

# Facing Loneliness With Dr. Steven C. Hayes

**Susan David:** Right now, the world is struggling to cope with at least two pandemics. First, of course, is COVID-19, which as of this recording has taken nearly 300,000 lives, and infected at least 4 million people around the world. The second pandemic is even more widespread: the pandemic of loneliness. As life changed profoundly over the past few months, our networks of meaningful connection have been disrupted. The resulting loneliness has taken many forms. Of course, those who live alone are struggling to cope with a world where their only in-person interactions might be bi-weekly encounters with masked grocery store clerks. But people who are holed up with a partner or family still miss the touch and support of friends that they haven't seen for a while (since March, or even before) and even those who are too busy for comfort—the doctors, the nurses, the essential workers keeping our lights on and our stomachs full—they, too, miss their loved ones. And they miss the time and mental bandwidth to be in quiet connection with themselves. For the time being, neither you nor I have the power to relax social distancing guidelines, nor to make it safe to hug our friends or host a dinner party. But we do have the power to keep ourselves connected, even as the virus threatens to push us apart. This is Checking In with Susan David.

This episode on loneliness was prompted by so many conversations with people recently who are describing how even in the midst of busyness, they feel a sense of disconnect with those around them. I got an email from a listener who said this:

“Hello, Susan. I'm finding great comfort in your podcast during this time. It's short and manageable at a time when everything feels daunting and uncertain. May I suggest an episode covering coping skills for those of us who are single and/or living alone? As such a person speaking to many of my friends and family who are isolating with a partner or with a family of their own, I feel that my hardships are relegated to “poor single person's territory.” All they seem to be able to muster is pity, which doesn't really allow space for me to talk about my own thoughts and feelings. I also feel like I'm unable to talk frankly with loved ones about the loneliness and isolation that I feel living alone right now, because I dread falling into the role of a stern, chiding person, implying the sentiment that you should be grateful that you have anyone at all. I know that their situation is extraordinarily difficult in its own way. But it's so alien from my experience right now. Again, thank you for providing so many people with a reassuring voice and a virtual helping hand. In gratitude, —”

So it was this email that prompted this exploration into loneliness. I think it's something that so many of us are experiencing right now in our own way. Even before many of us had heard of the coronavirus, loneliness was on the rise. One study shows that in the 1980s, the average

American had three people that they trusted enough to discuss important matters with; by the aughts, that number had shrunk to two. And it seems likely that this trend has continued in the US (and beyond) ever since. Loneliness and its effects are physical as well as mental: heart disease, stroke, disorders of the heart and immune system, depression, and anxiety have all been linked to loneliness. Loneliness, by definition, is subjective. We can be lonely when we are physically alone. But we can also be lonely in a crowd. Because loneliness, at its core, is the sense of our lack of meaningful connection with others. As with other social problems, the pandemic is highlighting and exacerbating the loneliness that so many of us were already living with. But the beginning of our movement towards a better life and more fulfilling human connection is subtle and simple, and yet enormously powerful. It starts with showing up to the pain of our experience. When we show up fully and with awareness and acceptance, even the worst demons back down. One of the leading voices in modern psychology helping us to better understand human suffering, including loneliness, is Dr. Steven Hayes. I invited him onto the show. Steve is a professor of psychology at the University of Nevada. He's the author of more than 600 articles and 44 books, the most recent of which is *A Liberated Mind*. Steve has been thinking long and hard about loneliness, both pre-virus, as well as in this moment that we find ourselves in. Steve, welcome. I so appreciate you being with us today.

**Steven Hayes:** I'm really pleased to be here with you, Sue.

**Susan David:** So Steve, one of the hallmarks of your work is helping people to better understand how we can get stuck in difficult experiences, for instance, the experience of loneliness. I'm wondering if you can describe a little bit what this looks like and what it can feel like. What is this experience of often being fused with loneliness like for people?

**Steven Hayes:** Well, there's two features of loneliness. There's that fact that you may not have close friends, that you just don't participate as part of a close-knit social group, and it seems to be getting worse. But there's also emotional loneliness. We can be among people who care about us and who really are there for us and yet feel profoundly alone.

**Susan David:** So, if someone is experiencing loneliness and it feels like it's all consuming right now, what are some ways that you would suggest that people can start opening themselves to that emotional experience, such that it's not, you know, a denial and also not, you know, a self pity, but really, that's connecting with what could be healthy about the experience of, of being with those difficult emotions?

**Steven Hayes:** Look at what we do when we're lonely. Sometimes if we're mishandling it, and we want to go to bed, we want to not call people, it's the exact opposite of what we should be doing. But you got to open your heart to be able to do the other path. I would start with the positive side. What do you really appreciate about people? We can do it right here, right now we've lost something and our ability easily to connect with others. If you slow it down and notice what's painful about that and then turn it over—just like it would turn over a sheet of paper, you'll see on the other side, are what you appreciate about people. What you would be grateful for. And it turns

out, if you open up to that, loneliness goes down. But if—and only if—you open up to that along the same pathway that opens yourself up to your own experience, your memories, your emotions, your bodily senses, and opens you up to your deepest values, your deepest yearnings. That's the avenue through which gratitude then kind of unlocks the key to your heart. And you can step into that space with love, connection, belonging, contribution, both in the way you organize your social life, but also in how you orient your psychological life. And so focus on what you deeply yearn for. And if you look inside the emotional loneliness—not just a social loneliness, which is really important, but simply not having friends—but the emotional ones. With some of the questionnaires, they're about things like, "I'm unhappy being so withdrawn," —is an item on a classic loneliness scale. Well, why did you withdraw? Why did you do that? And turns out, you were trying to protect yourself, but you were trying to protect yourself in a way that harmed yourself. It protected you only short term, not long term. And so this is not about masochism, or sadism. This is about being a whole human being. And being able to sort of take that rich soup of a life that includes love and loss, belonging, and times of loneliness. And when you feel those feelings, being able to reorient yourself towards what you deeply care about, and what your history is bringing into the moment. And then actually taking steps: calling your friends, getting out of bed, writing that email, writing that letter, you know, even in COVID, the opportunities are all around us to connect with others. And yet, the world within sometimes is tempting us: that little voice within to protect yourself, protect yourself. And it's harming yourself.

**Susan David:** Steve, because loneliness by definition is a lack of meaningful connection, what we know is that people can, when they are physically alone, put up barriers—these barriers are very often cognitive. So things like "oh, you know, others don't care about me, so there's no point in my reaching out to them anyway." But when we are with people, even within our own homes, we can put up barriers that create or exacerbate loneliness, so we can move away from people—our partners or spouses who might be trying to connect with us. It sounds like one of the core things we can do is really recognize that we are putting up these barriers and to open ourselves up to others. Is that along the lines of what your work suggests?

**Steven Hayes:** Exactly right. If you become more open and watch it, you can feel the barriers go up—you can sense them. And if you realize it's a choice, and that you do not have to do that, boy, here's a gut check isn't it? I mean, that we had a gut punch with COVID. We're—we have time now, in isolation, yes, but not in disconnection. Yes, we're physically distanced. But we don't need to be socially distanced. We're all experiencing this together, worldwide. We'll talk about this for generations. Can we spend some of this time right now to look again and say is this really how we want to be organizing our lives, our families, our businesses, our clinics? Is this really how we want to organize our culture? And maybe we can come out on the other side with post-traumatic growth. And there's a whole range of studies on psychological flexibility, on being emotionally open, focused on the now and focused on our values that show that actually, after you have things like violent storms, or school shootings, or a horrible medical diagnosis, or period of quarantine, you can come out more open, more spiritually focused, more able to do what's important and not sweat the small stuff. If you apply those flexibility skills to the challenges that are presented by that—if we did that, as a culture, right now, worldwide, we'd come out of this in a—headed in a new

direction. And I think a lot of us know we need to.

**Susan David:** So stepping into our difficult experience, our loneliness, not trying to push it away, trying to connect with it, trying to understand the values that they point to, and take active steps towards those values.

**Steven Hayes:** Exactly. And I think you can do it in small steps, you can practice it. It's a skill that can be learned. And COVID is, you know, that gut punch that has invited us for this gut check of a different way of dealing with the pain of connection and loneliness and creating a more connected world on the other side of this.

**Susan David:** Steve, thank you so much for joining us today.

**Steven Hayes:** It was awesome to be with you, Sue.

**Susan David:** Loneliness is often thought of as the experience one has of being physically alone. But as I've said, we can experience loneliness in a crowd. Because in its essence, loneliness is a lack of meaningful connection. And it is subjective. Moving through loneliness, then—effectively and wholeheartedly—is first about showing up to the pain of the experience: the memories, the heartbreak, the physical sensations. While, when we're lonely, we can often enter into the space of judgment and protection, persuading ourselves that “no one cares anyway, so there's little point in reaching out,” we can instead notice our loneliness with kindness and compassion. Second, when we sit with loneliness as an imagined word on a piece of paper, we can then flip that paper over and recognize that there are values on the other side that loneliness is pointing to. Examples might be love, kindness, yearning, connection. And third is to let those values guide us into doing something different. No matter how small that action is. It might be reaching out, writing a letter, going for a walk, asking an open ended question, disclosing a little bit about yourself to another person in a new way, or even listening to a piece of music that connects you with humanity and reminds us of the common struggle that we are all in in our different ways right now. It is these values-guided actions that help us to be who we most want to be in our lives. That's all from me today. I hope that this episode was of value to you. Be well, stay safe, and let's check in next week.