort that felt like home, but rather a place where loneliness materialised in unorganised tasks and unattended chores. Inviting friends over to a place like that felt unachievable or unappealing. As this example shows, loneliness can have an overarching effect in your life.

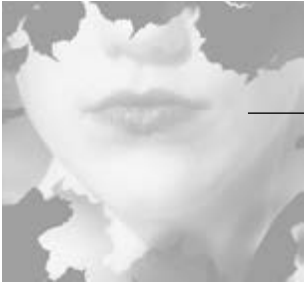
*“I should be looking for a job. I know I’d feel less lonely, because I’d have something to do that matches my skills. I’d feel more important, and I’d have people in my life through work. Getting paid would mean I could afford to go out for coffee and dinner with people I know... But first I would have to create a CV. And I don’t know how to get started.*

*I’m so lonely and unhappy that I don’t know if the sentences I write make any sense at all. I know this is stupid, but I just can’t get started. I feel anxious and I keep putting it off. The more I postpone it, the harder it is to start looking for a job!”*

A specific problem, such as writing a CV or taking care of your home, can sometimes exemplify a person’s experience of loneliness. However small or insignificant the challenge may seem to you or to an outsider, it should never be trivialized. It is crucial to be able to recognise that there is something you need to change, but it’s also important to admit to yourself when implementing the change feels difficult or impossible on your own. An important part of taking care of yourself and dealing with loneliness is recognising the challenges and obstacles you face in life and, when necessary, getting the help required to deal with them.

Loneliness can have an impact on how you approach your own well-being and can manifest as neglect. *“I feel like no one cares about me, so why should I care about myself?”* How you look after yourself shows how much you value yourself and what you think you deserve in life. This is transparent to others too. If you value yourself, it’s easier for others to do the same.

The steps to overcoming loneliness therefore include not only making social connections, but also all the everyday changes you make for your own well-being. They allow you to experience positive solitude in your life instead of loneliness and engage in aspects of life that energise you. Being more aware of what is going well in your life, regardless of your loneliness, will increase your well-being and help you refocus on the aspects of life that enable you to move forward even in the years to come.



**EXERCISE:**  
**FACTORS THAT INCREASE OR  
DECREASE YOUR LONELINESS**

*During a typical day or week, what contributes towards  
you feeling more lonely?*

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*During a typical day or week, what contributes towards  
you feeling less lonely?*

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## Attempts to overcome loneliness

Loneliness is a sign of an anomalous state, which each of us seeks to resolve as we see fit in the moment. We respond to the social pain and stress of loneliness by applying various coping mechanisms. We develop these methods, some more effective than others, in order to cope with the difficult experience. These coping methods are automated behaviours that are partly conscious, partly subconscious. Whereas one person might attempt to solve their loneliness by promptly seeking the company of others, another might avoid others by confining themselves on the sofa, and a third may find it easier to escape into the world of the internet.

A developing cycle of loneliness can be nipped at the bud when we manage to find connection with others by actively making contact and being around others. However, if we are unable to truly connect in our relationships, they can feel superficial and may not bring relief to our feelings of loneliness. Nonetheless, most people try to solve the problem of loneliness by actively seeking the company of others, taking the initiative, and striving for openness in their relationships. Sometimes a compulsive search for company or activities can even become an avoidance strategy and an exhausting way to escape loneliness. Spending time on your own can feel difficult. The week might be packed so full that there is hardly any time to sit down and consider what is actually making you unhappy. The amount of work, studies, and events you have in your calendar is not always an accurate indicator of your internal experience in relation to how much connection and meaningfulness

you feel in your life and relationships. Paradoxically, being active in relationships and social situations can become a chore in the middle of a busy life, as one person stated, "*Spending time with people has become a chore for me.*" Slowing down, focusing on others, and being present are prerequisites for developing a deep connection. In the absence of these, you can still feel lonely even if you otherwise have an active and busy social life.

People often avoid situations that feel new, nerve-racking, or stressful. It's only natural for us to shy away from situations that involve the risk of being rejected or the fear of losing face, because no one wants to knowingly walk towards danger. Disappointments in previous relationships and unfortunate experiences in social situations may also have an impact, causing you to avoid certain types of social situations or letting others get close to you. Loneliness can affect our initiative and expectations of others as it causes us to fear and pre-empt past disappointments repeating all over again, as well as impacting negatively on our interpretations of others in social situations. Avoiding social situations or personal, more intimate conversations can temporarily relieve feelings of anxiety and distress, which is why it often feels like a valid solution.

Loneliness can cause people to withdraw and seek activities that don't require too many inner resources to engage in, but that provide temporary pleasure and comfort. You might notice yourself staying at home and watching TV, playing games, or surfing the web much more than before. Fear of disappointment, rejection, and feeling left out can lead to withdrawal and staying at home. Home usually represents a safe

environment that feels unsafe and reinforces the pain of loneliness. *“I always have the radio on at home, because hearing someone talk makes me feel like I’m not alone.”* Home can reinforce feelings of being insignificant and not belonging, especially if you would rather be somewhere else, with other people or achieving things that are meaningful to you. *“I just stay at home, but I get nothing done.”* Boredom and inactivity contribute to frustration and a lack of meaning in life: *“I get nothing done at home. I can’t concentrate on anything. Evenings are the worst. I feel anxious, but I’m not sure what about.”*

Some people have very few meaningful social relationships and everyday encounters with others, or if they do have them, they can feel distant. In some situations, it isn’t even possible to alleviate loneliness by reaching out to others. It can feel like a dead end, where you have to find other ways to make yourself feel less lonely, even if you know the benefits are only temporary.

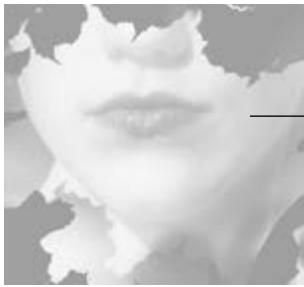
*“I know I should go out somewhere, like the gym, but then I start playing a computer game and suddenly I’m like oh wow it’s already evening. Then I feel anxious, because I didn’t get anything done today either.”*

It can be difficult to find effective solutions when struggling with the emptiness and boredom, or the pain and unpleasant feelings caused by loneliness. Sometimes such attempts to find relief can reinforce or deepen the experience of loneliness. You shouldn’t be too hard on yourself for the bad habits you may have acquired or for your attempts at solving the situation, which haven’t worked. Instead, if you have habits

you would like to change, this workbook can help you recognise the situations that trigger these behaviours, as well as other ineffective ways you might have for managing feelings of loneliness. As your loneliness eases, you will have more inner resources for making better choices and changing your lifestyle.

Before starting the exercises, let’s take a moment to think about your well-being. While this workbook focuses on social relations and your goals relating to them, your wellbeing and resilience are also relevant, affecting your life comprehensively. As you start these exercises, you might also want to think about the small actions you could and would like to take for your well-being – perhaps something you have been thinking about doing for a long time but haven’t managed yet. What could you do today to increase your well-being? What could you do to have more energy and to feel better? Could you sleep better, exercise a bit more, spend time outdoors, eat more regularly or improve your home to make it a more pleasant place to spend time in? Maybe you have these things in order already. If so, that’s great! Even if you’re not where you want to be, instead of trying to overhaul your life all at once, it’s best to take small steps with a few changes that are important to you. If these changes feel overwhelming right now, don’t blame yourself for it. Now might not be the best time for changes, or maybe you just need a bit of support in getting started.





**EXERCISE:**  
**ATTEMPTS TO SOLVE LONELINESS**  
**- THE BENEFITS AND DISADVANTAGES**  
**OF DIFFERENT STRATEGIES**

Loneliness and the thoughts and behaviours that result from it are not always unpleasant, but instead can offer momentary relief. This is why we often carry on with these thoughts and . Following the examples below, write down in the exercise how you tend to act and what you tend to do when feeling lonely. How does thinking and acting in a certain way benefit you? What are the long-term disadvantages of this approach for you? Finally, weigh up whether your approach leans more towards the beneficial or the disadvantageous. If the way you think and behave is doing more harm than good, would you consider taking small steps to change it?

Example: What do I do when I feel lonely?

I go home and avoid seeing people.

*Benefit: I'm less anxious without other people around*

*Harm: Being alone makes me feel distressed*

I spend time on social media.

*Benefit: It takes my mind off other things, I feel like I've got something to do, I feel stimulated, I meet friends*

*Harm: I don't get anything done, I get frustrated, I feel lonely because I'm not actually meeting anyone*

I snack.

*Benefit: It gives me pleasure, I feel pampered, rewarded, and relaxed, I have something to do and I get some enjoyment into my life*

*Harm: It makes me feel bad and guilty, I gain weight, I lose money, I neglect my well-being*

What do I do when I feel lonely?

*Benefit:*

*Harm:*

Do you see anything in these practices that you would like to change? Perhaps right now you don't feel that any of your behaviours are harmful to you but take a moment to consider your behaviour in the long term, perhaps a year or five years from now. Could these behaviours turn harmful during that time? You can also write down something that is not yet a behavioural pattern but is perhaps something you are concerned about adopting at a later stage. It could even be a concern someone close to you has expressed. These reflections will help you at the end of the book, when you start making a plan for yourself to reduce loneliness and find connections. It may also help you to pick up on the little things that bring you closer to ways of thinking and acting that work better for you. Write down below what you would like to change and what is causing you concern.

*Behaviour you would like to change*

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*Why do you want to change your behaviour?*

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*Where could you get support for change?*

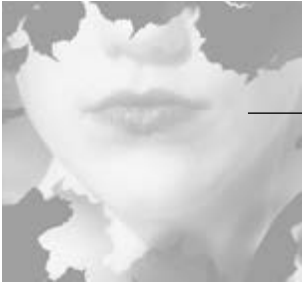
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**EXERCISE:**  
**LONELINESS, THOUGHTS,  
AND BEHAVIOURS**

Loneliness and the feeling of being an outsider can be triggered in various situations. The purpose of this exercise is to encourage you to observe and notice the situations in which feelings of loneliness arise or deepen.

For example, it may be a situation in which you did not feel understood: *“I shared with someone that I’m lonely, but they just said, ‘you have lots of friends’.”* Similarly, loneliness can increase when you feel ignored: *“The person looked at everyone else while talking and asked everyone’s else’s opinion except mine.”* Sometimes the feelings of loneliness and isolation can be exacerbated by situations where it seems that others are different to you: *“They only talk about their trips abroad, which I don’t have the opportunity to go on.”* You can also feel lonely if you are not getting the help or support you need with important choices: *“I don’t know what to do. I don’t have anyone I could talk to about this.”*

*Describe a situation in which your experience of loneliness emerges or deepens.*

**Situation:**

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Once you have visualised the situation, notice the very first thought that comes to mind. Don't overanalyse it, simply write down the first thing that came to your mind. For example, in a situation where you were not understood, you might think: "*My friend doesn't care.*" If you were ignored, you might think: "*The person speaking doesn't respect me.*" In a situation where you feel like an outsider, you might think: "*I'm different to everyone else.*" When you are dealing with important issues alone, you might find yourself thinking: "*I can't do this alone, there's no point in even trying.*"

Example:

***Situation:*** *I didn't feel understood*

› ***Thought:*** *My friend doesn't care*

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└ Describe the situation and the first thought that came to mind.

***Situation:***

› ***Thought:***

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After writing down your thoughts, take a moment to observe how you felt. What emotions arose and what was your mood in the situation? Try and describe it as accurately as possible. A situation like the one above where the person didn't feel understood and thought that their friend didn't care could bring up feelings of sadness. Feeling ignored and thinking that the other person doesn't appreciate you, can lead to feelings of inferiority and irritation. Feeling like an outsider and consequently thinking you are too different from others can cause shame. Thinking that you can't manage on your own while having to deal with important issues all alone can make you feel frustrated and empty.

Example:

***Situation:** I didn't feel understood*                      **>** ***Thought:** My friend doesn't care*  
**>** ***Emotion:** I'm sad*

Now describe the emotion evoked by both the situation that made you feel lonely and the thoughts that followed.

***Situation:*** ..... **>** ***Thought:*** .....  
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**>** ***Emotion:*** .....  
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After writing down your feelings, consider how you behaved in the situation. What did you do and how? In the first example, the person didn't feel understood, and concluded that their friend didn't care, which made them sad. As a result, they became even more withdrawn and lonely, unable to share their experience with others. In the second example, feeling ignored and consequently interpreting this as disrespect brought up feelings of inferiority and irritation. An experience, such as this can make concentrating more difficult, so when they were finally asked for an opinion, they couldn't form one. Feeling like an outsider and too dissimilar to others, caused the third person shame, which led them to leave and avoid similar uncomfortable situations in the future. In the final example, the person had to deal with important issues all alone and thought they couldn't handle them on their own, which made them feel frustrated and empty. This can lead to postponing decisions and eventually avoiding decision-making altogether.

Example:

***Situation:** I didn't feel understood*

***Thought:** My friend doesn't care*

› ***Emotion:** I'm sad*

***Behaviour:** I withdraw and ignore my friend*

*Now describe your behaviour following the situation that made you feel lonely and brought up the thoughts and feelings you previously specified?*

***Situation:***

› ***Thought:***

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› ***Emotion:***

› ***Behaviour:***

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You can return to the earlier exercise 'Describe your experience of loneliness', in which you wrote about situations where you felt lonely. If you wish to, you can do this exercise again using those experiences.

### Summary

In the first part of this workbook, you explored loneliness as a phenomenon and considered how it shows up in your life. Loneliness adversely affects our thinking, behaviour, and social relationships. Loneliness can make social situations feel uncomfortable and make you want to withdraw from them. Sometimes loneliness can lead to a tiring, activity-packed schedule even when you simply long for more reciprocal relationships. Loneliness can also manifest itself as difficulty in approaching others with an open and trusting attitude.

When experiencing loneliness, other people can sometimes seem shallow and critical, or you may view yourself in an unfavourable light, as

somehow different or inferior. It can be difficult to identify loneliness as the cause of habits such as heavy alcohol consumption, excessive snacking, or spending time online. Loneliness can cause us to be critical in our relations with others, refuse invitations, or express ourselves more bluntly than intended. Sometimes it can be difficult to understand our own thinking and behaviour. "Why do I act the way I do when I know it's not good for me?" Recognising your own attitudes and ways of thinking will also help you reduce feelings of loneliness. By doing so, you can challenge your established ways of thinking and behaving and consequently attempt to do things differently.

### Pause for Thought

*Take a moment to think about the thoughts and emotions the exercises above evoked in you. What do you think these thoughts and emotions say about you?*

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*What thoughts and feelings do you notice having at the end of the first part of this book?*

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*What needs or desires are these thoughts and feelings communicating to you?*

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## **Pause for Emotion**

Colour in the clouds to show your experience of loneliness over the last week.



*How often do you feel lonely?*

*How strong is your experience of loneliness?*

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## Time for Action

In the activity diary below, write down two or three small, practical steps that will help reduce your feelings of loneliness. What can you add to your routine this week, or the next week to reduce your feelings of loneliness? For example, could you spend less time online? Or could you do something you enjoy? Do you want to take care of a task that has been on your mind or that is stressing you out? Ask someone how they are doing? Request for help with something small?

Colour in a box whenever you complete something you have added to your activity diary.

My small action

MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT	SUN	MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT	SUN
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My small action

MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT	SUN	MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT	SUN
-----	-----	-----	-----	-----	-----	-----	-----	-----	-----	-----	-----	-----	-----

My small action

MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT	SUN	MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT	SUN
-----	-----	-----	-----	-----	-----	-----	-----	-----	-----	-----	-----	-----	-----

## Time for Gratitude

*What is going well in your life despite your loneliness?*

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A series of 20 horizontal dotted lines spanning the width of the page, providing a template for writing or drawing.

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**PART 2**

**THE POWER  
OF THOUGHT I**



## WHAT THOUGHTS DO I HOLD ABOUT MYSELF?

“There must be something wrong with me, because I don’t have any friends.”

“I’m boring and no one is interested in me.”

The aim of this chapter is to identify thoughts you have about yourself and how they affect your behaviour and your experience of loneliness. In the first quote above, the person’s experience of themselves as defective adds to their sense of loneliness. It fuels their pattern of thinking that there is nothing they can do about their loneliness, because it is a permanent quality for which they blame themselves. In the second quote, the person considers themselves boring, which may consequently discourage them from seeking other people’s company, because they think that others couldn’t possibly be interested in them. Why seek the company of others only to be disappointed?

Your attitude towards yourself affects your relationships and the interactions within them. Our past relationships play a huge role in the development of our identity and the way we interact. If you find it difficult to appreciate yourself or see yourself in a positive light, this will be reflected in how you interact with others, including the roles you adopt in social interactions. For example, do you keep to the sidelines as an observer during interactions,

waiting for others to take the initiative or involve you in the conversation? Or, when talking to friends, are you always ready to say “*yes, whatever suits you*” and “*I’m okay with anything*” to make sure you are accepted? Is it sometimes easier to be critical of others than to expose your own vulnerability? Or do you always take control of the situation and want to lead the discussion in an attempt to feel more confident?

Loneliness often prompts reflections on who we are. Other people act as mirrors through which to view ourselves. In order to feel important and accepted, it is important for us to know how others view and relate to us. When we are lonely there are few, if any, people around us who could act as mirrors. We see this lack as an indication of what we are like. As one person put it: “*I’m like an empty shell.*” Their lack of relationships meant they didn’t really know who they were anymore, and loneliness made them doubt whether they had any identity at all.

## How did I become me?

Different phases of life and the social relationships within them shape our identity and influence how we view ourselves. Major life changes, crises and transitions can cause loneliness, but they can also affect our experience of ourselves. Some situations in which you may find yourself alone or feeling a deep sense of loneliness include moving to a new city, changing schools, becoming a parent, becoming ill or facing illness in the family, going through divorce, or starting your retirement. In such situations, external events can shape our identity beyond our control. A young person changing schools may always feel like the new kid and a little different, no matter how much time passes. A person who has gone through divorce or lost their partner may feel that they were “*destined to be alone*” and may not even welcome anyone new into their life. A person who has always had to cope with life’s challenges on their own may see themselves as a strong survivor who doesn’t need help from anyone. Someone who has worked all their life may not know what to do when they retire: “*When I retired, I found I had to force myself to get out, because I didn’t have to leave the house anymore and there were no familiar routines to help me get going.*” Loneliness can also be present in matters relating to your gender and sexuality.

Adverse life experiences of deprivation, loss, failure, neglect, or abuse can cause loneliness and impact your self-esteem, as well as your perception of being accepted, loved, and cared for. Am I really worthy in other people’s eyes? Do I matter?

Reflecting on the role of their childhood in the development of their loneliness, one person stated: “*I come from a family where there was alcoholism. Because of that, I have felt alone since childhood, and I still feel different to others as an adult.*” Another person in a similar situation connected this to issues related to openness and trust in relationships: “*I’m quite a reserved person. I find it hard to trust others because my trust has been betrayed so many times.*”

## Innately sociable, shy, or introverted?

“*The worst situations are those where you are expected to be sociable. Others are talking casually amongst themselves, and I’m too nervous to say anything. I get anxious that I’ll be left out if I don’t act immediately. I then desperately try to think of something to say but feel frustrated because my head is completely empty.*”

In addition to having different life experiences we, of course, also have different personalities. Some like solitude and silence and are more calm and reflective in nature, while others are more active and fast-paced, enjoy crowds and thrive in fluctuating conditions. Contrary to popular belief, however, we are all innately sociable. Sociability, or the desire to interact with others, is a temperament trait common to us all. How much time we want to spend with others and how much time we need for ourselves varies, but we are nevertheless all sociable by nature and all in need of other people.

Some attribute at least a part of their loneliness to poor social skills: "*Because I have poor social skills, I don't know how to talk to people and easily feel left out.*" However, loneliness is not necessarily caused by poor social skills or a lack of sociability. Sociability and social skills are also not the same thing. Social skills refer to a person's ability to interact with other people. Sociability is linked to our temperament and reflects our desire and interest in interacting with other people.

Studies show that those experiencing loneliness do not have any worse social skills than others, but they more commonly hold the belief that they are less skilled than other people at interacting. More than their actual social skills, it is this belief that can affect their relationships and social situations. Of course a person experiencing loneliness might have fewer opportunities to practice their social skills and receive constructive feedback. Nonetheless, even if you're a little rusty, your social skills will improve with practice as you participate in more social situations.

People experiencing loneliness often define themselves as sensitive, shy, or introverted. Shyness is a temperament trait, which means that a person with this trait needs more time to adapt to new situations than someone who is less shy. Shyness is often associated with social situations, but it can apply to a wide range of situations that are new to us. Shyness is often prevalent in the early stages of a situation that is new to us. As the situation becomes familiar, a shy person may become talkative and outgoing. In other words, shyness is not the opposite of sociability, nor are they mutually exclusive. Shy people are also sociable.

According to research, shyness seems to be associated with higher-than-average levels of empathy, as well as a stronger ability to understand and listen to others. These are valuable skills in building and maintaining relationships.

Introversion is part of a theory that defines personality traits. In short, an introvert is someone who needs more peace and solitude than what a more outgoing extrovert would. For instance, an introvert might be sociable and talkative during the working day, but after a day's work will need time to recharge and relax in their own space.

## **Can an extrovert be lonely?**

Some of the character traits or temperaments described above can contribute towards a person's experience of loneliness. However, loneliness is a multidimensional phenomenon. Someone who is outgoing, energised by other people's company and actively seeks contact with others may experience loneliness in just the same way as a shy and introverted person would. Despite being active and sociable, they may feel that they have no relationships that are truly meaningful or close. Paradoxically, because the responsibility for making and maintaining contact is often left to the more active party, the role of a socially active person can even increase feelings of loneliness. They may feel that they are alone in maintaining the relationship. Feelings of loneliness and insecurity are further exasperated by the knowledge that were they to stop their usual active behaviour it could mean an end to a relationship. It is important for us to know that



the people we have relationships with like us, care for our wellbeing, and are interested in our lives. This can often be seen in the way others act towards us. So, if a friend calls me, it means they want to keep in touch and are interested in me.

The loneliness experienced by extroverts can be difficult for outsiders to understand – *“you can’t be lonely because you’re always doing things and have lots of people around you.”* Downplaying this experience, however, can only increase feelings of loneliness, because the experience is not seen or understood.

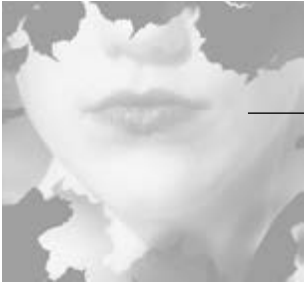
## **Prone to feeling nervous**

Social situations sometimes involve nervousness. Nervousness is natural to all of us when we enter a new and important situation. We start to focus on the impression we will make on others, what is at stake and what might come from the situation. Nervousness is often driven by a strong desire for something, accompanied by an ever-increasing fear as we reach for that desire. If the nervousness turns into social anxiety, it can cause us to restrict or avoid social situations in an effort to protect ourselves from painful situations.

Nervousness can also be linked to sensitivity. In social situations, sensitive people perceive more information than others about what is happening around them and within them. Many people feel that social situations trigger them to lose their ability to think or react to situations as they happen. They often wrongly blame themselves for this and may feel slow and even stupid in social situations. Sensitive people sense more of the cues around them,

and the resulting information overload makes it difficult to process and react to these situations. Sensitivity has many valuable aspects, such as the ability to read other people’s facial expressions and emotional states. However, it seems that people now have more negative connotations with sensitivity, which is causing many with the trait to want to change and be something different. They may have received negative feedback or criticism on their sensitivity, such as *“you’re so touchy”* or *“what’s wrong with you, why are you so quiet?”*

Sensitivity can also increase feelings of disappointment in relationships. When a sensitive person has looked forward to something that doesn’t happen, they may interpret this as rejection, even if that is not the case. This can be illustrated in an example where a person experiencing loneliness asked an acquaintance to go to the cinema and the acquaintance replied, a little hurriedly, that they were busy this week. Instead of agreeing to go to the cinema at a less busy time, the acquaintance’s response was interpreted as a rejection. The person didn’t want to ask again because they thought the acquaintance simply wasn’t interested in going to the cinema with them.



**EXERCISE:**  
**WHAT AM I LIKE WITH**  
**OTHER PEOPLE?**

*How do you typically behave in social situations?  
Use the exercise below to describe how you interact with people.*

Mark where you typically are along the line in social situations.

CRITICAL	<input type="radio"/> — <input type="radio"/> — <input type="radio"/> — <input type="radio"/> — <input type="radio"/> — <input type="radio"/> — <input type="radio"/> — <input type="radio"/>	FLEXIBLE
BOLD	<input type="radio"/> — <input type="radio"/> — <input type="radio"/> — <input type="radio"/> — <input type="radio"/> — <input type="radio"/> — <input type="radio"/> — <input type="radio"/>	TIMID
ASSERTIVE	<input type="radio"/> — <input type="radio"/> — <input type="radio"/> — <input type="radio"/> — <input type="radio"/> — <input type="radio"/> — <input type="radio"/> — <input type="radio"/>	MEEK, ACCOMMODATING
ATTENTION-SEEKING	<input type="radio"/> — <input type="radio"/> — <input type="radio"/> — <input type="radio"/> — <input type="radio"/> — <input type="radio"/> — <input type="radio"/> — <input type="radio"/>	WITHDRAWN
PRAGMATIC	<input type="radio"/> — <input type="radio"/> — <input type="radio"/> — <input type="radio"/> — <input type="radio"/> — <input type="radio"/> — <input type="radio"/> — <input type="radio"/>	SENTIMENTAL
QUIET	<input type="radio"/> — <input type="radio"/> — <input type="radio"/> — <input type="radio"/> — <input type="radio"/> — <input type="radio"/> — <input type="radio"/> — <input type="radio"/>	TALKATIVE
PESSIMISTIC	<input type="radio"/> — <input type="radio"/> — <input type="radio"/> — <input type="radio"/> — <input type="radio"/> — <input type="radio"/> — <input type="radio"/> — <input type="radio"/>	OPTIMISTIC
PLANNER, PREPARED	<input type="radio"/> — <input type="radio"/> — <input type="radio"/> — <input type="radio"/> — <input type="radio"/> — <input type="radio"/> — <input type="radio"/> — <input type="radio"/>	IMPULSIVE, SPONTANEOUS
INTROVERT	<input type="radio"/> — <input type="radio"/> — <input type="radio"/> — <input type="radio"/> — <input type="radio"/> — <input type="radio"/> — <input type="radio"/> — <input type="radio"/>	EXTROVERT

## **Is my interaction style permanent or evolving?**

The way we interact with other people is often shaped by our experiences and the patterns of interaction we have internalised based on these experiences. Caregivers play an important part, setting an example to us of how to talk and interact with others, how much value to place on close relationships, and how to relate to others and ourselves. The way we behave in the company of others is affected by the manner in which our primary family expressed affection, care and concern. Furthermore, it is affected by the way appreciation was shown towards each other and expressed about those not present, as well as how advice and help was requested, given and received. It can be hard to be vulnerable in front of other people and show your need for others if you have always had to act brave and strong, no matter how you feel inside. It can be difficult to maintain your boundaries if they were always violated and never respected. How do you share secrets if they were never kept, or became subjects of gossip? Your way of interacting with new and familiar people now is supported or hindered by your childhood experiences. It has been impacted by the comments made and attitudes held towards others, as well as the amount of contact your family had with other people.

It can be difficult to recognise your strengths and personality traits if you have not had enough open interaction with other people. Maybe your needs haven't been met or your way of interacting with other people hasn't been accepted. This can cause you to feel like

you don't know how to act. You may adapt to social situations by withdrawing. Others adapt by taking control of the situation and by being very vocal. In both situations, it is difficult to connect with others, because you are either not present in the social situation, or not giving others enough space.

Relationships are rarely exactly how we want them to be. We cannot choose our closest family members or relatives. It is therefore useful to focus on what we can influence. Close relationships can be used to mirror what you want in your life. If you were wrongfully not allowed to express yourself authentically, it might become a life principle of yours to be more tolerant towards others. Similarly, if you wish your childhood family had entertained visitors more often, but they weren't in the habit of inviting people over, as an adult you can choose to invite people into your own home. As you progress through this workbook, you may discover habits that are not actually your chosen way of doing things, but rather something you have picked up and learned from others. Sometimes these are habits that deepen your feelings of loneliness. You can, however, choose to do things differently. Just as we have learned ways of interacting in our past relationships, we can equally re-learn alternative ways of relating and interacting in our current relationships and

social situations. For example, just because your childhood family didn't show affection by hugging or didn't know how to process emotions, it doesn't mean that you can't pursue closeness and openness in your relationships now.

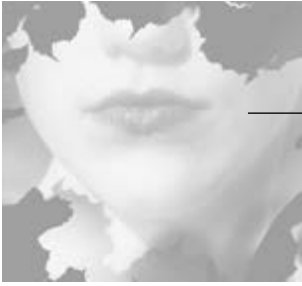
## **The many sides of me**

Instead of making value judgements about different personality traits, it may be more useful to think about ways of interacting and being in relationships that feel natural and right to you. You may want to consider how to better express these aspects of yourself in your life, as well as how to maintain and strengthen them. For example, shyness and introversion are not barriers to satisfactory social relationships. A shy person can have good friends and learn to embrace their shyness without it interfering negatively with their life. Introverts, on the other hand, are often capable of deep relationships and can be very social in their everyday lives, as long as they have a chance to recharge in solitude. Being a little nervous is also normal and can help us perform better in new situations and alert us to the significance and importance of a given situation.

A style of interaction learned in close relationships can often be unlearned or challenged and, as such, it does not automatically prevent you from creating new genuine and meaningful relationships. However, we build our new relationships on the foundations of our previous ones. Reliable and genuine relationships are attainable. Sometimes it requires you to first forgive or move on from those who have hurt you. When your trust has been betrayed many times, facing these painful events in your past

is important, because it allows you to draw your own boundaries of self-worth and self-respect. Sometimes relationships require a different approach from what you are used to. They may require more sharing if you have made a habit of keeping things to yourself too much. Sometimes the approach required may be simply to stop and be present instead of jumping to straightforward action, and at other times it may be to take measures into your own hands, raise problematic issues, and face up to them if you have previously been in the habit of hiding or downplaying them.

It is also often forgotten that listening is one of the most important social skills. When experiencing loneliness, we often underestimate the listening skills, tact, and sensitivity we possess. These are crucial and highly useful qualities for equal and reciprocal interaction and for building meaningful relationships. Whatever your way of interacting, there are always valuable aspects to it that should not be overlooked or dismissed as worthless.



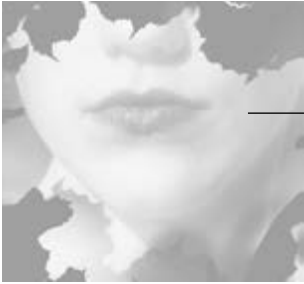
## **EXERCISE: MY CHARACTER STRENGTHS**

*Circle your character strengths.*

Perseverance    Compassion    Self-Regulation    Sense of Humour  
Joy of Learning    Gratitude    Creativity    Enthusiasm  
Love    Bravery    Fairness    Teamwork skills  
Social Intelligence    Optimism    Curiosity    Kindness

Use another colour to circle a strength you would like to further develop. Maybe it is a trait that you repeatedly get feedback on from friends and family, or one that could help you move forward if you made more use of it.

Familiar and comfortable social situations are often the best in bringing out your character strengths, as are new social situations where loneliness does not interfere with your way of interacting with people. How, then, could these traits be kept in mind in other situations too? Could you find a way to remind yourself that even when you're not around other people, these qualities are still a part of you? Placing photos that are important to you somewhere visible or easily accessible can help you remind yourself of times when you were content, of people who are important to you or of places where your mind can recharge. You can also make use of aphorisms or self-affirmations that help you, perhaps by displaying one in a prominent place in your home or office. Sometimes we need gentle reminders of what we truly value in life.



**EXERCISE:**  
**KEEPING CHARACTER  
STRENGTHS IN MIND**

*Write down your ideas for how to keep your strengths  
and positive character traits in mind.  
How could you ensure that you remember them  
even during difficult moments?*

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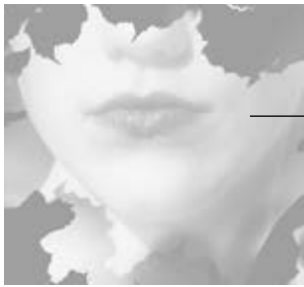
## Does my loneliness define me?

Sometimes loneliness can become such a dominating experience that you can't remember what it's like to feel connected to others. It can be difficult to even visualise thinking and acting in a way that isn't influenced by loneliness when it's always been a part of your life and something you have had to constantly adapt to. It can lead to an all-encompassing identity that is defined by being a lonely person. By then, the experience of loneliness is so central to your existence that it has come to fully define your way of being, your thoughts about yourself, and your relationship with others.

*"I find it very difficult to start a conversation with another person. Not because I don't know how to, but because if I asked them how they are or what they did over the weekend, they might ask me the same question. I definitely don't want to reveal to them that I don't have a life. Everyone would know how boring and pathetic I am."*

*"I've always been alone. What else could I even be?"*

In the example above, the person sees themselves as boring and pathetic. They believe that this is what others would see too if they found out about their loneliness. In new situations, this person focuses their attention primarily on cues that support a self-image of being pathetic and boring. Attention is drawn, for example, to the fact that everyone else seems to have lots of friends and interesting things to do all the time. Likewise, they also have a tendency to miss cues that do not match these beliefs. Through the lens of loneliness, their observations and interpretations become more narrow and rigid, and what was once a belief starts to become 'true'. Equally, a belief about oneself can easily turn into a self-fulfilling prophecy, as behaviour is guided by beliefs. Indeed, the person in the second quote, wonders what else there could even be when loneliness has been a part of their life for a long time, defining how they view themselves and everything around them. The breadth and depth of loneliness can obscure everything else a person is, including what they have been and what they would like to become. It is very important to remember that loneliness is just one emotion among many others and does not define a person. Truly, what else could there be?



## EXERCISE: IN A CYCLE OF LONELINESS – ATTITUDES TOWARDS MYSELF

Similar to the exercise 'Loneliness, thinking and behaviour', the following exercise will explore how the experience of loneliness arises and how it can be intensified and sustained in recurring key situations in life. The exercise starts with an example, after which you can reflect on a corresponding experience from your own life.

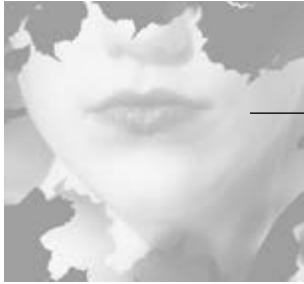
Arriving alone at an empty home is one example of a situation which often causes feelings of loneliness. The situation then gives rise to an almost automatic thought about yourself: *"I'm a failure because I still don't have a significant other and a family of my own."* The situation and the thought that arises from it are followed by the feeling: *"I'm disappointed and sad."* Consequently, the thought of being a failure and the feeling of sadness then drive your action: *"I'm going to order takeaway and play a video game to make myself feel better and take my mind off things."* Temporarily you even feel better, and the unpleasant thoughts and feelings subside, but by bedtime you feel even deeper disappointment and the thought of yourself as a failure has been reinforced. Feelings of guilt might creep in, and you may even blame yourself for the situation. Why didn't I cook dinner for myself, go for a walk, or call a friend? Moreover, your sense of loneliness deepens. We often repeat these types of situations in our lives and further reinforce our sense of loneliness without realising it. The simple act of coming back home can set off a cycle of events that seems almost unstoppable. When maladaptive thoughts, unpleasant feelings and guilt are continually reinforced in this manner, it can be difficult to explore different choices and try new approaches.





*In the following diagram, describe a recurring situation from your everyday life that triggers feelings of loneliness. Describe the first thought that comes to mind in this situation. Try to observe it as accurately as possible without filtering it. Simply write down whatever comes to mind in the situation. Then think about how you feel and act in the situation. Finally, contemplate on the outcome of your thoughts, emotions, and action.*





## EXERCISE: RECOGNISING AND EXPLORING MALADAPTIVE THOUGHTS ABOUT YOURSELF

In this exercise, we will explore maladaptive thoughts about yourself that loneliness has given rise to.

The previous 'Cycle of loneliness' exercise, showed an example situation in which the thought "*I'm a failure*" was evoked. If you look at the thought more carefully, you will see that it is maladaptive and harmful because it defines the person comprehensively as a failure in life simply because they live alone. The thought of being a total failure does nothing to contribute towards your well-being or promote desired changes towards meeting people and creating lasting relationships. This kind of maladaptive thinking is often deeply ingrained, and to rid ourselves of it we need to examine it in depth.

What evidence do we have for this thought or belief? In other words, when is it accurate (+)? What evidence do we have against this thought or belief? When it is inaccurate (-)? "*The fact that I always return home alone to an empty house reinforces the thought that I'm a failure. I haven't been able to start a family of my own, and my attempts at dating have not been successful. On the other hand, can I really say that I have completely failed at everything? After all, I've managed to make some friends, and I have warm relationships with my siblings. These are proof that I'm not a total failure in all my relationships.*"

- + I'm not in a romantic relationship and I don't have a family
- I have been able to develop some close relationships

*Using the previous exercise, focus on a thought or belief you have about yourself.  
Next to the positive and negative signs below, list evidence,  
that either proves your thought or belief or disproves it.*

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Write down your original maladaptive thought related to your loneliness:

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Here are some supporting questions to help you figure out how to make a thought less maladaptive and harmful. These thoughts can't be corrected overnight. With practice, you can find an alternative thought that will help you. When you notice a maladaptive thought arising, you may find it helpful to stop and consider these questions.

- Is the thought accurate, always and in every situation?
- Does the thought help you achieve what you want to achieve?
- Does the thought help you reduce or prevent feelings of loneliness from arising or deepening?
- Does the thought help you reduce or prevent behaviour that you want to let go of?
- What would be a useful alternative thought that would help you achieve what you want, increase your well-being, and promote behaviour that is more likely to improve your situation?

Write down your new amended thought:

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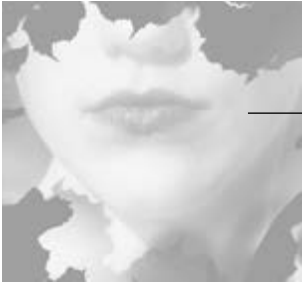
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It can be difficult to find an amended thought that suits you. The key is to start exploring what kind of alternative thoughts you find more helpful, while bearing in mind that they should also be thoughts you find believable. The aim is not to turn your thoughts into positive ones, but into realistic ones that consider various perspectives on the issue. For example, the thought of yourself as a 'complete failure' could be amended as follows: *"I've often failed in romantic relationships, but I have great friends. I have also done quite well in my studies and work."*



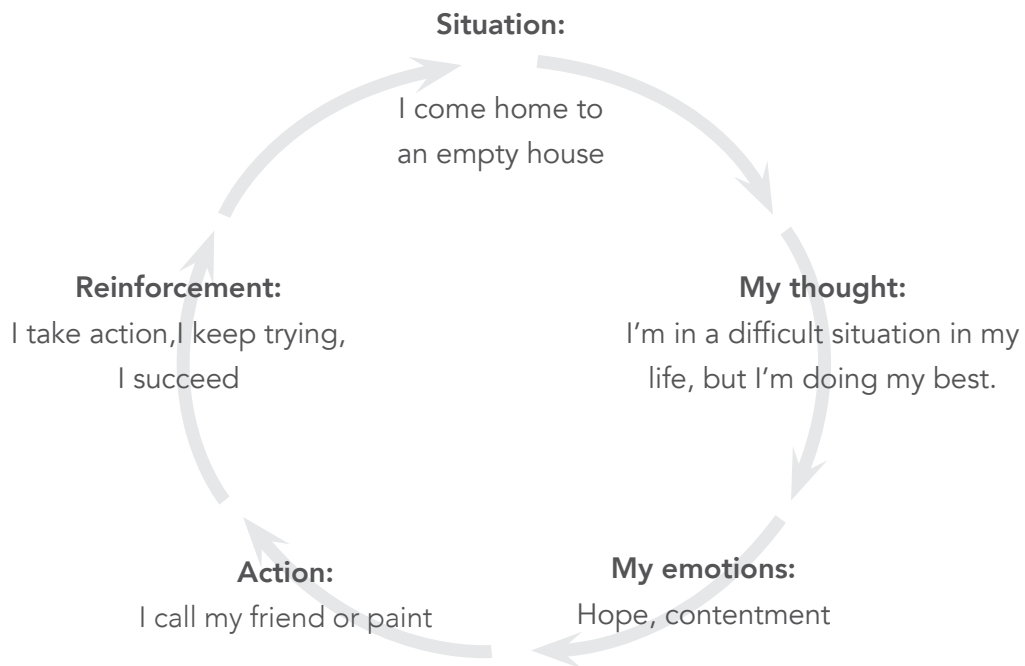
## EXERCISE: GETTING OUT OF THE CYCLE OF LONELINESS

This exercise explores how to prevent feelings of loneliness from becoming quite so intense and persistent in recurring key situations in your life. As before, we start with an example situation, after which, you can reflect on a similar situation from your own life.

In simple terms, there are two ways to stop the cycle of loneliness: either by challenging and changing a maladaptive thought, or by changing a dysfunctional and routine way of acting and behaving. In the example we have been using, returning alone to an empty house triggered the feeling of loneliness. The first thought that came to mind was that of being a total failure. At a point like this, it may be helpful to simply observe this thought: *“I found myself thinking again, in my typical way, that I have failed.”* Challenge the thought: *“Is it really the case that I have failed?”* The strategy practised in the previous exercise can be used as an example for how to challenge your thought. *“There are relationships I have succeeded in.” “The fact that I’ve failed shows that I’ve tried. Not that I am a failure.”*

A challenged and amended thought has a more positive effect on your well-being. Instead of feeling disappointed or sad, you may feel hopeful. You might find it easier to remember the things in life you can be genuinely content with. An alternative thought does not always involve a positive observation, nor is it the purpose of the exercise. It is important to also come up with alternative thoughts that do not deepen your feelings of loneliness. The aim is to find thoughts that you can honestly stand behind.

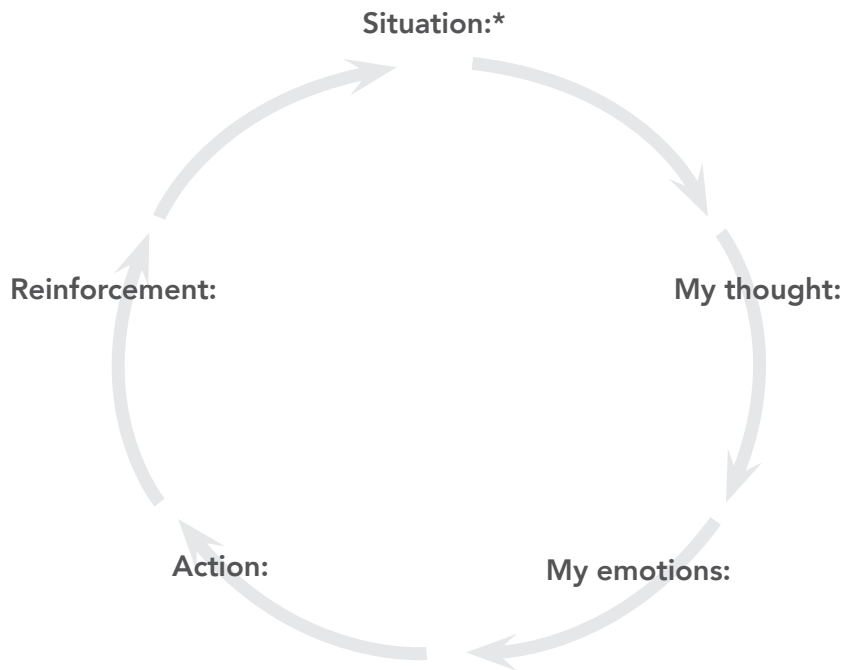
Your behaviour might change as a result of the above-mentioned changes in your thoughts and emotional states. However, it is also possible to influence your thoughts and feelings through your behaviour by acting differently. For example, when coming home to an empty house and feeling like a failure, you can make plans and do things that you enjoy and that give you a sense of achievement. *“I’m going to call my friend”* shows an ability and willingness to look after relationships and have an impact on them, or *“I’m going to continue my painting project”* provides enjoyment and a sense of achievement and accomplishment. Perhaps by acting differently, the experience of an empty home will no longer feel so distressing.



*In the following diagram,  
describe a recurring situation from your everyday  
life that causes you to feel lonely.  
Observe what kind of thought it evokes in you:  
- "I find myself thinking..."*

Write down a challenged thought or alternative to this maladaptive thought. You can find an alternative thought by reflecting on the following: *"Is this thought accurate and true? Is the situation really as I see it? Do I think this way about other people in a similar situation?"*

Reflect on it and write down how you feel as you come to notice that your thoughts are not always completely true in every situation.



*\*What does the new situation look like after the change in thoughts and behaviour?*

Reflect on this and write down in the Action field a different course of action you could take from the one you might have resorted to in the past. Then write down the outcome resulting from all this and describe what your difficult situation looks like now.

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We tend to think and feel all sorts of things about ourselves. However, it can often be difficult to distinguish what is the real innermost you and what might just be a stream of thoughts running through your mind, or emotional reactions to different events and situations. It can also be difficult to separate actions from personal characteristics. For example, if you fail at a task, it does not mean you're a failure, or if you feel irritated, it does not mean you're a troublemaker. Sometimes we forget that we are not our feelings, our thoughts, or our behaviour.

The 'Cycle of loneliness' exercises are a good way to examine how much loneliness affects your life and the extent to which you can define the role loneliness and related ways of thinking and behaving play in your life. It can be difficult to identify your own cycle of loneliness. You may not see which situations trigger feelings of loneliness. Perhaps this is because one of your coping strategies for dealing with the pain of loneliness has been to shut off all unpleasant feelings. The challenge of controlling unpleasant emotions is that if we close ourselves off from, say, loneliness, sadness and frustration, we also close the door to other emotions. We can't choose to only feel the

emotions we find acceptable. For that reason, it is important to choose an accepting and self-compassionate approach to all our feelings and experiences.

The first step in reducing loneliness is to become aware of your personal meaning-making patterns within the cycle of loneliness. At this point, instead of making big changes, the most important thing is to stop to examine and observe your own experience of loneliness and its impact on your life. After completing the previous exercises, one person reflected:

*"I refuse to let loneliness define me as inferior to others anymore. I still feel a longing and sadness for not having someone to share my life with. Why don't I have a special person to enjoy life and do things with? I may have tried too hard to remove loneliness from my life and may not have dared to stop and let myself feel what I feel. I've found that I understand myself and others better now, my loneliness doesn't feel insurmountable anymore, and I can trust myself to cope with it."*



## Pause for Thought

Take a moment to think about the thoughts and emotions the exercises above evoked in you. What do you think these thoughts and emotions say about you?

*What thoughts or feelings do you notice having at the end of the second part of this book?*

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*What needs or desires are being communicated through these thoughts and feelings?*

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## Pause for Emotion

Colour in the clouds to show your experience of loneliness over the last week.



*How often do you feel lonely?*



*How strong is your experience of loneliness?*

## Time for Action

In part two, you reflected on your sense of self and your thoughts about yourself, as well as how these relate to your experience of loneliness. Next, write down in your activity diary below some practical steps you could take to reduce your feelings of loneliness. Your small actions in the following weeks could relate to thoughts about yourself and how you interpret situations. For example, whenever you catch yourself berating yourself, could you try to change your thoughts to something more useful and constructive? Could you focus on a maladaptive thought from an exercise and come up with alternative interpretations to it in everyday situations?

Colour in a box whenever you complete something you have added to your activity diary.

My small action

MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT	SUN	MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT	SUN
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My small action

MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT	SUN	MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT	SUN
-----	-----	-----	-----	-----	-----	-----	-----	-----	-----	-----	-----	-----	-----

My small action

MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT	SUN	MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT	SUN
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# Time for Gratitude

*What is going well in your life right now?*

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PART 3

THE POWER  
OF THOUGHT II



## HOW I VIEW OTHERS

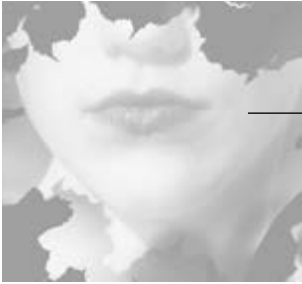
“People often talk about such trivial things.  
Who cares what happens on some reality TV show?  
Everyone’s so shallow.”

“My colleague asked me if I had sent the email.  
It annoys me when people think  
I can’t even send a simple email.”

In the first quote, other people are seen as shallow and in the second as patronising and judgmental. In the same way that our thoughts about ourselves affect our interactions, so does our attitude towards others. When you are lonely, it can feel difficult to interact and you see other people differently than when you are not. Loneliness influences our interpretations, for example, by sensitising us to negative situational cues and making us blind to positive cues in interactions. For instance, the colleague’s question in the second quote may have been a neutral enquiry to find out whether the matter had been dealt with or if the person needed help. People also tend to jump to conclusions too quickly, such as concluding that those who talk about reality TV are shallow and therefore not suitable company. Drawing various conclusions is typical for all of us but in social relationships particular attention must be paid to their truthfulness and bias.

Loneliness creates and reinforces a wide range of shortcuts in thinking that we use to interpret social situations and others’ behaviour. Viewed through the lens of loneliness, our interpretations of other people can be too black and white and hastily made. For example, our view of others as untrustworthy or self-centred may be caused by our anguish from loneliness, our past experiences of injustice, or the bitterness we hold on to from past disappointments. Perhaps you wish that others paid more attention to you and, if they do not, their behaviour may feel selfish and cold. Learning to recognise how loneliness affects the way we view the world is crucial. It is also good to be aware that it is common for people to take shortcuts in thinking, even when it is unnecessary.





## EXERCISE: HOW DO I VIEW OTHERS?

The following exercise presents some everyday situations concerning relationships. Reflect on these situations and your interpretations of other people's intentions, character, and behaviour in these scenarios. Observe whether there might be a difference between your interpretations when you feel lonely and when your loneliness is less intense. On the next page there are blank spaces, where you can write down a scenario of your own, which might be occupying your mind, and examine your interpretation of it.

Everyday situation	My interpretation when I'm lonely	My interpretation when I'm not lonely or my loneliness is less intense
Your friend never contacts you but you always call them.		
You tell an acquaintance that you've been having a tough time and they say that it's nothing compared to what a difficult time they've been having.		
You try to have a chat with a new acquaintance but the conversation isn't really taking off.		
You bump into an old friend in a shop but they seem distant and keep glancing at their phone.		
Your colleague asks you for yet another favour.		
An acquaintance from a hobby talks openly about themselves but doesn't listen to what you have to say.		

Everyday situation

My interpretation  
when I'm lonely

My interpretation when I'm not  
lonely or my loneliness is less intense

## Shortcuts in thinking

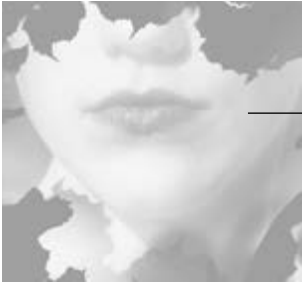
An interaction between two people could be described as a busy motorway. Obeying traffic rules and being considerate of others allows us to travel smoothly and safely. Drivers travel back and forth on the motorway in different directions, similarly to social cues and dialogue in social situations. Sometimes someone overtakes recklessly without consideration for others, while another person might drive slower than others. Every now and then we might even find ourselves on a collision course or in the oncoming lane.

Unlike traffic, interaction rarely has clear rules. In interaction, rules are created through joint negotiation in repeated encounters and social situations. Our interactions are influenced by our life experiences, social skills, mood, the interaction itself and our interpretations of it. Our limited minds cannot always take everything into account in a fair and truthful manner. Shortcuts in thinking help us to cope with social interactions amongst all the information we are flooded with.

However, hasty generalisations such as categorizing ('good guys' and 'bad guys') and a tendency to jump to conclusions ("They didn't look at me, which means they don't like me") ignore the complexity of social situations. These shortcuts in thinking speed up the process of seeing the big picture in social situations. However, if the conclusions we draw are never challenged by another person, it is difficult,

if not impossible, to question their accuracy. This is why it might feel like we are doomed to repeat the cycle of loneliness. Our own thinking ensures that our loneliness stays in much the same state and is constantly scanning the environment for anything that might reinforce it. We may not even notice cues that undermine or disprove our way of thinking. Our interpretations and shortcuts in thinking become self-fulfilling prophecies. For example, if others seem inconsiderate to me, I begin to interpret them based on this view. I make observations that support this thought because I pay attention to anything that supports it. When you can only see one 'correct' perspective, it is difficult to change your thoughts on your own.


We tend to come up with explanations for ourselves regarding different behaviours and occurrences: how and why did something happen and who caused the event or situation. These explanations can relate to ourselves, other people, or the situation at hand. Based on our observations, we try to create a coherent story that fits our way of thinking. The narrative often formed by someone experiencing loneliness tends to support their personal experience of being alone and an outsider.



**EXERCISE:**  
**DO I SEE THE BIG PICTURE,  
OR ONLY PART OF IT?**

Thoughts distorted by loneliness are often associated with black-and-white thinking. This can manifest itself as seeing only one side of things or perceiving everything as polarised extremes, such as entirely good or bad. Things are either-or, with no in-between.

*Think about your social network, your relationships of all kinds. Bring to mind specifically someone you know who seems unpleasant, annoying, or rude, and try to think of some good traits they have. Despite their flaws, try to see the other side of the coin. Similarly, think of a person you find pleasant, decent, and lovely, and try to come up with some flaws. Could all these features exist in one person at the same time?*

*Positive features of person A:* 


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*Negative features of person A:* 


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*Positive features of person B:* 


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*Negative features of person B:* 

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## Interpretations and reality

*“I’m about to go to lunch at work. I listen quietly as my colleagues talk about childcare fees and football practice. Some of them have recently bought a house and others are considering it. They live a completely different life from mine. Nobody asks me how I am, even though they can see that I’ve been quiet all along. Everyone else is so boring, living in their own little bubble. There’s much more to life than children’s hobbies and floor plans. Going out to lunch with them makes me anxious. I don’t fit in, and I think I’m the only one who’s bothered by it. I just want to go and eat lunch alone.”*

Feeling lonely and consequently like an outsider can give rise to a wide range of interpretations in social situations. We can feel separated from each other when in different situations and stages in life, such as in the example above. Finding connection and similarity amongst all the differences can feel impossible. However, when it comes to loneliness, this person’s interpretation of the situation is much more significant than the actual differences between their lives. They begin to see others as boring people living in their own bubble and ignoring others. They may not want to spend time with such people and may also assume that these people are likewise not interested in them. They make very broad conclusions about their colleagues’ characteristics and behaviour based on their topics of discussion. With this perspective, opting out of their company starts to seem like a logical and sensible solution. Withdrawing seems easier than trying to find common ground, actively

participating, and showing interest in others. Withdrawal temporarily eases the experience of being an outsider, without exposing oneself to the disappointments that might follow from interacting with others.

This kind of thinking and consequent behaviour can become automated without us realising it. The aim might be to ease our affliction and protect ourselves from disappointment, but over-protecting ourselves in this way can backfire in the long term. It makes it difficult for us to take initiative, consider another person’s perspective, find connections, and build friendships. In social situations, it is therefore important to recognise potential shortcuts in your thinking, or interpretations that are distorted by loneliness, giving you one-sided and even incorrect information about the situation. It is equally important to be able to recognise and address situations arising from genuine observations, for example, when a relationship does not meet your needs.

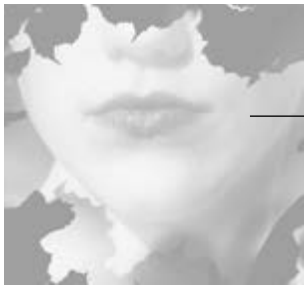
Shortcuts in thinking are useful and allow you to operate relatively flexibly in an information-rich environment. After all, there is simply not enough time for us to always consider every possible angle and alternative for every issue at hand. If we did, we wouldn’t have time to do anything else. Nonetheless, as you have probably noticed, shortcuts in thinking are rigid and one-sided ways of reading the world around us, especially complex social situations. By unlearning this and adopting a more flexible way of thinking, we can eventually gain a balanced view of the different aspects of any given situation. Flexible thinking

involves being aware that the conclusions we draw are one option among many possibilities. *“That person didn’t look at me – They don’t like me.”* Another interpretation could be: *“That person didn’t look at me – They’re deep in thought.”*

In flexible thinking, categories are not mutually exclusive, but can coexist. For example, even a nice person can sometimes be annoying and a friend who only talks about football might be able to talk about other topics too. Being aware of the ways in which loneliness can affect our interpretations also increases our ability to utilise flexibility in our thinking. Practising flexible thinking can make you feel insecure at first, but once you start applying it to real-life situations, your confidence will start to grow. Soon you will

notice that you can assess social situations from many different angles.

*“I realised that if I changed where I eat my lunch, I would be even more alone. I realised that my loneliness made me interpret the situation to mean that I don’t belong, that I’m too different. Ever since I relocated, it has been my overriding experience in other situations as well. While thinking about this, I remembered that one of my colleagues was going to watch a film I’m interested in. I decided I would ask their opinion about it. Perhaps others are happy to have new topics for discussion too.”*



## EXERCISE: IN A CYCLE OF LONELINESS – ATTITUDES TOWARDS OTHERS

You have explored the cycle of loneliness earlier, considering how your thoughts about yourself affect the creation of this cycle. In this exercise we explore how your thoughts about other people can reinforce and uphold your feelings of loneliness. We will start with an example, after which you can reflect on a similar situation from your own life.

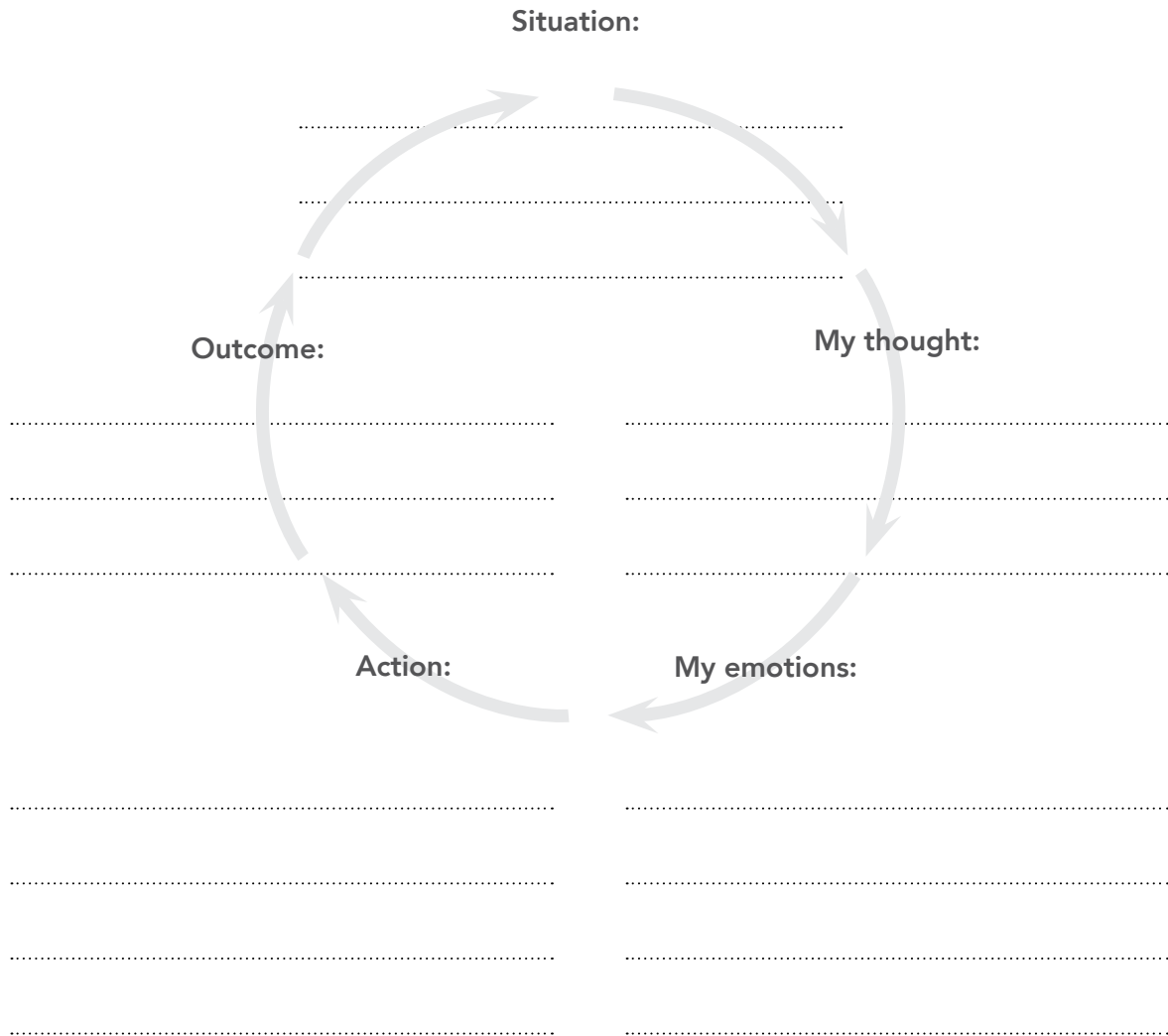
*Example:* I send a message to my friend suggesting we go to a concert together, but they don't reply. As a result, I have an almost automatic thought about the other person: *"My friend is inconsiderate. How difficult can it be to answer a message?"* The situation and the resulting thoughts are followed by an emotional reaction: *"I'm irritated and hurt."* My interpretation of the friend as inconsiderate and the feeling of irritation I have towards them determine the way I now act: *"The next day, my friend sends me a message about something completely different. I don't reply. Now they know how I feel."* Momentarily, I might even feel a little bit better, but the irritation and feeling of hurt don't seem to ease. I begin to feel abandoned and even lonelier than before.

Our experience of loneliness can often reinforce our interpretations and behaviour, so that we end up repeating these situations and, without realising it, our loneliness intensifies. At a later point, the mere thought of sending a message or suggesting a meeting feels pointless and unfair, potentially even triggering a cycle of loneliness that can repeat itself without interference. When maladaptive thoughts and unpleasant feelings are continuously reinforced, it can feel difficult or impossible to suddenly start making different choices and trying new behaviours.

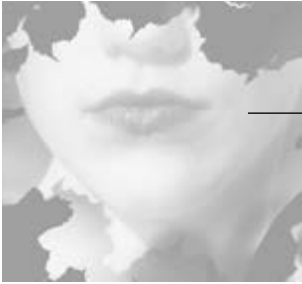


*In the following diagram, write down a common recurring situation that makes you feel lonely and that involves other people and your thoughts about them.*

*Describe the first thought you have about the other person in this situation. Try to observe it as accurately as possible without filtering it. Simply write down whatever comes to mind in the situation. Then consider how you feel and act in the situation. Finally, summarise the outcome of your thoughts, emotions, and action.*







**EXERCISE:  
RECOGNISING AND  
EXPLORING MALADAPTIVE  
THOUGHTS ABOUT OTHERS**

In this exercise, we go deeper into exploring the maladaptive thought about another person that we looked at in the previous exercise. In the example situation, the concluding thought was: *“My friend is inconsiderate and self-centred”*. What is the evidence for this thought or belief – in other words, when is it accurate (+)? What is the evidence against this thought or belief – when is it inaccurate (-)?

The fact that my friend does not respond to my suggestion confirms my thought that they are inconsiderate. It is not very difficult to reply to a message so evidently they must not consider it very important. Be that as it may, is it really the case that this is due to their thoughtlessness and that my friend is always like this in everything they do? After all, my friend did send me a message on my birthday and invited me to an art exhibition not too long ago. These actions prove they cannot be completely inconsiderate and self-centred.

+ Doesn't reply to my message

- Has replied in the past and invited me along to places

*Now, using your real-life example from the previous exercise, collect your thoughts or beliefs about the other person. Next to the plus and minus signs below, write down points of evidence that prove your thought or belief and evidence that disprove it.*

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Write down your original maladaptive thought related to your loneliness:

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Here are some helpful questions to consider when you find yourself thinking about other people in a negative way:

- Is your thought about the other person true and accurate? Is it always the case in every situation?
- Does the thought help you achieve what you want to achieve in this relationship?
- Does the thought help you reduce or prevent feelings and behaviours that you don't want in this relationship?
- What would be a more useful thought that would help you achieve a well-functioning and stable relationship?

Write down your new, amended thought about the other person:

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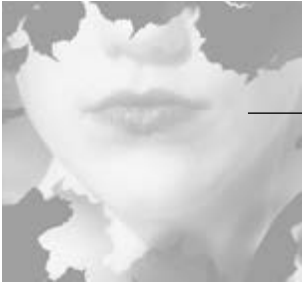
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It can be challenging to come up with an amended thought about another person. The key is to start exploring which alternative thoughts would be more useful to you, while also finding them conceivable. If the other person's behaviour annoys and offends you, you could find a thought that would ease that feeling of annoyance. For example, thoughts about them as 'inconsiderate and self-centred' could be amended to: *"I'm upset that I'm not getting a reply to my messages, but there's nothing I can do about it now. I don't know why my friend isn't replying but usually they call me eventually and we arrange to meet up."*



## **EXERCISE: GETTING OUT OF THE CYCLE OF LONELINESS**

This exercise explores how you can influence whether your experience of loneliness intensifies and remains in your relationships. It starts with an example from the previous 'In a cycle of loneliness' exercise. You can then reflect on a similar situation from your own life.

The best way to stop the cycle of loneliness is either by challenging and amending a maladaptive thought about another person or by changing a dysfunctional and routine way of acting and behaving. In the example, the feeling of loneliness is triggered by the fact that the friend doesn't respond to the message and invitation. The first thought that comes to mind is that the friend is inconsiderate. At this point, it may be helpful to pause and simply observe the thought: *"I found myself thinking again, in my typical way, that others are inconsiderate and self-centred."* You can then challenge the thought: *"Is my friend truly inconsiderate? Is not answering my message a sign of this?"* You can make use of the previous exercise for challenging maladaptive thoughts. *"My friend has replied to me before."* *"They have a tendency to be forgetful and it's not because of being self-centred."*

A challenged thought and an alternative thought have a more positive effect on your well-being. You may still feel hurt or irritated, but you may also find that you are disappointed with the outcome because you expected something pleasant to happen. In any case, your thoughts about other people can still be more understanding and flexible.

As described above, you can alter your behaviour by amending your thoughts and consequently your emotional state. However, it is also possible to influence your thoughts and feelings by acting differently. Instead of reacting to the annoyance by not responding, one way to prevent the cycle of loneliness from taking hold is to send a message to the friend saying that you hope they have time to respond to your invitation. You could also ask someone else to join you or accept the situation and go to the concert on your own, so you don't miss out on a great event. Acting differently and knowing that you can affect the outcome could even change the experience of taking the initiative or inviting a friend to come along. Perhaps in the future doing so won't feel futile or involve pre-empting disappointment.



*In the following diagram,  
describe a recurring social situation from your everyday life  
that makes you feel lonely. Observe the thoughts it evokes in you:  
“I find myself thinking...”*

*Think of a challenge or an alternative for the maladaptive thought.  
“Is this thought true and accurate? Is this really the case?”  
Reflect on how it makes you feel as you notice that your thought  
may not always be completely true in every situation.*

*Now write down in the Action field  
how you could act differently in the difficult situation  
than how you might have done in the past.  
Finally, write down the outcome of all this and  
what your difficult situation looks like now.*

**Situation:**

**Outcome:**

**My thought:**

**Action:**

**My emotions:**

## Towards flexibility in thinking and reciprocity

Automatic interpretations are very typical in human thinking, but when it comes to loneliness, they can become maladaptive and central to how we process information. It's important to become aware of these interpretation styles and recognise how they work in order to change them. The key to flexible thinking is being able to tell apart the facts and subjective interpretations of a given social situation, as well as how these interpretations affect your feelings and actions relating to the situation.

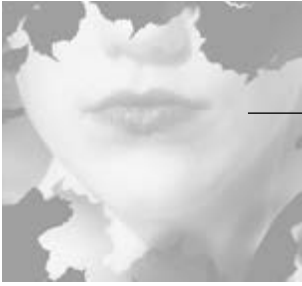
*“I tell my friend that I've been feeling quite lonely lately. My friend doesn't say anything. An awkward silence follows.”*

Fact: My friend doesn't say anything  
Interpretation: My friend doesn't want to hear about it. They are burdened by my problems  
Emotion: Annoyance, shame  
Action: I change the subject

Or

Fact: My friend doesn't say anything  
Interpretation: My friend feels perplexed and doesn't know how to respond  
Emotion: Compassion, understanding  
Action: I try to describe my experience of loneliness in a little more detail and ask whether they've ever felt lonely

In everyday social situations like this, we are unable to deduce the other person's thoughts or characteristics based on their outward behaviour. The fact that my friend doesn't answer me does not mean that they are indifferent to me, nor can we conclude anything else about their personality simply based on this. Difficult topics of conversation, such as loneliness or other personal issues, can easily come between people and cause confusion, especially if one person has an expectation that the situation should be resolved in some way. For example, the friend might simply be disconcerted by the topic of loneliness and not really know what to do or say, or how to help. Indeed, we are often unable to solve each other's difficult situations or problems. Without open discussion, it is easy to make the assumption that we are expected to resolve the issue we are approached with, even if the other person just needs someone who they can share their experience with and who will listen non-judgementally.



**EXERCISE:**  
**INTERPRETATIONS IN  
AN INTERACTION**

Read the following two examples of different interactions.

*Robin runs into Sam during morning rush hour. Sam casually asks: “Hey, how’s it going?” Robin tries to think of something to tell Sam. A little embarrassed, they share about their recent move into a nice studio flat but other than that not much is new. Sam gets excited about this saying how great it is that Robin has some peace and quiet to do whatever they want. Unlike Sam, who has two young children and a huge mortgage to worry about. Sam suggests they go out for a beer some time. Robin replies: “Yeah, let’s keep in touch.” As they part ways, Robin feels strangely disappointed and doesn’t want to go out for a beer with Sam.*

*Casey drops Ellis off at nursery and wonders what to do today. Casey can’t really afford to go anywhere and is feeling lonely. They decide to ask a friend, who is a stay-at-home parent, out for coffee. Alex arrives an hour late and talks about what’s going on in their life at a relentless pace. Alex has a child who is probably hyperactive and a partner who doesn’t understand anything. Alex bursts out crying, saying that life is so difficult. Casey doesn’t know what to say and has never been good at this kind of stuff. Casey tries to comfort Alex by sharing that they’ve also been having a difficult time lately, being a single parent. Alex huffs that at least Casey’s child is healthy. Casey feels even more lonely.*

Try to put yourself in the shoes of the people in the examples. How would you feel in a similar situation? What would you do? What thoughts would you have about yourself and the other person? In each example, try to put yourself in the shoes of each person involved and look at the situation from both perspectives.

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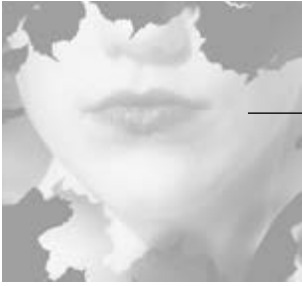
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**EXERCISE:  
CONSIDERING THE OTHER  
PERSON'S PERSPECTIVE**

Here is an example situation detailing two consecutive interactions Jessie had. Read the examples and make observations.

*“Jessie got some bad news on the way to meet their friend Drew. When Jessies arrives, Drew is laughing on the phone. Drew greets Jessie cheerfully and asks how they’re doing. Jessie says, ‘I’m fine. How are you?’ Drew starts chatting about what’s going on in their life, and Jessie feels uncomfortable. After a while, Drew starts wondering to herself if Jessie is alright: ‘Have I said something stupid? Jessie has barely said a word all this time. Did they not want to see me after all?’”*

Write down your observations from both Drew’s and Jessie’s point of view:

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*“Jessie returns home after meeting Drew and sees dirty dishes on the draining board and a bag of rubbish that hasn’t been taken out. Jessie angrily snaps at their partner Charlie, complaining that hardly any housework has been done all day. Charlie is taken aback and snaps back at Jessie: ‘I didn’t even get a hello before you started nagging at me. It’s always the same thing. What’s wrong with you?’”*

Write down your observations from both Jessie’s and Charlie’s point of view:

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Relationships are filled with many, often unspoken, interpretations, hopes, needs, and expectations of others. In the example above, Jessie might have been waiting for their friend or partner to notice that they were distressed. Jessie might have needed compassion and comfort in the difficult situation. This need was not met because both the friend and spouse were unaware of this expectation. Instead, the unattended chores and cheerful ‘how are you’ turned into interpretations that communicated indifference instead of the compassion Jessie needed.

Similar hopes, needs and expectations can be heard in many of the stories told by people suffering from loneliness. For example, one said, *“I just wanted them to simply ask me what I thought about the matter”*, and another reflected that, *“I just wanted my friend to hug me”*. A third person thought: *“I would have wanted to be there for support. I wanted to do something, but I didn’t really know what.”* In situations where you feel disappointed or unheard and frustrated, there may be an underlying need, desire or expectation relating to yourself or someone else that has not been met.

You can practise making your thinking and interactions more flexible by trying to take the other person's point of view into account. This can be done by asking them what they think and therefore showing interest in their perspective. It is often useful to reflect on matters together, rather than drawing conclusions and interpretations without enough information. How does the other person feel about it? What was their experience of the situation? How would they like to resolve the situation? Am I interpreting the other person's feelings correctly? One person aptly observed: *"It's not other people watching or judging me. I'm the one doing it to myself."*

It is sometimes difficult to distinguish what we are thinking from what we think others are thinking, because our own interpretations and ways of perceiving things seem so natural and accurate to us. It can be surprising noticing how completely differently someone else's mind works to our own. One person shared the following: *"When I looked more closely at these difficult social situations, I realised that my experience of being an outsider doesn't derive from other people's attitudes towards me. It was just my own strongly held conviction that others were being critical and judgmental of me. I still struggle with feeling like an outsider, but I also notice the many similarities I have with others."*

## Summary

In the second and third parts of this book, we reflected on the power of thought. Hopefully, you have noticed that thinking does indeed also hold a powerful grip over the experience of loneliness. The ways in which we think about ourselves and others, the interpretations we make in social situations, the narratives we form about them and how we remember things in general, all influence our behaviour, feelings, and the way we interact with others. If you interpret another person's neutral facial expression to mean irritation or hear their feedback as criticism, the interaction is likely to be very different from a situation in which you interpret the neutral facial expression to mean reflection and welcome the feedback as a learning opportunity rather than personal criticism. Shifting to a more flexible way of thinking and learning to see alternatives is directly linked to the alleviation of loneliness, because when we no longer perpetuate loneliness with our thinking but instead use the power of our thoughts to build connectedness and openness, loneliness dissipates from within ourselves and our surroundings. The next section will examine in more detail the intersecting expectations we have towards ourselves and others in relationships. It will also look at how to move away from recurring assumptions, frustrations, and disappointments in relationships and towards more open, reciprocal, and stable relationships.

## Pause for Thought

Take a moment to consider what thoughts and emotions the exercises above evoke in you and what these thoughts and emotions say about you.

*What thoughts or feelings do you observe in yourself at the end of this part of the book?*

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*What needs or desires are your thoughts and feelings trying to communicate?*

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## Pause for Emotion

Colour in the clouds to show your experience of loneliness over the last week.



*How often do you feel lonely?*



*How strong is your experience of loneliness?*

## Time for Action

In this section, you have reflected on the power of thought as it relates to loneliness. Next, in the activity diary below, write down some practical steps you could take to reduce your loneliness. In the upcoming weeks, your small actions could relate to maladaptive thinking and your interpretations of other people. For example, in a situation where you have a maladaptive thought about another person, could you come up with a neutral or useful thought alongside that thought? When interacting with others, instead of interpreting their words and behaviour, could you practice asking them what they are thinking, or checking with them whether their feelings are in fact what you had assumed them to be? Could you practice changing a pattern of behaviour? For example, in a situation where you feel like an outsider, instead of withdrawing, you could stay involved and find something in the situation that connects you to others.

Once you have completed your small action for the day, colour in the box underneath.

My small action



My small action



My small action









# CONTENTS

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PART



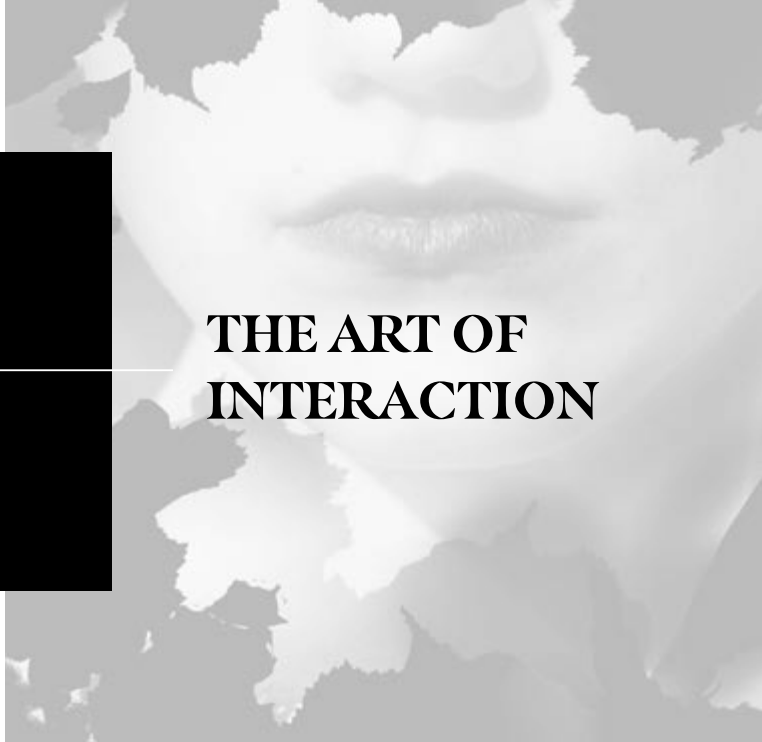
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**PART**  
**4**

**THE ART OF  
INTERACTION**



## THE RELATIONSHIP BALANCING ACT

"I don't bother asking my friend anywhere because they have so many other friends. They don't need any more company and are too busy anyway."

"I'm always the one to make contact. I feel like I'm always the one who's accommodating. If they wanted to spend time with me, surely they would do something about it."

In the fourth part of this book, we will consider the variance and multitude of different kinds of interactions and social situations. The person in the first quote above defines their friend as someone who has a lot of friends and a busy life. The person positions themselves in the relationship as the one who has fewer friends

and more time on their hands. Within the relationship, certain roles and outlooks have been established, and with them come specific ways of behaving. The person doesn't call their friend because they don't want to bother or disturb this friend who doesn't need them and is busy.

The second quote shows the division of roles in the relationship into active and passive parties. The person is frustrated because they feel that they are always the one who makes the first move. The friend's more passive behaviour leads them to make the interpretation that the friend doesn't actually want to spend time with them. The quote reveals the patterns of behaviour and positions within the relationship, but it also shows the person's wish to be thought of and shown an interest in, which would be demonstrated were the friend to contact them first for once.

Relationships always include a particular kind of positioning and attitude towards the other, as well as towards oneself. This can lead to us taking on specific roles and approaches we have found to work which, generally speaking, can make it easier for us to interact within complex interpersonal networks. However, at some point they might not feel right anymore

and may even stand in the way of you developing the kinds of relationships you want to have. Relationships could be compared to a set of old-fashioned scales, with your own needs, feelings, and beliefs on one side and the other person's needs, feelings, and beliefs on the other. The relationship scales are balanced when both are able to pay sufficient attention to each other and understand each other's thoughts and feelings. Relationships are a constant balancing act between holding on to your own boundaries and meeting the other person halfway, between giving and receiving. An imbalance in a relationship can be seen when there is a need to please or there exists only one-sided helpfulness, exploitation, repeated irritation, avoidance, or some form of rigid interaction. In a more balanced relationship, on the other hand, you feel seen just as you are, and the relationship feels satisfying and secure. When that is the case, the effort you put into the relationship will not feel unfair.

## Social network

Reflecting on the diversity of your relationships starts with examining what your social network looks like. We all have some kind of social network in childhood, adolescence, adulthood, and old age. It consists of relationships in which we have an interdependence of sorts with each other. Such relationships are often made up of friends and relatives. A social network can also include other types of relationships, such as those based on a common interest, financial exchange, knowledge and skills, beliefs, or the prestige of status. Therefore, your network may include people you have chosen to be part of it, but also those who have come into your life through work, studies, and other recurring activities in your everyday life. You may experience these relationships as more or less positive, neutral, conflicting, or negative. Moreover, contact in relationships can be one-way or reciprocal. When your social network functions well, both in terms of reciprocity and in desired closeness and intimacy, it gives you a sense of social connection with other people.

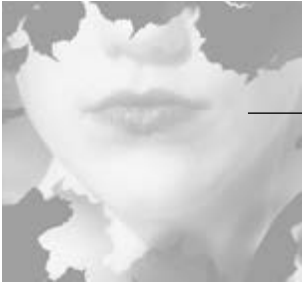
Some of the relationships we have in life can be somewhat permanent in nature. It might be hard to imagine life without your family members, relatives, and close friends. Other parts of your social network, however, may change and shift more fluidly with life changes and transitions. Current relationships may be put to the test in situations such as changing jobs, finding a new hobby, relocating, starting a family, or getting divorced. In these situations, there is often less time and fewer opportunities for spending time together. On the other hand,

a new life situation also creates opportunities for making new friends. It is only natural for some people to drift apart and for relationships to change or come to an end as we go through different stages of our lives. Attitudes towards change are not always shared, and change is not always wanted. Sometimes the situation may require more adaptation on the part of one than the other.

At times it might feel like your social network is non-existent but, once you give it a bit more thought, you might recall people you don't think about all that often. If you yearn changes in your social network, you can start by thinking about who you are as a person, what you value and what you like to do with your time. These reflections can seem puzzling: why should I think about what I'm like when what I need are new people in my life, or what I want is to get closer to my existing friends? However, new relationships and ways to deepen existing ones are often found around a shared activity or interest. Similar values and concurring views make it easier to find and connect with like-minded people. We will return to these themes later in this book.

It can be difficult to look at your social network if you don't have a family or one you feel close to, or if you generally don't really have anyone in your life to spend time with. It is then natural to approach loneliness from a slightly different perspective and with a different goal than in a situation where there is a social network of some kind. How many people is sufficient for you in your network and how close you would like them to be is highly individual. While one person might only need one or two friends, another might want to keep in touch with a wide range of people while a third might want to feel like they belong to a group. Some of the people in your network may not be as close to you as you would wish. On the other hand, perhaps you could benefit from some distance to a more draining relationship in your life, so that you would have more room for yourself and positive relationships.

Alleviating loneliness starts with identifying what you want and need in your life. One person described their friendships as follows: *"I have friends, but none that are particularly close. My relationships are pretty superficial. I don't feel like there's anyone I could talk to about how I'm really doing."* This is an apt description of what emotional loneliness is all about. You can feel lonely even when you are surrounded by friends if these relationships don't meet your needs and don't provide enough intimacy and meaningfulness. When it comes to relationships, quality is often more important than quantity. How do you perceive your relationships to be? Do they meet your needs? Are they as close as you would like them to be?



## EXERCISE: MY NETWORK

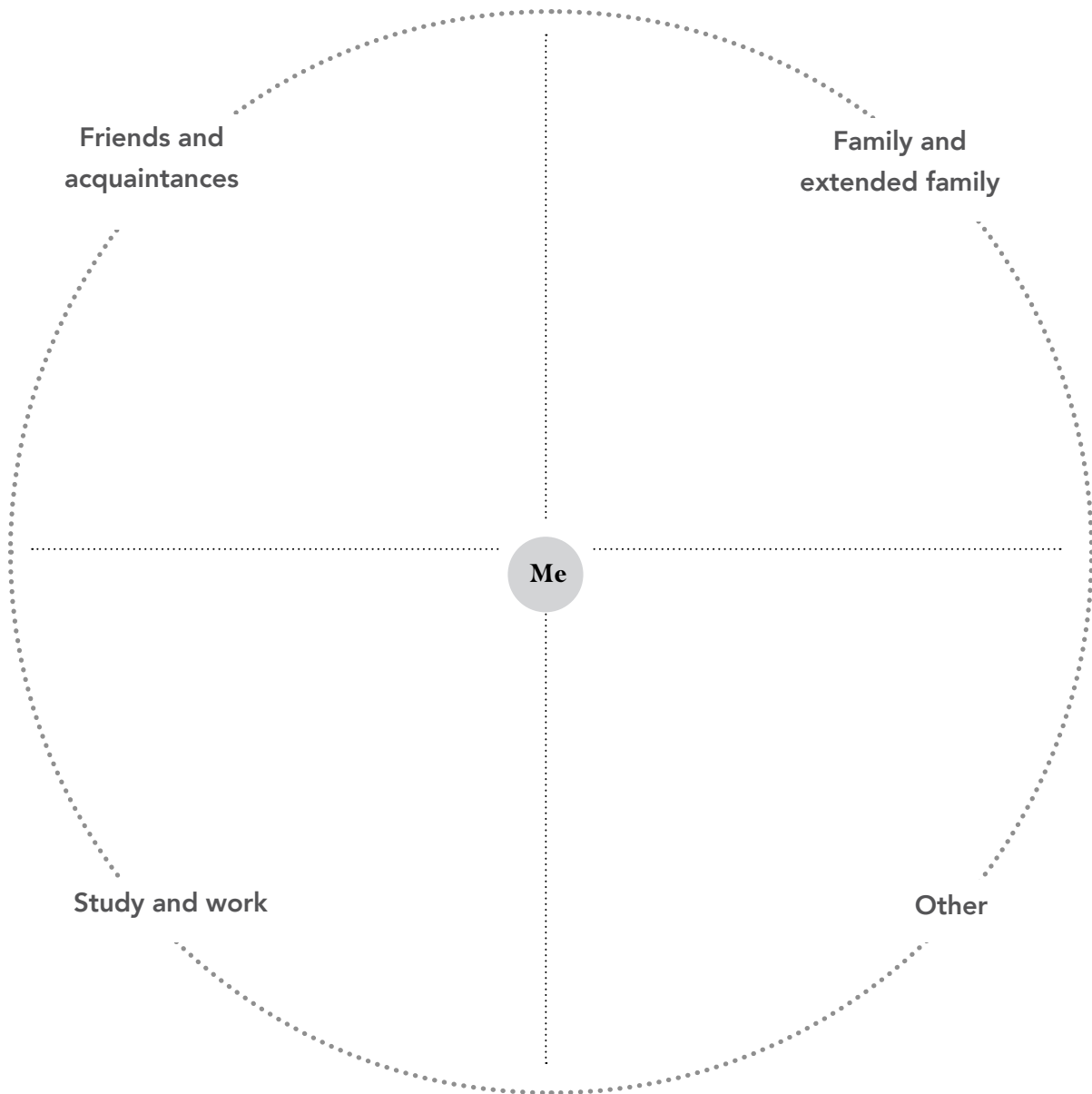
*On the social network map, illustrate the recurring and meaningful relationships you have in your life. You are at the centre of the map.*

On the social network map, mark your family members and relatives, friends and acquaintances, people you know through hobbies, work, or studies, and other people such as neighbours and therapists or other supporting professionals or volunteers who are important to you and with whom you have regular contact. Put the people at a proximity to you that reflects how close you feel to them. You can also put pets on the map. If you wish, you can also include people who are important and close to you but who are no longer in your life and whom you miss.

*Then mark on the map how you perceive the relationship generally speaking: positive, negative, conflicted or neutral? Also, draw an arrow on the relationship to indicate its reciprocity and your communication with each other.*

If you both keep in touch with each other, the arrow points both directions from you to the other person and from the other person to you. If only one of you keeps in touch, mark it with a single arrow pointing only one direction, for example, from you to them. You can also use an arrow to describe your experience of reciprocity and equality in the relationship. The social map reflects your current social situation: the actual number of people around you and your experience of social connection with them. Don't worry if you find it difficult to think of people to put on the map. It simply means that this is the starting point for your work. That's what you are on your way to changing.

## MY NETWORK



THE GROUP OF PEOPLE YOU PUT ON YOUR SOCIAL NETWORK MAP SHOULD CONSIST OF THOSE WHO HAVE A SIGNIFICANT IMPACT ON YOUR LIFE. THE CIRCLE IN THE MIDDLE REPRESENTS YOU. MARK THE PEOPLE WHO ARE PART OF YOUR SOCIAL NETWORK ONTO THE MAP. THEIR PROXIMITY TO YOU INDICATES HOW CLOSE OR DISTANT YOU PERCEIVE THE RELATIONSHIP TO BE. CONNECT THE PEOPLE TO YOURSELF USING THE LINES AND ARROWS BELOW.

*When drawing, use the below symbols:*

Person ○  
Pet □

*How do you feel about the relationship:*

negative **VVVV**  
positive **————**  
conflicted **UUUU**  
neutral **- - - -**

*Staying in touch:*

reciprocal **< - >**  
one-way **- >**  
one-way **< -**

What does your social network look like?  
Write down your observations about your current relationships.

Now examine your map to see what it looks like.

- Do you feel that there are enough people, or would you like there to be more?
- Do you feel that the people are suitably close to you, or are you missing closer relationships in your life?
- Are your close relationships reciprocal or one-sided?
- Do you have relationships in your life that are negative or that you have conflicted feelings about? What would you like to do about them?
- Is there a relationship on your map that you would like to be closer or one that you would like to have more distance from?
- Could some of the relationships benefit from you acting differently within them?
- Is anything missing from your network? If so, what?  
Is there an emphasis on certain types of relationships?

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## The scripts we follow in our interactions and how to change them

It's often impossible to predict the course an interaction with someone will take. Most situations unfold in the moment, as you communicate with each other and mutually respond to each other's social cues. Recognising and interpreting these social cues, anticipating responses, and relying on stereotypes all add layers to our interactions. We cannot predict situations, let alone access and understand all the information available in the situation itself. Yet, we tend to try anticipating how situations will unfold, as well as what our own and others' roles, attitudes and tasks in the interaction will be. Sometimes it can be difficult to recognise what kinds of roles are being offered and what we have already assigned for ourselves, others, or the situation. One person described their role in a group of friends as follows: *"I'm always the one who agrees to everything. Even my friends will say that Billie is fine with it, even when I haven't been asked anything."* In the quote above, Billie's friends see them as accommodating and agreeable. Based on this view, they easily assume that Billie is always going to be like that in every situation. Then again, Billie also takes on the role of an adaptable person and may even interpret what others say solely from the perspective of this role.

Identifying how to influence the way your relationships develop, or what they become can be difficult. For example, some people take on the role of an observer from an early age. They position themselves as a bystander in interactions with others and participate in social situations only when asked a question and when it is necessary. They may have initially taken on the role of a bystander because being at the centre of attention feels distressing or they feel conflicted about it, both nervous and excited: "I would like to, but I'm too scared to." Coping in a difficult situation has required adopting a particular position and approach, but in the long term this can lead to more intense feelings of loneliness and exclusion.

We may feel that others exert their influence to define and limit who we are and how we express ourselves within groups. In reality, however, we can often also limit ourselves within our relationships and behave according to the position we have assumed: *"When I'm around people I always start making jokes. Sometimes I just don't feel up to it and would rather not, but if I'm not constantly smiling and goofing around, people will start to wonder what's wrong with me."*

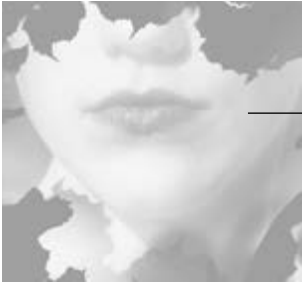
The following quotes demonstrate some of the positions, roles, and behaviours developed within relationships.

*“I’ve been invited to yet another party and I can’t refuse the invitation because then I won’t be invited anymore.”*

*“I’m always the one who calls or arranges our meetups. I don’t have the energy to keep doing it anymore but if I don’t we’ll never get together.”*

*“Nobody ever listens to my suggestions, it’s always other people who decide how we’re going to do things.”*

As you may have noticed, the quotes express a level of dissatisfaction, paired with an inability to implement changes in relationships that have been a certain way for a long time. The solution could be to consider whether you could take on a different role and approach, and thus act in a different way that feels more satisfying to you. Yet, how do we even begin to perceive and recognise these attitudes that arise in our relationships and interactions? How can we learn to understand what they mean to us and find new perspectives on them? The best moment to access them can be found in those everyday situations when we notice our dissatisfaction with how a situation went ‘again’, or how it ‘always’ or ‘often’ goes, or how it ‘never’ goes as we had hoped it would.



**EXERCISE:  
WHAT MAKES ME ACT  
THE WAY I DO?**

Having discussed the different roles and behaviours we adopt in interactions we will now turn our attention to what makes you act the way you do and why. Think back to a social interaction. Think about how you acted in the situation and then consider what triggered this particular course of action among many other alternatives. Triggers can be internal, such as the emotions and thoughts that affect us, or external, such as another person's behaviour, their choice of wording or loud noises. Take a moment, once again, to think carefully about why you acted the way you did. We will use the example of the person quoted earlier who felt forced into the role of the joker.

My actions in the situation:

*Example: "I joke about myself and make a clown of myself."*

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Triggers:

*Example: "My friends seemed bored and were chatting amongst themselves."*

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Why I acted the way I did:

*Example: "I was afraid of being left out. Unless I'm funny, I won't be accepted and liked by others."*

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Our subconscious or routine ways of relating to others also play a role in upkeeping the scripts we follow in our interactions. Everyone has their own typical way of positioning themselves in relation to other people. Even another person's praise or request may provoke a negative attitude in us and steer our interaction in a direction we don't want or a direction which may later lead to conflict and dissatisfaction in our relationships. In general, it is difficult for us to identify how we position ourselves in our interactions. These attitudes, however, have a significant impact on our relationships throughout our lives.



**EXERCISE:  
MY ATTITUDE TOWARDS  
MYSELF AND OTHERS**

*(RRP survey, Reciprocal Role Procedures © Hely Kalska)*

Our attitudes and the ways we experience things have a certain automated quality, repetitiveness, and regularity to them. Learning to recognise these qualities and patterns can help us to better understand ourselves. The purpose of this exercise is to help you identify and understand your attitude towards yourself and other people in different kinds of situations.

In the following exercise you will be presented with different scenarios to think about. Consider how well each option applies to you. Try to be as open and honest as possible, as this will help you get the most out of the exercise. Identifying your own attitudes may not be easy at first. It is particularly difficult to recognise your maladaptive attitudes but this is precisely what will help you the most. The exercise also includes empty spaces for you to write down your own option should none of the ones provided reflect your attitude suitably.

Circle: ++ typically + sometimes - rarely or never

OTHER PERSON

>

ME:

“I like you a lot.”  
(affection can also be conveyed indirectly)

1. I distance myself ++ + -
2. I try to please the other person ++ + -
3. I doubt their intentions ++ + -
4. I feel affection towards them ++ + -
5. \_\_\_\_\_

“You are so talented and brilliant.”  
(admiration or appreciation can also be conveyed indirectly)

1. I start beaming and feel more confident ++ + -
2. I feel awkward and get embarrassed ++ + -
3. I get irritated ++ + -
4. I'm afraid of being found a fraud ++ + -
5. \_\_\_\_\_

“What a stupid, worthless loser you are.”  
(contempt can also be conveyed non-verbally)

1. I get angry ++ + -
2. I freeze ++ + -
3. I retaliate ++ + -
4. I don't let it get to me ++ + -
5. \_\_\_\_\_

“Here's what you have to do. I'm in charge, and you have no say in this.”

1. I resign myself to doing as they say ++ + -
2. I stand up against them and rebel ++ + -
3. I give up my responsibilities easily ++ + -
4. I act according to my discretion ++ + -
5. \_\_\_\_\_

“I'll take very good care of you, and you don't have to do anything.”  
(care is expressed through actions)

1. I'm helpless and dependent ++ + -
2. I enjoy being cared for ++ + -
3. I become irritable and dismissive ++ + -
4. I don't let it affect me ++ + -
5. \_\_\_\_\_

“I don't care about you. There's no use trying to approach me.”  
(also indirect rejection or rebuff)

1. I get upset ++ + -
2. I want to show them that I can manage ++ + -
3. I'm alone and helpless ++ + -
4. I try to cling onto them ++ + -
5. \_\_\_\_\_

AN OBSERVATION ABOUT MYSELF:



HOW I FEEL /

HOW OTHERS REACT:

I have made a mistake or done something wrong.

1. I criticise and blame myself ++ + -
2. I feel useless ++ + -
3. I don't take it seriously ++ + -
4. I get angry with myself and move on ++ + -
5. I get blamed and criticised by others ++ + -
6. \_\_\_\_\_

I do well and succeed in a task.

1. I am accepted ++ + -
2. People envy me ++ + -
3. I am admired and appreciated ++ + -
4. People require more of me ++ + -
5. Nobody cares ++ + -
6. \_\_\_\_\_

I need support and help from others.

1. People help and support me ++ + -
2. I'm all alone ++ + -
3. I'm perceived as a burden ++ + -
4. People take advantage of me ++ + -
5. I feel humiliated ++ + -
6. \_\_\_\_\_

I'm in the limelight and the centre of attention.

1. It feels good and I enjoy it ++ + -
2. I feel awkward and embarrassed ++ + -
3. I freeze ++ + -
4. I'm afraid of being found a fraud ++ + -
5. \_\_\_\_\_

When I'm not doing something useful...

- 1 ... I get restless ++ + -
- 2 ... I enjoy it and relax ++ + -
- 3 ... I feel guilty ++ + -
- 4 ... I feel useless ++ + -
5. \_\_\_\_\_

I'm being treated badly.

1. I get furious and lose my temper ++ + -
2. I defend myself calmly ++ + -
3. I get confused and do nothing ++ + -
4. I submit, and feel defeated ++ + -
5. \_\_\_\_\_

We all have recurring and rather automatic attitudes towards ourselves and others. The attitude itself is neither good nor bad. Instead, what is relevant is how the attitude is connected to your emotions, overall well-being, and experiences of well-functioning and reciprocal relationships. When you notice certain attitudes affecting your moods or getting in the way of your relationships, it may be useful to pay closer attention to them. For example, if you notice yourself often feeling embarrassed and awkward when receiving praise, you could start searching for an alternative approach to receiving positive feedback from others. You may also want to consider whether the awkwardness you feel when receiving positive feedback is linked to the way you view yourself and your successes.

Identifying and examining your most typical attitudes that contribute to your loneliness can be a turning point in your experience of loneliness. For example, your loneliness may start to shift if you notice that the reason your relationships are more distant is because needing another person triggers unpleasant feelings for you of being a burden. You may feel dissatisfied and inadequate when it comes to your achievements, if your successes have previously led you to feel like nothing is ever good enough and others will always demand more. You can also re-examine these observations using the previous chain analysis exercises in which you reflected on your thoughts and their effect on your emotions and behaviour.

Our attitudes can often be traced far back and are an integral part of how our thinking has evolved. They have been shaped into what they are today by the significant, recurring relationships and experiences we have had in our lives.

Equally, a change in attitude does not come overnight, immediately turning someone who has always withdrawn after being mistreated to someone who calmly defends themselves. However, simply identifying the areas in your life where a change of attitude is needed can bring about a sense of relief before any attempt to implement these changes has even begun. The situation no longer controls you but instead you can take a step aside, observe it and recognise where you need more practice in your relationships. As one person described it: *“I don’t know what has changed, or whether anything has... But somehow, I feel different and more relaxed. I find myself smiling more.”*

## **Contradicting expectations and needs in social relationships**

In social relationships, there are expectations and norms, certain types of generalisations about what people should be like and how relationships should work. These expectations of yourself and others can make you feel conflicted because there is often a deep gap between expectations and real life. When lonely, you may feel like everyone else has a spouse, a family, friends, hobbies, and fun activities to do, in addition to being successful in their jobs or studies. The expectations we set for ourselves of what our lives should look like can reinforce feelings of loneliness, of being too different and of not belonging: I simply don’t fit in with others in my study, work or hobby groups. The experience of living a different kind of life and of not belonging is evident in this quote: *“At work, everyone talks about what they did over the weekend. I can’t join in the conversation, because I don’t want them to find out that I didn’t do anything at the weekend.”*



Deviating from external expectations and norms can lead to a sense of not belonging or being somehow defective and can deepen your sense of loneliness. This can come through societal expectations, such as in this quote: *“I don’t fit the role society has set for a man. I’m just not like that. I’m more sensitive somehow.”* Sometimes it can be difficult to grasp who expects something from us and what it is they expect. These expectations are often related to aspects of life that could be considered somewhat fundamental or innate to us, creating expectations for us internally or externally: *“Everyone else my age has children.”* *“Everyone else is in a relationship, no one is waiting for me at home. Nobody asks me how my day went.”* *“Everyone else has a life. I expected my loneliness to go away when I became an adult, but it never did. My life never got started after all.”*

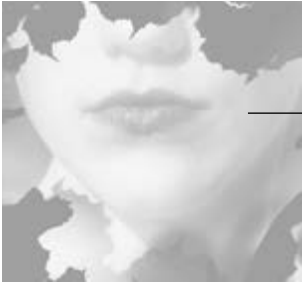
Few people can or even want to fully meet these expectations and norms that we come across in social relationships. Yet it is typical for people to mirror their own actions against what is assumed, normal and accepted. Instead of simply striving to follow expectations, you may want to stop and think about the kind of life you really want to live. Could you challenge general norms and expectations? Surely the most important thing, after all, is to be true to ourselves, satisfied with and proud of the way we act in our relationships and live our own lives.

We also tend to view life through our own set of values. By doing so, we run the risk of judging another person’s way of doing things differently to us as somehow wrong or worthless. For example, if your friend is more interested in history and historical dates than you are, you may think they are boring and pedantic, whereas if you are more interested in historical dates than they are, you may judge them to be scatter-brained and careless. You may perceive a partner

who craves intimacy and more time together than you do as clingy. But if you yourself crave intimacy in a way that your partner can’t deliver, you may judge them to be cold and distant. Instead of trying to identify and define what is wrong with another person’s behaviour, we could consider what needs, our own or those of others, have not been met. Defining and judging other people can often tell us more about our own needs and values than it does about their qualities.

Disappointments in relationships are often caused by a need or expectation of others that has not been met or heard. For example, you may have a need to be heard and understood in the situation you are in, but instead of meeting this particular need, the other person offers advice or encourages you to keep going. This can make you feel like they are downplaying the situation or disregarding your experience.

Sometimes our expectations of others are obvious to ourselves but not to the other person. We may expect another person to meet our needs and simply wait for them to do so, instead of taking any responsibility ourselves. One person lamented: *“I would like more intimacy in my relationship, but my partner doesn’t seem to need it because they don’t show me affection.”* In the quote, the person clearly wants and needs a deeper connection and intimacy with their spouse, but at the same time feels that they have no control over the situation. It’s as if they are simply waiting for their spouse to see their need and respond to it. Here, another person picked up the courage to tell a group of friends about something that was bothering them: *“I told my friends that I get anxious when they talk about a certain topic and explained why. I was afraid they would get angry. But everyone was really nice about it. They just hadn’t known how I felt about it.”*



## EXERCISE: EXPECTATIONS BEHIND DISAPPOINTMENTS

Below are some illustrative stories of different situations. Read the stories and, as you're reading, think about the expectations the people have that lead them to be disappointed.

*Marion is brave and likes to approach others. They are not afraid to talk to strangers and often seek out new situations. They get excited easily, but their proactivity towards others doesn't bear fruit. Marion has not found lasting and like-minded friends. Marion finds that they no longer want to go anywhere, and they are no longer their cheerful self. Marion can't understand why they, of all people, feel so lonely and why no one wants to be their friend.*

*Frankie struggles with making an initiative or talking to people. They go to gigs and events with a hopeful attitude. Getting to know people or starting a conversation just doesn't feel natural. Frankie seeks situations where they are in a group with others, but people don't really notice Frankie. They often go home from a gig feeling down, even when they have enjoyed the concert.*

*At the end of a pleasant get-together, Cameron cheerfully tells their new friend that it would be nice to get together again. Any time is good for Cameron, and they are happy for the friend to suggest a time that suits them. The friend says, "Absolutely. Let's stay in touch." But they don't get in touch and Cameron feels clingy and embarrassed. Clearly, the friend didn't feel the same way about their time together.*

*Pat feels that their relationship with their spouse isn't going so well and would like to talk about this with them. Week by week, Pat becomes more anxious and worries that telling their partner about these thoughts would make the situation even more distressing. Pat wonders if there is something wrong with them for not being happy despite everything, or if perhaps they're both feeling the same way about the situation. However, Pat's spouse doesn't seem to even notice Pat withdrawing, and Pat finds this confusing. Does their spouse not even notice that anything has changed?*

*Remy is feeling down. Life's been challenging lately and, to top it off, today Remy had an argument with their sibling, which has made them feel even worse. Remy texts a friend: "I'm feeling so down, I had another argument with my sibling. Well, I guess other people have bigger problems than me. I guess it'll blow over 😊." The friend replies to Remy's message, "Sorry to hear that, good luck 😊." Remy feels disappointed and even more dejected.*



## The art of verbalising hopes and expectations

Based on our own personality, skills, and intentions, we may form an expectation that others should know what we are thinking and feeling without us ever saying it out loud. We may also assume that others know when we find a role we have been given difficult or unpleasant, without us ever expressing it out loud. What may feel unfair and burdensome to you may appear as something completely different to someone else. *“I love that Rowan always calls me. Rowan is so sociable and outgoing. I like it that they always find something to talk about and put everyone at ease. Personally, I’m shy and not very good at chit-chat. Making the first move feels like such a huge effort to me.”* Sometimes we even end up communicating the exact opposite of what we really feel. We may respond to a suggestion to do something with ‘yeah, whatever’, ‘I’m good with anything’ or ‘I don’t know’, making it unclear to the other person what we actually want. By doing so, we also give the other person full responsibility for the decision.

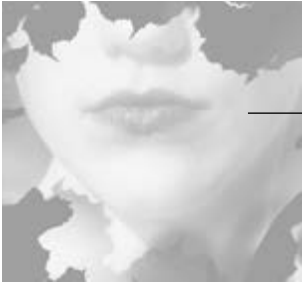
Let’s look at some examples of situations where strong emotions and conflicts might arise. You can use these examples to consider how you could verbalise your own expectations and needs to make yourself better understood. This will help you avoid conflicts or disagreements.

*“My friend gets angry if I talk about my loneliness. They say I’m guilt-tripping them.”*

*“My parent often makes decisions for me. Their way of behaving and my own acquiescence to it irritates me.”*

In the circumstances described above, one might feel that there is something irreversibly wrong with them, with others or the situation itself. Such situations also easily lead to conflicts in relationships. What would be helpful in moving forward under these circumstances? One good way is to distance yourself from the situation, put words to what you feel and tell your friend about it: *“I know you’re worried about me. I don’t expect you to solve the problem of my loneliness. I just appreciate you listening to me.”* Instead of saying something out of frustration and anger, you could tell your parent: *“When you make decisions for me, I feel that you don’t trust me to take care of my own affairs. It would mean a lot to me knowing that you trust me and if you were to let me take care of this myself.”*

Verbalising your feelings is a skill that can be learned. When you can communicate what you think and what you hope for, the chances of misinterpretation are reduced. Your openness is also likely to increase the openness of others and the development of trust.



## EXERCISE: CONSTRUCTIVE COMMUNICATION

(© Rosenberg & Chopra 2015)

*Try the following steps of interaction in any situation.  
Try to express the following as clearly and honestly as possible.*

### 1. Make an observation

> Try to observe other people's actions and express to them what you have observed without interpretation, judgement, or evaluation. You are simply stating what is happening.

### 2. Share your feelings honestly

> Next, share with them what emotions the observed action evokes in you.

### 3. Express what you need

> Communicate the needs and desires behind your emotions.

### 4. Ask for what you need

> Finally, ask for whatever it is that you would like the other person to do.  
What would make your life more pleasant?

A request is not the same as a demand that says, 'you should'. A demand includes an accusation against the other person and the threat of punishment, which in turn may provoke a defensive reaction and a rebuke instead of a constructive discussion.

In particular, try to match what you are feeling with your need:

"I am \_\_\_\_\_, because I need, because I want,  
because I believe..."

If we express our needs, we are more likely to be seen and heard in the future. If our needs are not met, we automatically start wondering what is wrong us or with others.

For example:

“I have noticed that it is often me who calls you and suggests we meet (observation). It makes me sad (feeling) because I would like to feel that I’m important to you and worthy of your attention (need/want). Would you mind contacting me the next time you want to meet (request)?”

Using the example above, try these steps to write down or express something important to you.

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See what it is like to also be at the receiving end of such an interaction. Try to listen with empathy to what the other person has observed and what they feel. Pay particular attention to what the other person needs or wants from you, because often even a difficult feeling or request has an understandable human need behind it that is currently not being met. By accepting someone else’s request, you can also find out what would enrich their life.

## Taking responsibility, setting boundaries, and standing up for yourself

*“I can’t really imagine myself sharing my feelings. It goes against everything I’ve done all my life. I don’t know why. I guess there’s a feeling that others won’t be able to bear me telling them I’m sad, disappointed, or angry. But now that I’ve reflected on my loneliness, I realise I’ve never even given others a chance to be close to me because I never talk about myself. How can you be close to another person if you never share your feelings and experiences. ... And is it really true that others can’t handle my feelings? After all, I can handle their worries. It just takes a lot of courage to get started, I’m not sure how I’m going to do it.”*

The difficult feelings that come with loneliness can lead you to protect yourself from the world around you, keeping your thoughts and feelings to yourself. However, building deep relationships require courage and trust to share your insecure, protected, and personal inner world with others. In the quote above, the person said that it is difficult to do things in a new way. Without it ever even occurring to us, our learned habit of not talking and not sharing our thoughts and feelings can keep others at a distance and maintain our feelings of loneliness.

It is our responsibility alone to express our own feelings and needs, share our views and be open with others. Sharing your inner world with others can feel difficult if you are not used to it, or if your previous relationships have not fostered a receptive atmosphere where you had enough space to fully express yourself. As well

as taking responsibility, each of us also has the right to be seen with our feelings and needs, and the permission to share our thoughts if we so wish.

When experiencing loneliness, it can be difficult to respect our own boundaries. We may end up in relationships where there is no possibility of equality. Unequal relationships increase our feelings of loneliness and worthlessness. Our longing for connection can be so great that we choose a toxic relationship over being alone. Perhaps we don’t even feel capable of leaving these relationships, when the mere thought of being alone and the associated fear feels so crushing. Standing up for yourself, as well as listening to and meeting your own needs is a sign that you value yourself and take care of yourself. In an equal relationship, both sides value themselves and each other. When a relationship or a situation feels overwhelmingly challenging, seeking outside help and support can often be helpful.

*“I was so depressed when I fell out with my friends, and we stopped talking and seeing each other. I felt like I was a bad friend for not taking care of the relationships. Meeting them now after years of being apart I realised I haven’t lost anything. I had an image of us as good friends, but we had nothing in common except partying at weekends. I realised I’ve changed. I want more from my relationships. And this friend... They shared all their worries with me but never once asked me how I am. Nowadays, I prefer to spend my time in nature and with people who are interested in more than just drinking.”*

We tend to think that our relationships are a certain way, either good or bad. Yet a good one can become bad or a bad one can become good, depending on how much effort is put into the relationship, how experiences and feelings are mutually shared, and how disagreements, disappointments, and arguments are resolved. Everyone has a part to play in developing interactions and relationships. However, you can do no more than your own share in a relationship.

## How to make contact and have a conversation?

Some people experiencing loneliness feel they could benefit from practical tips for social situations on how to make the first move, make contact, as well as take part in and maintain a conversation. Giving advice and a list of dos and don'ts is a somewhat incongruous way of dealing with loneliness, because interaction is all about improvisation, being authentically present in the moment and throwing oneself into the situation, each in their own unique way. Pre-scripted behaviour can make interactions rigid and awkward but, more importantly, they can divert our attention away from the presence of the other person and onto matters that are not necessary to consider in that moment. We have, nonetheless, put together some ideas and guidelines for you to apply in your interactions, which will hopefully prove useful. If you wish, you can use the margins of the page to indicate which of the methods you already use when interacting with others (**V**) and what skills you would like to practise more (**X**).

■ Being present and paying attention to the other person is essential in interactions. Listen to what they are saying, what they are really talking about and what is important to them in life. Sometimes when in new situations or when feeling nervous, we might turn our attention to ourselves, thinking, for instance: *“I really should say something now. Oh no, it’s my turn soon. What should I say? Can I say something like this?”* It is impossible to be present in the moment and show interest in the person you are talking to when all you are thinking about is how nervous you are or how you are acting in the situation. Topics for discussion often arise in the moment, which means you must be present and attentive in the situation.

■ If you find it challenging to make the first move or to involve yourself in social situations, you can try to anticipate and prepare for your nervousness. You could, for example, focus on your breathing as you visualise yourself taking part in a safe and calm interaction. You can also look back on situations where you were nervous but nevertheless coped well.

■ You can consider the worst thing that could happen. Even if everything were to go badly, would it still be possible to survive? When you take a risk, the chance that things will go well is at least as big as the chance that they won't.

■ Making an initiative can involve starting a casual conversation or perhaps asking someone out on a date. A conversation can be started by asking a question or commenting on something relating to the situation you are both in. Being



considerate to the other person by asking *“Am I interrupting?”* or *“is it okay if I sit here?”* can help you make a good first impression. If you find yourself thinking, for example, *“I can’t do this”* or *“I’m useless at talking to people”*, you can practice self-compassion by reminding yourself that these thoughts stem from insecurity. They are thoughts you can observe while still ploughing on in spite of them.

■ Instead of spending energy on thoughts such as *“Others won’t find me interesting”*, *“other people are boring”*, or *“we have nothing in common”*, you can focus on showing an interest in them. Your openness to interact with others can be communicated non-verbally through smile, eye contact and posture, to name a few. Observe how often you check your mobile phone, whether you avoid eye contact, sit by yourself, or stand at a distance from others. Could you change these habits? What happens when you communicate to others that you are interested in them and available to them?

■ You can start a conversation or keep it going by asking the other person questions. Try to observe anything that interests you about the other person and ask them questions or make comments about these aspects. Differences are what make us fascinating to one another and are not a barrier to forming a connection.

■ Maintaining a conversation is just as important as starting one. Talking to and forming a connection with another person requires constant maintenance and building of the conversation, for which all the parties involved have a shared responsibility. Consider, for instance, how you respond when someone

asks you a question. Do you answer *“yes”* or *“no”*, *“I don’t know”* and *“I’m fine”*? It can be difficult to continue a conversation if you give one-word answers. Try to describe and share your opinions, as well as your reasoning behind them, ask more specific questions about a topic, or ask the same question you were asked back. This may take practice if you are used to being quiet and reserved in interactions. Especially if you find yourself thinking, for example, *“I don’t want to pry or intrude”*, try to treat it as a thought that may come to your mind, but doesn’t affect your ability to act differently.

■ Keep in mind that you don’t have to be an expert in everything or know about world politics or the latest developments in parliament if these are not your interests. You can also participate in conversations with the attitude that you are interested in learning more. In such a situation, you might catch yourself thinking, for example, that *“other people think I’m stupid because I don’t know anything about this subject”* or *“I’m too different because my opinions differ from other people’s opinions.”* Remind yourself once again, that these are just thoughts, which do not reflect the real situation in any way. So that they don’t get in the way of your actions you could try and find alternatives, such as *“I know nothing about this topic, but this is a great opportunity to learn”* or *“If everyone always agreed with each other, conversations would get very boring.”*

■ Tell people actively and without hesitation about your interests, hobbies, or everyday life. You can also influence the conversation by suggesting or changing topics.

■ You can also share your worries and talk about unpleasant aspects of your life. You may fear that others will be burdened by your worries and perceive you as gloomy if you share them, but you simply cannot know how people will react to what you say until you say it. Could we then trust others to share how they experience the interaction, so as to avoid guesswork and sometimes even avoid underestimating others? It is good to share private matters with someone you feel you can trust.

■ When you meet and talk to someone you like, tell them at the end of the chat that it was lovely to meet them and talk to them. You can also share what you enjoyed about it. If the other person seems equally enthusiastic following your chat, you could suggest meeting up again or doing something together. They won't know you would like to meet them again unless you tell them. If meeting again isn't convenient for them, this is not a reflection on how your encounter went or what they think about you. Schedules and life circumstances rarely match, but if you don't try, you won't know. That is why it's good to anticipate things going well.

The following is a list of practical exercises that you can try out in your everyday life:

■ Practice giving positive feedback to others. Pay attention to the people around you, noticing their achievements, what they are good at, and how they inspire admiration. Give them your sincere positive feedback. Observe how giving feedback or praise made you feel. How did it affect the situation? How did you feel afterwards? Practise giving positive feedback to yourself too. Try to notice the things you are good at, that you succeed at, or that

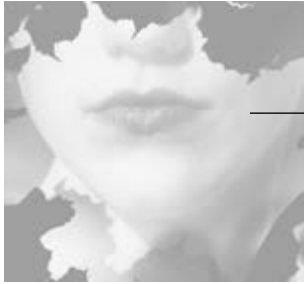
otherwise inspire admiration. Give yourself your sincere positive feedback. You can also imagine what someone close to you might say to you. Give yourself this positive feedback, visualising it the way they would give it. Observe how giving feedback or praise made you feel. How did it affect the situation? How did you feel afterwards?

■ Try to do one good deed per day for a week. These deeds can be small, such as opening a door, smiling, offering help, giving someone your seat on the bus, being charitable towards a stranger. Write down what you did and how it made you feel. How did others react to your good deed? How did this make you feel? What good deeds did you notice others doing for you today?

■ Talk with another person and share a positive thought about yourself or a positive event that happened to you. Even in situations where it can feel difficult to find anything positive to say, it's good to also find and share some positive aspects. Write down how sharing it made you feel and how the other person reacted to it. How did sharing something positive affect the situation and your actions?

■ Experiment with how making eye contact and smiling affects social situations compared to not making eye contact and not smiling. What differences did you notice? How did they affect the social situation?

■ Start a conversation with a stranger, for example at a bus stop, in the queue at a grocery store or at the checkout. It can be about the weather or other small things. What observations did you make?



**EXERCISE:**  
**HOW AM I ATTENTIVE TO OTHERS?**

Loneliness researchers have found that a good way to alleviate feelings of loneliness is to do good for others. Helping others shifts the perspective from yourself to the needs of others and doing self-less good deeds voluntarily increases your sense of being important and needed. Is there anyone close to you who would be delighted to have you contact them, visit them, or invite them for a coffee, a walk, or a fishing trip? Have you ever considered volunteering for something that would allow you to help others in a way that suits you?

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## Summary

In the fourth part of this book, we have examined the multidimensional nature and diversity of interactions and relationships. How can we look after our own boundaries and needs, while also taking the wishes and expectations of others into account? How can we create and maintain reciprocity and balance in relationships so that they don't feel unfair? Sometimes we assume that others know, or at least should know, how we feel or what we think about a situation. To be understood and to feel seen, we must shed light on our inner world to others. In interactions and relationships, it is typical to proceed as if according to a pre-written script. Without realising it, we may keep our own approach and the relationship dynamics in a rigid state, even though we are not entirely happy with the way it is.

In reality, however, interactions and relationships are in a constant state of flux. This requires us to adapt and, above all, to be present and perceptive to what is happening in a situation, for others around us and for ourselves. Reacting to another person's praise with irritation or agreeing to their suggestion without really wanting to exemplify attitudes that can reinforce your experience of loneliness in relationships. Our attitude towards ourselves also has a significant impact on our loneliness. Reducing loneliness is also about finding an authentic way for us to be present with others and with ourselves, so that we can have reciprocal and balanced relationships that are not defined by loneliness.

## Pause for Thought

Take a moment to consider what thoughts and emotions the exercises above evoke in you and what these thoughts and emotions might say about you.

*What thoughts or feelings do you notice yourself having at the end of this part of the book?*

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*What needs or desires do your thoughts and feelings reflect?*

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## Pause for Emotion

Colour in the clouds to show your experience of loneliness over the last week.



*How often do you feel lonely?*



*How strong is your experience of loneliness?*

## Time for Action

Write down in your activity diary below some practical steps you could take to reduce your feelings of loneliness. Your small actions over the next few weeks could involve, for example, putting your expectations or wishes into words. Could you try taking a slightly different role in a familiar situation or relationship? What if you tried to find out what a particular person wants from you and do your best to respond to it? Could you stand up for yourself more or set firmer boundaries in some situations or relationships?

Once you have completed your small action for the day, colour in the box underneath.

My small action

MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT	SUN	MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT	SUN
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My small action

MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT	SUN	MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT	SUN
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My small action

MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT	SUN	MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT	SUN
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**PART**  
**5**

**FROM THE CYCLE  
OF LONELINESS  
TOWARDS  
POSITIVE  
CHANGE**

## THE FORCES BEHIND CHANGE

"I went to the Christmas party even though it scared me.  
I'm so glad I did."

"I asked someone if they would like to go for a walk  
or a coffee with me."

"Nowadays when I travel on the bus I don't look at my phone.  
I'll look at the people around me."

Everyone experiences loneliness in a way individual to them, impacted by their life stories, diverse relationships, and circumstances in life. Using this book, you have explored the concept of loneliness and its relation to how you think and behave, both through illustrative examples and through exercises enabling you to reflect on loneliness in your own life. As you may have noticed, simply thinking about and observing your loneliness is rarely enough to bring about the change you want in your life. This is why the 'Time for action' exercises have been included, encouraging you to make a conscious decision to act in new ways approach your life in a different, less lonely way.

In the final part of this book, we move from reflection to practice: how to occasionally step aside from your cycle of loneliness and how to create a cycle of positive change, allowing you to experience social connection with others in the way that you have hoped to. But first, let's start with who you are, what interests you, and what your priorities in life are. These reflections will help you make a concrete and personalised plan for change that will help you reduce your loneliness and strengthen your social connection.

*"Being alone makes me feel anxious because I haven't chosen this, I've been forced into it. It's like I'm a visitor in my own life."*

This is how one person experiencing loneliness described their situation. Loneliness is never a choice and there is nothing positive about it. It can make your own interests, life choices, and values feel distant and insignificant. You may feel like an outsider in your own life.

## **Should I or do I want to?**

We naturally make comparisons involving ourselves, others, and our situation in order to figure out our place in the social world. Our aim is to get answers to the questions 'who am I' and 'where do I belong'. Society is full of expectations and norms, from paying taxes to gender roles. We treat information on social media as guidance, telling us the number of friends we should have, how we should look, and where we should visit. Our friends and family may also have hopes and expectations relating to us. Parents often want their children to study and engage in hobbies. Spouses often want their partners to participate in aspects of their life they find significant in order for them to be shared. Colleagues and classmates also have specific expectations on handling responsibilities and obligations. Friends also wish for reciprocity, as well as for the friendship to contain interest in the other person and mutual sharing.

On top of all these expectations from other people, and partly as a consequence of them, we also form expectations that we then place on ourselves.

We may have all kinds of expectations of ourselves that we try to meet. Sometimes this can make us feel like everything has to be done a certain way, rather than actually considering what we want to do. This can be seen in the following reflections: *"I should be more sociable, I should learn small talk."* *"I should call my friend who lives far away."* *"I guess I just have to go and do things, no one's going to come to my door and take me out or do things for me."* *"Now that I'm retired and have lots of time, I should be doing all sorts of things."*

When surrounded by other people's expectations, demands, and wishes, it's easy to forget your own hopes and desires. It is hard to feel motivated to act and do something if it feels like a demand or an obligation. Prioritising can also bring its challenges. Whose expectations and wishes should I answer to, my own or those of others'?

When you notice yourself using the word *should*, you may want to pause and consider the reasons behind it. Is what you 'should' do an unavoidable obligation, or does it just feel like one? If you could decide for yourself, what would you do, what would you choose? What is it that you really want?

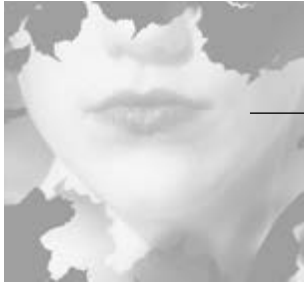
In this workbook, we have explored different ways of thinking and the impact of your thinking on your behaviour and feelings of loneliness. At times, you may have found yourself thinking, *"I should be different from the way I am"*. However, this self-correcting 'should' will not help you move forward. On the contrary, trying to change the way you think by placing various demands on yourself can lead to a growing

sense of loneliness. You may end up in a situation where your loneliness is simply accompanied by an inner critic that is both harsh and discouraging. It is therefore important to recognise the inner voice that says, 'I should'. Does it encourage you to move forward, does it push you towards your aspirations, or is it coming from a different place, discouraging you and controlling your actions?

Feeling dissatisfied with your life may partly be a result of excessively comparing yourself to others. Comparisons can be useful if they help you identify what is important to you and what you want out of life. Making comparisons can be particularly useful if it inspires us to implement desired changes in our lives. They can, however, also have the complete opposite effect, demoralising us and leaving us feeling defeated. This is often the case if what you are comparing yourself to seems unattainable and impossible. We might, for example, compare our own social life with the lives of others as presented on social media: everyone else seems to have lots of friends, fun activities to do all the time, and lots of events to attend. This idealised life, with all negative aspects removed, can lead to dissatisfaction, making your current life feel bland and empty in comparison. You may find yourself trapped in a daydreaming loop, where you long for change but your goals feel too overwhelming and unattainable. Taking practical action feels

impossible. One person who had suffered from loneliness for a long time described their daily routine in the following way: *"I spend my days on social media looking at all the wonderful things other people are doing."* Self-deprecating and critical comparisons can become a bad habit. By recognising your tendency to compare yourself to others, you can start to break this habit. You can ask yourself whether the comparisons are of any use or help to you. Will it help me become more satisfied with my life? Will it lead to me feeling less lonely and less like an outsider? Does it encourage me to pursue things that are important to me?

A significant step in breaking the cycle of loneliness is to start outlining for yourself what is important to you and what you really want. Perhaps you want to hold on to what is already familiar to you, or you may want to introduce something new into your life. Sometimes the values and interests that are most important to you even today are more closely associated with your past. Could something from your past, that was laid aside and forgotten, become significant to you again? The following exercises will help you reflect on these questions.

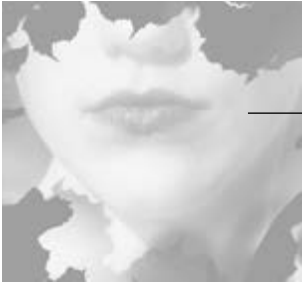


## EXERCISE: WHAT DO I LIKE?

*Use different colours to mark the activities you are already doing in your life and activities you would like to do.*

Go for a walk	Hunt/fish	Have a conversation
Write	Read a book/magazine	Collect something
Visit flea markets	Take photographs	Participate in sporting events
Draw/paint/sculpt	Visit a library	Look after animals
Cook	Go to the theatre / a concert	Tend to plants/garden
Play computer games	Volunteer	Go to a restaurant
Go to the cinema	Visit people	Sing/play an instrument
Listen to podcasts/the radio/ music	Visit an art exhibition	Do handicrafts/ fix things
Spend time online	Study	Do crossword puzzles
Go to a café	Participate in groups	Travel
Watch television/stream series	Attend courses/exercise	Something else, what?

Loneliness can lead to inactivity, where we give up and forget about the things in life that we find enjoyment in. We may also end up doing these activities by ourselves. Is there anything on the list above that you could start doing? Could other people be included more in the activities that you already do? Could you seek out an environment or circumstances where there are others who share your interests? Reflecting on these kinds of questions will help you figure out what changes you would like to see in your life and make a plan for implementing them.



## **EXERCISE: 12 HOURS EXTRA**

*The purpose of this exercise is to help you identify  
what you consider meaningful and important right now.  
Imagine you had 12 more hours in your day.  
How would you use the extra time?  
Try to answer without thinking about any potential obstacles.*

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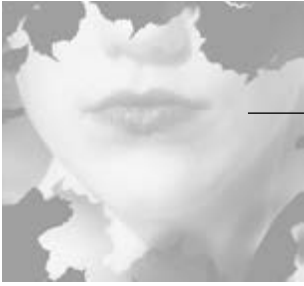
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### **First things first**

People tend to act in accordance with principles or values that are important to them. For some, helping other people is important, while others value success. Some people's actions may be driven by an appreciation for traditions and security, while others may be driven by a desire for new experiences and thrills. There may also be a conflict between your values and your actions, for example if you consider it important to help others, but for one reason or another you are unable to do so in practice. For many people, health is an important value, but it is not reflected in their behaviour, which can cause a great deal of anxiety. Sometimes values can also be contradictory, in which case implementing them in your life may require you to first clarify which values are important to you and why. It is difficult, for example, to be simultaneously fully invested in both your own free time and family life. It often requires making conscious choices to avoid constant conflicts of value between your own and other people's expectations.







**EXERCISE:  
MY PRIORITIES**

*The purpose of this exercise is to get you thinking about your priorities and the aspects of your life that are important to you right now. What is important to you in your hobbies, your personal growth, relationships, and skills development? If it were up to you, what kind of a person would you be and how would you act in relation to other people, yourself, and your environment?*

**1. Hobbies and relaxation:**

How do you take time out for yourself and pamper yourself?  
What are your hobbies? Write down how you would like to spend your free time, whether you currently have any or not. Write about everything that is important to you in this area of your life.

*Supporting questions: What hobbies would you like to have? What kind of hobbies encourage your development? How do you relax, take time out for yourself, or pamper yourself?*

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**3. Well-being:**

What is important to you in terms of well-being, health, the environment, and creativity?

Write about how you want to take care of your health. Consider how you would like to nurture your mind, body, and spirit, through areas such as religion, creativity, life skills, exercise, diet, and your relationship with nature. Write about what you would like to spend your time on within these areas of well-being.

*Supporting questions: What kind of regular exercise would you like to do to take care of your body?*

*How would you like to take care of your health through sleep, diet, and exercise?*

*How would you like to nurture and develop your mind and spirit?*

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**4. Relationships:**

How important are your relationships to you, in terms of your family and relatives, friends, acquaintances, colleagues, and other social contacts and networks? Write down the kind of person you would like to be in relationships. Write about anything you think is significant to your interactions with the people who are important to you.

*Supporting questions: What personal qualities do you want to display in these relationships?*

*In what direction would you like to develop your relationships?*

*If you could act in any way you want to, how would you behave?*

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Here you can summarise your most significant interests and values. Where could you find like-minded people while also fulfilling the interests and values that are important to you?

I'm interested in:

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My most important values are:

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Where I might find like-minded people:

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## My change of direction

In the previous exercise you considered what you like, what is important to you and what you consider worth pursuing. When experiencing loneliness, aspects of life that were once important to you can feel distant and making a change can feel challenging. When reducing loneliness, the most important thing is to consistently engage in activities that make you feel less lonely and bring you closer to what truly matters to you. To keep up your motivation for change, it can be helpful to remind yourself regularly what you want to change in your life and why.

Next, we can start to consider what would be the right goals for you to implement changes in your life. How do you identify a suitable goal? A good goal is something you can see yourself putting into action now or in the near future. It is a goal that feels reasonably challenging but still manageable. A good goal will spark your curiosity.

The goal could be, for example, to start a new hobby and to exchange a few words with a new person every time you go there. The goal could also be to share something personal about yourself with someone you know in an appropriate situation. Like any change or skill, connecting with other people requires you to practice and nurture the skill. The key to reducing loneliness and increasing social connection is to start living your life and expressing yourself in a way that feels authentic and fulfilling to you. Furthermore, it is about taking action to build relationships with others and learning from new situations, rather than expecting everything to always go a certain way.

When it comes to relationships, it is often the little things that carry the most weight. As you establish your goals, it can be difficult to figure out what you should do differently going forward. Here are some reflections made by people who were experiencing loneliness.

*“I would like to meet new people, but I don’t know where to start. I’d like to learn how to talk to new people, but I don’t know how. Nobody wants to talk to a stranger on the bus, do they? I definitely don’t want to go to a bar looking for friends anymore. It never leads to the kinds of encounters I hope for.”*

To reduce feelings of loneliness, it is clearly important to make changes to how you meet people. This includes where you meet people and how many people you meet, as well as how you talk to and behave around them. What factors contribute towards relationships feeling closer? What could you do differently? Perhaps you would like to find the courage to be more open and vulnerable and to express your feelings more openly to others.

*“I told an old friend of mine about my loneliness and apologised for withdrawing from our friendship for so long. We talked at length about how my divorce was such a big deal for me and how I couldn’t really get over it, despite my best efforts. It somehow got in the way of our friendship because I couldn’t find the words to talk about my sadness and anger. It felt good to talk. I don’t know why I didn’t do it sooner.”*

Maybe it doesn’t come naturally to you to talk about your personal affairs in the same way as in the example above. Even if this is the case, you can find your own way to be more relaxed and uninhibited in your relationships, so as not to withdraw and guard yourself from others but

instead connect with others without losing yourself. On the other hand, you might simply want to be more at ease with your loneliness so that it no longer rules out opportunities in your life. Maybe you just want to be better able to tolerate awkward or disharmonious situations.

*“I was talking with my son about how good it feels that we no longer argue so much anymore. I stroked his back at the same time. It felt nice. I can’t even remember the last time I touched him. I’ve just been so focused on the fact that we fight all the time. Now I feel like things aren’t so tense between us anymore. Sometimes he calls me to tell me what’s going on in his life.”*

Sometimes a big change in loneliness can come from the decision to distance yourself from a relationship in which you do not feel seen or heard. This will free up space for a new relationship in which you feel valued.

*“I hadn’t realised how much energy my previous friendships used to take from me until I met an old friend. The one I’d had a falling out with. I’d been crushed by the ending of the friendship, and I felt so guilty about having not kept in touch. Now I realised that we no longer have anything in common. They just talked about themselves and never once asked me how I’m doing. I notice that I don’t even miss partying with that group of friends anymore. I’m a different person now. Happier. It’s sad that this friend can’t see that and be happy for me. But at the same time, I feel free now. I don’t need a bad relationship to make me feel whole. I value myself more than I used to.”*

Perhaps you would like to find a more open way of communicating with others, in which you

ask and request, listen, and express yourself. Perhaps you would like to better recognise and communicate the boundaries you don’t want people to cross. Or maybe you have become more aware of other people’s boundaries.

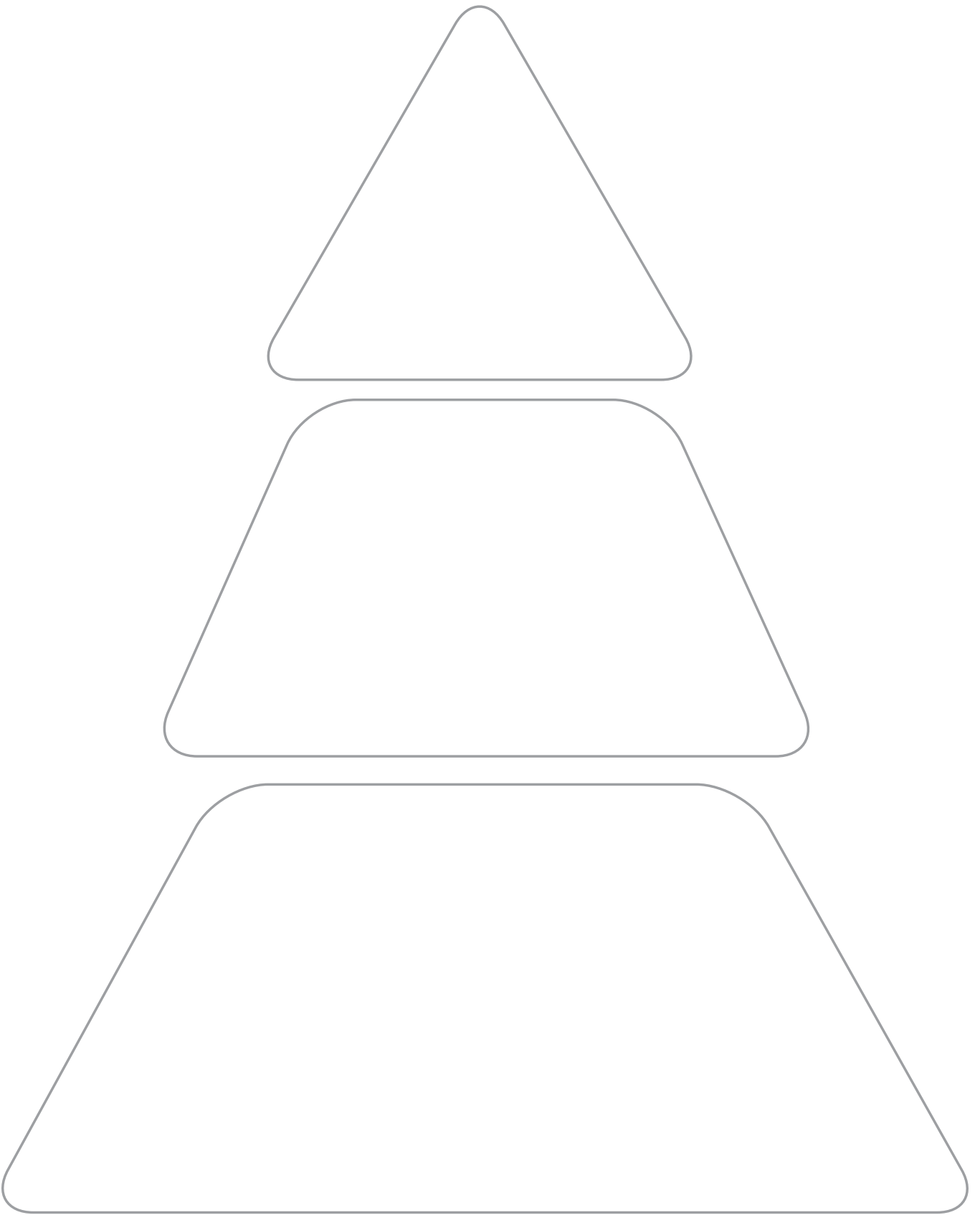
*“When I was thinking about these roles, I realised that I always withdraw from relationships. I’m always the critical observer. But I don’t like that role at all. I have a lot to say, but for some reason I never say it out loud. Then I get angry and disappointed when no one asks for my opinion. Last week I voiced my opinion at a meeting, and it was really liberating. I also told an acquaintance of mine that it would be nice to meet for coffee. It had never occurred to me that I could change my role, my way of being with people to something more reciprocal.”*

What makes a goal overly ambitious or unrealistic? An unrealistic goal has excessively high expectations and demands on yourself and others about reducing your loneliness or creating new social relationships. Thinking about this kind of a goal makes you feel anxious and so you procrastinate and wait for the moment when you will hopefully feel ready to start working towards it. However, all sorts of obstacles get in the way of the change, and you simply never get started. An unrealistic goal involves other people or situations beyond your control. For example, falling in love is an unrealistic goal because it involves another person, whom you have no control over. A realistic goal along the same lines would be *“I will start a conversation and get to know a person I am interested in.”*

In this section, we explored what overcoming loneliness can involve. The given examples might resonate with you, or you may have your own steps to take on the road to having more meaningful relationships in your life. Lasting transformation often requires a change in your thinking, emotions and even behaviour. Emotional change can be as simple as becoming more aware of your feelings and needs, and perhaps sharing them with those close to you. A change in thinking is about recognising your own maladaptive thoughts and not letting them determine your actions. A change in behaviour could mean inviting people over or planning your summer holidays in advance rather than letting loneliness take over your plans entirely.

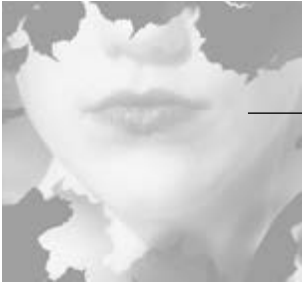






It can be difficult to get started with making a change and sometimes we may even have some resistance to it. This includes changes that aim to reduce loneliness and increase social connection. You can recognise this kind of counterproductive mindset that *is resistant to change from thoughts such as: "There's no need for a plan. All I need is to be aware of the problem and just do things."* Change can also bring about anxiety, for example in the form of disbelief or avoiding doing the exercises: *"This won't solve my loneliness. Working through this book on my own won't bring me the friends I need in my life."* You may also find yourself thinking that change shouldn't be so difficult: *"If it was really possible to influence loneliness, it wouldn't seem so difficult."*

It can feel confusing and uncertain to work on something new and unfamiliar as you are advancing a wish that is important to you on a personal level. It can be difficult to get a grip on where to start and how. That is why the next step is to make a concrete plan. It will give structure to your thoughts and make it easier to get started.



**EXERCISE:**  
**A PLAN TO STRENGTHEN  
SOCIAL CONNECTION**

Your next task is to draw up a plan for change to reduce your loneliness and strengthen your social connection, making it as concrete and detailed as possible. These goals involve all the elements you want in your life that will contribute to your social well-being. The goal can also be to reduce the harmful habits you are currently engaging in to cope with your feelings of loneliness.

If the 'Time for Action' exercises had specific actions that you found useful in reducing your feelings of loneliness, you can include those too in the space below. What has helped you move forward? Similarly, you can also consider any of the small actions that may not have worked for you. What could you have done differently? Was getting started with the goal too difficult, did it involve too many expectations of other people, or do you perhaps need methods for reminding yourself of the smaller goals you have set for yourself?

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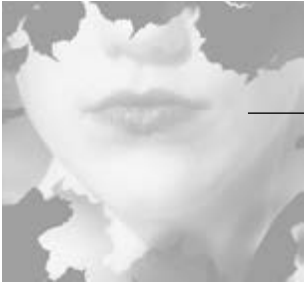
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This exercise will help you create your action plan by exploring what kinds of goals work for you: *“I find that it’s enough to have a small goal and one that I’m happy to do, like inviting a friend for a walk with me.” “I’ve noticed that I do manage to plan stuff to do, but then I just don’t get them done. Maybe I need to set a reminder on my phone so that I would manage to, for example, call my friend or go out for a walk, either with the friend or by myself.”*

Use the planning boxes to specify tasks and actions that will help you move from your initial situation towards the future situation. These tasks can differ from each other and do not have to be related. The main thing is that each of them, together and separately, helps you move towards the desired situation in small, concrete steps. Try to think particularly about what actions you can take and what impact you can have through your actions. In the first planning box, write the easiest task or action you could take and in the last box, write down the most challenging. The idea is not for you to achieve all of these tasks immediately, but to allow the time needed as you implement a change in your life.

*In the box on the left, describe your life and social network as it is right now. What is your daily life like? How would you describe your social relationships and social situations? How does loneliness affect your life?  
What kinds of activities do you engage in?  
How do you cope with loneliness?*

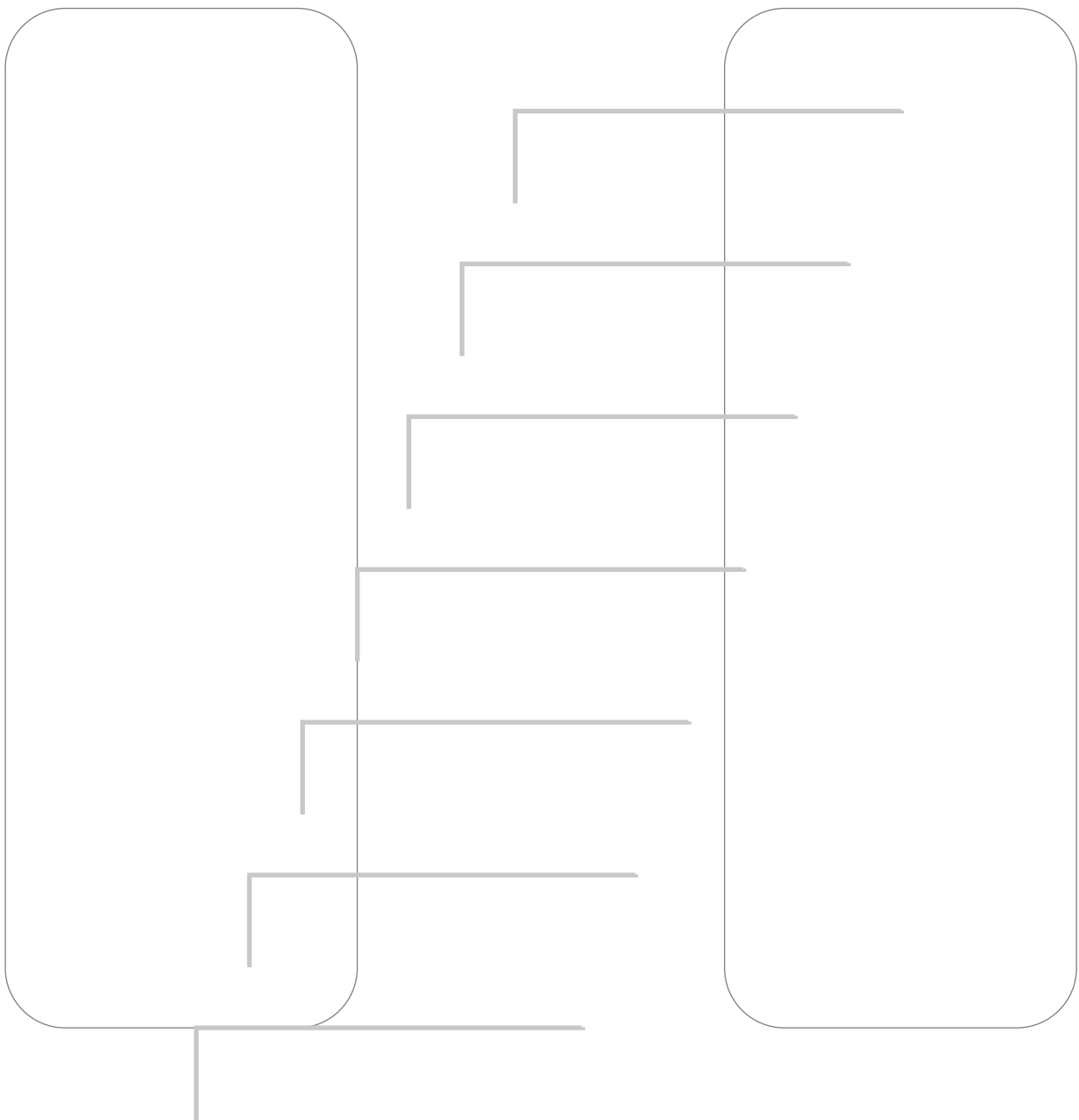
*In the box on the right, describe your situation when you are no longer struggling with loneliness or when loneliness has become an ever-smaller problem for you. Can you visualise where you would be and what you would be doing if you were no longer lonely?  
What would your everyday life look like?  
What would be an indication to you that you were no longer lonely or that your loneliness had reduced?  
What kinds of activities would you like to engage in?  
With whom? What would your social situations look like?*



**EXERCISE:  
AN ACTION PLAN TO REDUCE  
LONELINESS**

CURRENT MOMENT

THE FUTURE



## Keeping on track with your plan for change

What you are striving for may currently still seem to you like distant, dream-like fantasies. The difference between a dream and a goal is that dreams are something we think about and hope for, and goals are something we act on and work towards. Finding a friend or a partner is a dream for many, but as a goal it is difficult to achieve alone. We can, however, make it a goal of ours to keep an open mind, meet new people and engage in activities and interests that are important to us. You are then much more likely to come across someone with similar interests and are therefore also increasing the chances of meeting someone who could become that person for you.

It might be difficult to notice or fully appreciate the steps you take because the final destination may still be far ahead. The gap between where we want to be and where we are right now can make us feel inadequate, perhaps even like a failure.

*“I’ve started a new hobby and keep in touch with my friends more, but I still feel lonely because I’m not in a romantic relationship.”*

To keep up your motivation, it is essential to make a realistic assessment of where you have succeeded, what kind of approaches have worked for you, and when you have done well in relation to your goals, aspirations, and requirements. These successes and the progress you make in achieving intermediate goals will help you towards your bigger goal of reducing loneliness. Keep your focus on the

ultimate goal, without forgetting everything you are already doing to achieve it.

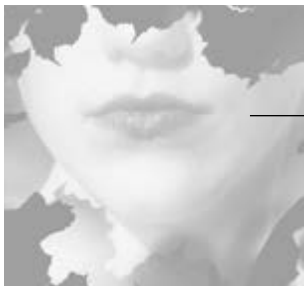
When we hope to find a friend and, in the process, choose to trust other people, we also open up the possibility that we will get hurt, disappointed or let down. Allowing oneself to feel vulnerable is closely linked to overcoming loneliness and it can be the hardest thing to overcome when you start approaching the topic of alleviating your loneliness. Loneliness can also work as a shield, protecting us from other people and the world. If you want to form connections with other people, you will have to put the shield down for a moment. For this reason, it is good to have a goal that keeps us on track to reduce loneliness even when we experience disappointments in relationships.

When we pursue our goals or strive for connections, it is possible, even likely, that we will occasionally suffer setbacks and feel sad and frustrated. Being aware of the possibility of setbacks, however, is quite different to approaching social situations or relationships expecting the worst. Expecting the worst often creates a self-fulfilling prophecy, because what you expect to happen tends to happen. Preparing yourself for disappointment increases your need for self-preservation, which in turn eats away at your courage to be open and genuine. Our attitudes have a significant impact on how events unfold, as we have already discussed in this book. Therefore, if there is no way of knowing how everything will turn out, you might as well expect that it will go well.

The more vividly you can visualise yourself in the future as being active and delighted with

your own progress, the easier it will be to start implementing your plan for change. It is very much up to you whether you choose to make those changes that will move you forward and inspire you to keep going. How do you show yourself appreciation and praise yourself for your successes or achieving a goal? Do you experience satisfaction, joy, and a sense of

achievement? Could you do something small and specific to celebrate your progress? How could you reward yourself? Even though these rewards are not the reason you are making the change, they can act as a positive incentive and a reminder that you should not take your plan for granted. You can be proud of your achievements and happy with them.



### EXERCISE: A LETTER TO MYSELF

*In this last part of the workbook, you have been working on a detailed and practical plan for change. Throughout the book and its exercises, you have crucially stopped and listened to yourself. You have learned something about yourself. Indeed, in terms of your plans for change, the most important question remains: what have you learned? What do you think about your life now? How do you feel about yourself and your relationships?*

*At the beginning of the book, you wrote about your experience of loneliness. Now write a letter to yourself, to the person you were in that particular moment when you were feeling lonely. What would you, as the person you are now in this moment, say to yourself as you were at that point in time?*

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## IN CONCLUSION – NURTURING SOCIAL CONNECTION

*“It was good to work on my loneliness and life in relation to it.  
It’s completely different from talking to a friend about it.”*

Everyone wants to have stable, trustworthy relationships to rely on. It is easy to think that there might be a person out there who possesses these qualities, and that once we find that friend we will be happy. Friendship and trust, however, are built through choices and acts of kindness. Your acts of kindness and your way of interacting with people in an open and respectful way are reflected onto others.

In the same way that we look after our fitness, our relationships and interaction ‘muscles’ also need exercise and rest. Did you know that studies show that it takes up to 200 hours to form a close friendship? Building and maintaining social relationships requires consistent long-term effort, but it always starts with the first small steps.

Often, kindness breeds friendship and mistrust breeds reservedness. Nevertheless, building trust is a very personal experience for all of us and cannot be rushed. While one person might find it easy to trust someone from the first meeting, another might find it takes a long time to build trust. In a lasting relationship, it is not necessarily the amount of trust that is key, but the mutual desire to nurture the existing connection and the growing trust in each other.

If one person does not share this desire in the slightest, it will be difficult to form a lasting relationship.

Perhaps you haven’t yet found the friend you long for or gotten rid of your loneliness while working on this book. Maybe this workbook has, nonetheless, provoked insight and helped you realise that loneliness need not define who you are, or what you do now or in the future. Hopefully, this book has given you the tools to alleviate your feelings of loneliness and strengthen your experience of social connection. Upon coming to the end of their work on loneliness with this book, one person noted: *“I have become aware of my own part in relationships.”* The world looks a little different when you’re not looking at it through the lens of loneliness: *“I started to see myself and others in a new light. Or actually, the way I saw them before my loneliness.”*

*“I notice the people around me more. I’ve started to really see them, for example when I go to the shop and when I talk to people. I have been surprised by my own compassion for others, my empathy. And I realised that it had been missing in my encounters before. I was so withdrawn into my shell of loneliness that I didn’t really feel compassion, not*

*for myself or for others. Now I sometimes just feel like hugging people. And apologising for being so withdrawn in the past.”*

*“I expected a lot from a meeting with my old friends. One of them withdrew and the other became closer. When one of these friendships didn’t live up to my expectations, I nearly gave in to disappointment. Then I realised that maybe this friend was lonely too and just didn’t know how to rely on me anymore. I decided to give them some space and time. We’ll see how the friendship develops. I can only do my part.”*

Loneliness, the feeling of longing for contact with others, is part of life. While it is neither welcomed nor desired, something good can come of it. It can make you pause and reflect on your life, its meaning and the relationships within it. This workbook is not a course you graduate from. Taking care of and valuing yourself, as well as living according to your own values and preferences, are all reflected in

the everyday choices you make. There are also factors beyond our control, which we cannot influence, however much we might want to, involving our surroundings, relationships, and the interactions within them. Establishing, maintaining, and strengthening a connection with other people requires constant care from both parties involved. We hope this book has set something in motion for you to begin reducing your loneliness and creating, maintaining, and strengthening your social connection.

We end this book with an insight from someone who suffered from loneliness. We hope that you will ask yourself, and perhaps others, the same question from time to time. And we hope that when you answer your own question, you will have found ways to act and feel increasingly more seen and heard in your own life.

*“I have become visible to myself. I know how to ask myself ‘how am I doing’.”*

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A big thank you especially to you, who are reading this and taking part in change. By choosing to take on the challenge of loneliness, you show a great deal of bravery and compassion.

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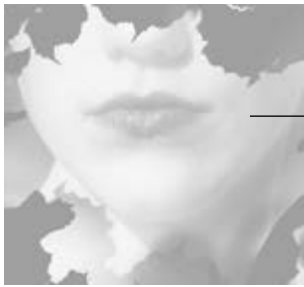
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## APPENDIX: LONELINESS SCALE

*How often do the statements below describe you?*

<i>I feel like this...</i>	<i>never</i>	<i>rarely</i>	<i>sometimes</i>	<i>often</i>	<i>POINTS</i>
1. I feel part of a group of friends.*					
2. I have a lot in common with the people around me.*					
3. I feel left out.					
4. I feel isolated from others.					
5. I can find companionship when I want it.*					
6. I am unhappy being so withdrawn.					
7. There are people I feel close to.*					
8. My social relationships are superficial.					
9. No one really knows me well.					
10. I am no longer close to anyone.					
11. There are people who really understand me.*					
12. There are people I can talk to.*					
<b>Total</b>					

*This abbreviated loneliness survey is based on the UCLA Loneliness Scale (Russell, Peplau & Cutrona 1980).*

Is it loneliness or something else? The loneliness scale is a guiding tool for measuring feelings of loneliness. After obtaining the answers, scoring is done in three stages. First, look at statements that do not have an asterisk. Mark the score in one of the columns in the table according to the answers as follows: never = 1 point, rarely = 2 points, sometimes = 3 points, and often = 4 points. Next, mark a score in one of the columns for the remaining statements, that is, those with an asterisk \* : never = 4 points, rarely = 3 points, sometimes = 2 points, and often = 1 point. Finally, add up the scores.

The minimum total score for the loneliness scale is 12 and the maximum is 48. The first six statements measure social loneliness (minimum 6 and maximum 24 points), and the last six statements measure emotional loneliness (minimum 6 and maximum 24 points). The total score gives an indication of the current experience of loneliness. The lower the score, the lesser the experience of loneliness.

*However, the survey alone cannot be used to draw conclusions about one's own or someone else's experience of loneliness. Instead, the questionnaire can be used as a discussion starter or as the basis for individual reflection.* A person's own experience of loneliness is more important than the score. In Finland an approximate threshold for social loneliness can be considered a score above 13, and for emotional loneliness a score above 11 for women and above 13 for men.

The loneliness scale can also be used when the workbook is being used in conjunction with professional support. Changes in the experience of loneliness can be monitored by using the questionnaire at the beginning and end of this work.

The answers to the questionnaire can also be useful in setting goals. If, for example, the statement *"no one really knows me well"* reflects your experience of loneliness right now, then it makes sense to explore what kinds of goals would help you strengthen your social connection. For example, could your goal be to share more personal aspects of yourself with the people you know?

Identifying and correcting your maladaptive thought patterns and making a change in your behaviour will often alleviate your experience of loneliness. For some, change can occur suddenly through insight, while for others it can be a longer process. In some cases, the feeling of loneliness can remain pretty much the same at the beginning and end of this workbook, but there may still be a different sense of ease with your situation. Loneliness and transforming it are very individual and personal experiences.





**Ari Marjovu,  
Jenny Julkunen and Maria Lähteenmäki**

# LONELINESS

**If you are tired of feeling lonely, this book is for you.**

This workbook helps to identify and explore maladaptive and detrimental patterns of thinking and behaving that perpetuate loneliness. It inspires new insights and encourages alternative ways of thinking and behaving.

Alleviating loneliness therefore becomes a collection of all those actions that lead us towards a life that feels authentic to us and towards relationships in which we feel genuinely seen and heard.

This book is based on research relating to the most effective methods for reducing loneliness. It was developed at HelsinkiMissio as part of a programme for reducing loneliness and was done in collaboration with people who were experiencing loneliness.



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