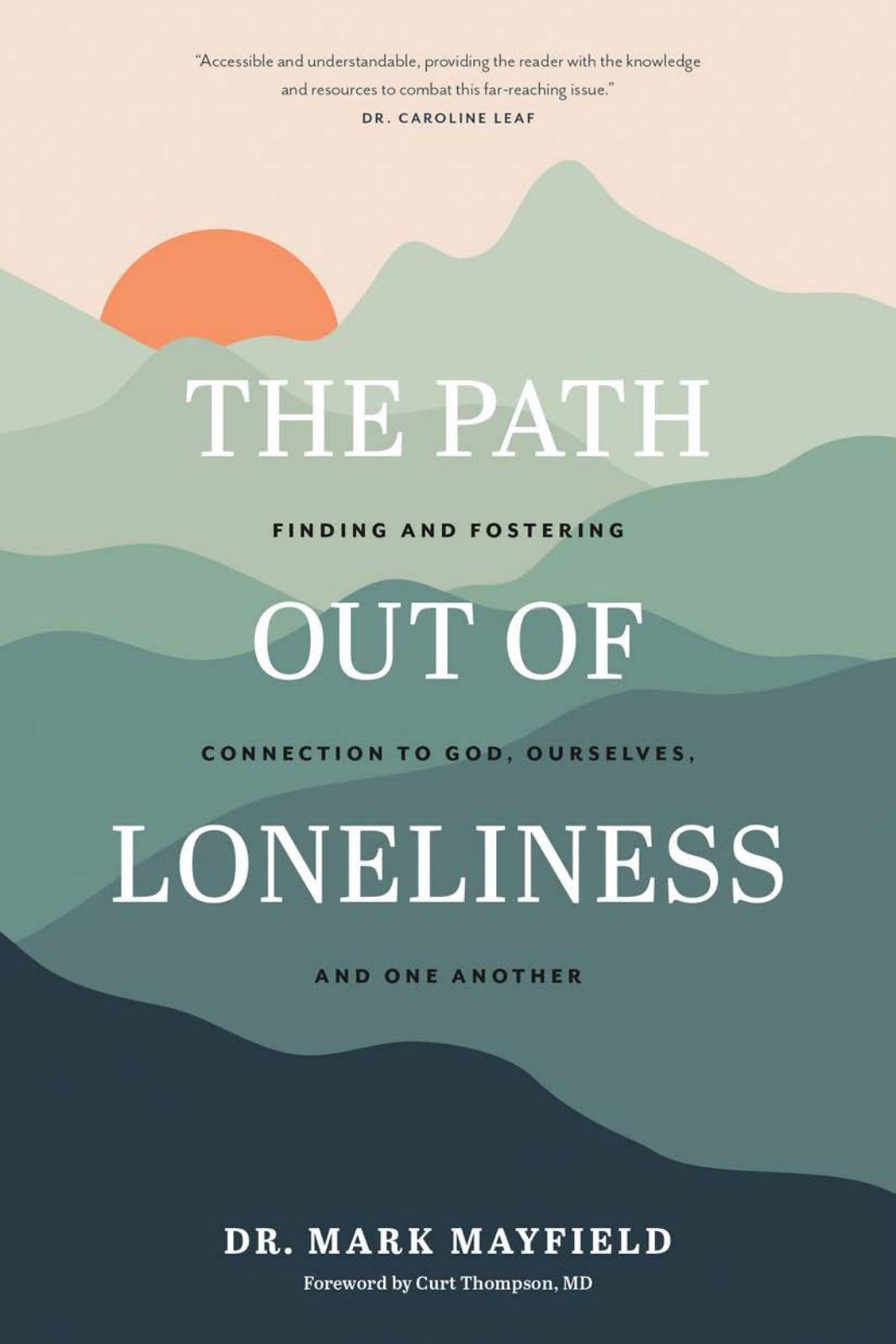


"Accessible and understandable, providing the reader with the knowledge
and resources to combat this far-reaching issue."

DR. CAROLINE LEAF



THE PATH

FINDING AND FOSTERING

OUT OF

CONNECTION TO GOD, OURSELVES,

LONELINESS

AND ONE ANOTHER

DR. MARK MAYFIELD

Foreword by Curt Thompson, MD

Today, our society is facing a new mental health crisis . . . an epidemic of loneliness. In *The Path out of Loneliness*, Dr. Mark Mayfield provides readers with a new way to be seen, heard, and loved. A timely must-read!

DR. TIM CLINTON, president of American Association of Christian Counselors, executive director of James Dobson Family Institute

Dr. Mark Mayfield's new book, *The Path out of Loneliness*, skillfully highlights a very urgent problem in our society today: isolation and its physical and mental consequences—and what we can do about it. He delves into the many social aspects of loneliness in a way that is both accessible and understandable, providing the reader with the knowledge and resources to combat this far-reaching issue.

DR. CAROLINE LEAF, cognitive neuroscientist, mental health expert, bestselling author

Loneliness is a risk factor for Alzheimer's disease and many psychiatric problems. We MUST address this issue head on, or the current mental health pandemic will continue to spiral out of control. Dr. Mark Mayfield's new book, *The Path out of Loneliness*, does this in an elegant way. I highly recommend it.

DANIEL G. AMEN, MD, founder of Amen Clinics, author of *Your Brain Is Always Listening*

For the price of this book, you get a year's worth of counseling . . . at your own pace. From a smart and compassionate therapist!

JOHN ELDREDGE, *New York Times* bestselling author, counselor

We were made for community. Yet our brokenness often makes us hide from others and keeps us from loving people well. As a counselor, as a professor, and as one who has served as a pastor, Mayfield integrates principles and practices from faith and science to help us flourish in fellowship with one another. This book will guide you toward wholeness as you and I learn to give and receive love.

REV. DR. GLENN PACKIAM, associate senior pastor at New Life Church, author of *Blessed Broken Given*

We've got to start seeing deep connection as a requirement, not an accessory in our lives. Dr. Mayfield has written this incredible, holistic guide to help you fight loneliness in your own life and see how God hardwired you for relationships.

JENNIE ALLEN, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Get Out of Your Head*, founder and visionary of IF:Gathering

Before anyone ever heard of the COVID-19 pandemic, loneliness was already a plague among us, but it was greatly exacerbated by the deadly virus separating us into our socially isolated cocoons. Whatever the cause, loneliness can drag us down into a debilitating spiral of despair, hopelessness, sickness, insanity, even death. There's a reason prisons reserve solitary confinement as one of their harshest punishments.

Loneliness has its genesis in Genesis, which makes clear it is not what God intended for us. We were lovingly created for relationship and connection—with him and with others. Within these pages, walk step-by-step with Mark as he gently guides you out of the darkness, offering practical tools such as honesty, vulnerability, reflection, and awareness, and let the insights gleaned lead you to embrace hope as you discover your identity, meaning, and purpose on the other side of loneliness.

DR. WESS STAFFORD, president emeritus of Compassion International, author of *Too Small to Ignore* and *Just a Minute*

Power-packed with his own vulnerable stories and strengthened through living examples curated from thousands of counseling clients, Dr. Mayfield guides us through today's pressing problems, recovers original design, and gently and courageously guides us on a path toward hope.

MORGAN SNYDER, author of *Becoming a King*, vice president of Wild at Heart, founder of BecomeGoodSoil.com

I've seen Mark Mayfield at work as a counselor, and now I know him as a friend. I've witnessed firsthand his passion for soul health, and I've watched him nurture a city toward life. *The Path out of Loneliness* is a clear call for us to get back to what we were made for—connection. This is a lifesaving message. Thank you, Mark, for being a voice.

JON EGAN, music artist, worship pastor at New Life Church

THE PATH

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AND ONE ANOTHER

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The Path out of Loneliness: Finding and Fostering Connection to God, Ourselves, and One Another

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Foreword

IN 2018, the United Kingdom appointed its first Minister for Loneliness. By then we had begun to recognize that for all of our modern advances, we were—and are—still as alienated as Cain was from Abel. Often, by the time a public health concern reaches the halls of government, one knows that it has long since perniciously been active and debilitating in the community. And so, as I write this at the commencement of 2021, in the case of loneliness, despite our scientific specialization, communication, and affluence, we find ourselves overwhelmed not by one but two pandemics—one viral and the other simply human.

Over the past thirty years, as I have treated patients who suffer from various psychiatric maladies, the specter of loneliness has hovered everywhere. And with each patient, it eventually makes its way into the conversation. We are people who are fraught, both neurobiologically and relationally, with a deep and ancient sense of alienation, of being cut off. Cut off from parts of ourselves and from each other. As we read in Scripture's Creation texts, it is not good to be alone. But like our first parents, we continue to

blindly—or in some cases, quite consciously—make choices that exacerbate our loneliness, only to find that our states of trauma, anxiety, depression, and addiction worsen, driving those very behaviors that serve only to reinforce the cycle of loneliness we are trying so desperately to escape.

Life on this earth was not meant to be this way. Nor does it have to be. With *The Path out of Loneliness*, Mark Mayfield not only shines a bright light on our topic's features but, throughout the book, he looks to fire the reader's imagination with hope—hope that loneliness is not the final state of affairs that any of us has to live with.

He begins by drawing the reader's attention to the impact of loneliness and the extent to which it reaches into our public domains and into the privacy of our souls. He deftly provides a stark account of where we find ourselves and the complex layers of life that contribute to the problem.

But Mark does not leave us there. For indeed, he is a clinician who knows of what he speaks; he does not live with the illusion that combatting our foe will be easy, nor does he offer a simple checklist of things to do that will somehow magically solve a complex problem. Rather, he does what any thoughtful clinician does: He offers himself—with vulnerability and precision—as a guide who deeply longs for his readers to tell their stories more truly, and so to live into the lives of beauty and goodness that they were destined for from the beginning.

Hence, he immerses us in the biblical narrative, setting us firmly in the context of God's story—one in which, despite the choices we have made over time that lead to painful alienation one from the other, he has no intention of leaving us where we are.

Throughout the book, Mark provides examples of real

FOREWORD

experience that capture our emotion while providing accompanying instruction to help us understand what those stories really mean. He winsomely and practically introduces us to the important themes of neuroscience and attachment that so effectively enable us to better understand God's intention for us as humans. He then helps us see how loneliness is ultimately symptomatic of our moving away from God's story as we try to cope with our own, on our own.

Finally—and joyfully—our author paves a beautiful, clear path of application: of the practices that enable us to make the difficult changes that will be necessary on our journey to wholeness. He weaves biblical wisdom with his work as a seasoned and humble mental health care provider to present to us a gift that is born out of the personal work that Mark has done and that is evident on the pages you read. He doesn't ask any of us to do something he has not been willing to do himself.

I know Mark Mayfield to be a man of integrity, a therapist of deep thirst for learning, and a man who is as kind as he is wise. He has the professional experience that anyone would want in their clinician—and he has the humility to know that he offers us his brokenness as much as anything on our road to healing. It is with this awareness of all that Mark hopes for you, the reader, to gain from this book that I commend it to your reading.

Read it with curiosity. Read it prepared to work. But mostly, read it in anticipation that the God of creation is coming to find you in your loneliness in order to transform you and the lives of those you will love as a result.

Curt Thompson, MD

Author of The Soul of Shame and Anatomy of the Soul

Introduction

*The most terrible poverty is loneliness,
and the feeling of being unloved.*

MOTHER TERESA

HAVE YOU EVER SLOWED DOWN, sat back, and watched people? I find it fascinating to observe people in their different environments. Maybe it's the counselor in me, or maybe it's the researcher, but I'm intrigued by body language, facial features and expressions, walk, dress, communication, and so on. Each feature tells a fascinating story if you know what to look for.

I recently traveled to Washington, DC, for a business trip, and during my time in between airports, planes, and taxis, a great deal of my time was spent observing people and their behaviors. I started to notice that almost everyone was looking down. Their shoulders were slumped, their faces were downcast, and their gazes were squarely on their mobile device or screen. I very rarely made eye contact with anyone, but when I did, the other person would

quickly look away, almost blushing with embarrassment. It was as if I could hear them thinking, *Oh! You're looking at me, and you see me; I'm not sure what to do with that!* Their eyes would quickly drop back to their device.

Inability to look a stranger in the eye is one thing, but inability to connect in a deep conversation with a friend or family member takes our disengagement to a whole different level. I see this happening everywhere I go. Next time you're at a "sit down" restaurant, take a look around and count how many people have their phones out and are disengaged from those at their table. There is little-to-no conversation and much distraction from being present.

Avoidance leads to disconnectedness. It reminds me of the Disney/Pixar movie *WALL-E*.¹ WALL-E is a garbage robot left on earth to clean up the extreme waste of the human race, who has destroyed the earth and left to find a better place to inhabit. Though I appreciate the "save the earth" messaging, I quickly picked up on the subversive undertones. WALL-E was accidentally taken up to space and deposited on a space shuttle filled with people who ate all the time and were constantly engaged with the latest technology. Thanks to lack of muscle use, they were unable to walk. It was not until WALL-E and EVE (another robot) disrupted the norm that people were able to look up and notice each other.

This movie was an eerie prophetic foreshadowing of what's beginning to happen in our culture. Ironically, *WALL-E* was released one year after the first iPhone came out. Since then, the foundation of our culture has changed. We are the most connected generation in history, yet we are also the loneliest generation. This is exemplified in a 2018 survey that revealed that 17 percent of those surveyed were lonely, while 54 percent struggled with aspects of loneliness.²

INTRODUCTION

Laying the blame of all our societal problems on a device is not realistic, but the newest technology certainly is representative of a bigger, more complex problem. As I consider the state of our country and our world, I'm perplexed by the statistics. Why, in a more advanced society, are we dying ten to fifteen years earlier than we were in past generations? Why is the suicide rate continuing to increase in spite of advanced prevention, treatment, and postvention³ efforts? Why is the addiction crisis still growing despite the hard-fought efforts of nonprofits, treatment centers, and government entities? Why are depression and anxiety on the rise, with no signs of slowing down? Why are heart disease, cardiovascular disease, and cancer worse now than they were a decade ago, despite so many medical "advancements"?

The answer can be both simple and complex. We are relational beings who need eye-to-eye, face-to-face contact and proximity on a regular basis. As a society, we are operating out of significant deficits.

Many of you might be reading this and thinking, *I'm not lonely! I've got a great spouse, a fantastic family, and friends. Why would I be lonely?* But deep down inside, you've experienced that nagging feeling of fear, anxiety, depression, or isolation. You've questioned when the last time you were truly seen as a person, loved for who you are, and valued as a unique human soul. Yes, bouts of loneliness are a common spiritual condition of humans, but prolonged loneliness is a sign of a deeper disconnect. In many ways, as a society, we've lost the ability to connect on a deep, messy, soul-seeing level. We've lost the ability to admit we need help and then ask for it. We're a lonely society, and with loneliness comes isolation, and with isolation comes death—in our mind, body, and spirit.

This doesn't have to be the way life ends. This book is meant to

THE PATH OUT OF LONELINESS

offer hope, to be a catalyst for change that is not based on the latest mental health fad or societal trends. *The Path out of Loneliness* is a real advocate for substantial change to reconnect people and help them be seen again.

The book is broken into three distinct parts. Part I explores the current and historical factors that brought us to this point. Part II engages in a conversation on the way it was originally designed. Part III discusses how to realign our lives so that we can change internally and, as a result, become change agents in our homes, neighborhoods, communities, and places of worship. For this to happen, we need to rethink and reimagine how to combat this loneliness epidemic.



Part I

THE PROBLEM

LONELINESS

The Basic Crisis of a Modern Society

To think that two bodies, crooked by life into question marks, when encountering one another did not form a heart. To do that, all we needed was to look each other in the eye, but you looked away.

ANNA JAE

Because Adam chose the pleasures of sin, humanity has inherited the pain of loneliness and the pain of separation from God and others. At its root, loneliness began in the garden of Eden, and we are all children of Eden.

PAUL MATTHIES, "ONLY THE LONELY"

I LOVE EPIC TRILOGIES. The *Lord of the Rings* trilogy by J. R. R. Tolkien is one of my favorites. (I'm a huge fan of the extended-version director's cut of the Peter Jackson adaptation, just in case there was any question or debate.) They were my favorite book series as a kid growing up, and the movies captured the attention to detail of my imagination. It was almost as if Peter Jackson were in my head as he directed the movies. What makes a trilogy like *The Lord of the Rings* so good? In my opinion, there are several key components:

1. solid, dynamic, and engaging characters;
2. a solid story line;
3. development of a problem that must be solved;

4. an epic struggle between good and evil;
5. a climax to the story that engages every aspect of your humanity (mind, body, spirit); and
6. resolution and redemption.

These components are woven into every minor and macro detail of Tolkien's work. Many other prolific writers have written epic stories similar to Tolkien's, which causes me to pause and wonder, *Why?* What if these stories are just reflections, echoes of a bigger story of good versus evil, of struggle, pain, loneliness, and redemption? What if these stories are the deep longings of our souls? The longings to be seen, to be known, to be loved, and to be valued?

Biblical Origins of Loneliness

The Bible is one of those epic stories, a story of love, loss, pain, sorrow, loneliness, rescue, and redemption. If you've never stopped to pick up a Bible and read through it, I'd encourage you to do so. The Bible tells the story of rescue and redemption that is weaved throughout history. A telling of souls lost and brought back to intentional love.

Loneliness, it turns out, enters the story very early. The creation narrative introduces us to several key characters. God, the protagonist, who existed before all things, effortlessly but intentionally spoke life into existence. As we see in Genesis chapter 1, God created the heavens and the earth, the land and the seas, the birds of the air, the fish of the sea, and the animals of the land. He looked around and saw that what he'd created was good, but something was missing. Relationship. Fellowship. Connection. Though these things were represented in the Trinity, it wasn't yet

LONELINESS

represented on earth. God created mankind in his image, “male and female he created them” (Genesis 1:27, ESV). I’ve read this story over and over, and each time, I’m overwhelmed. The God of the universe, of countless stars and galaxies, desired that we share in his creation. From the start, he wanted to be in an intimate, reciprocal relationship with us.

But the perfection of the original design didn’t last long. Adam and Eve quickly met the antagonist of the story, Satan, in the form of a serpent. Satan began to plant seeds of doubt into Adam and Eve, causing them to question God’s original design. The seed of deceit grew, and both Adam and Eve ate from the fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Let’s look at Genesis 3:7-10 (NIV), which contains several components that lay the foundation for our current loneliness epidemic:

Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves.

Then the man and his wife heard the sound of the LORD God as he was walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and they hid from the LORD God among the trees of the garden. But the LORD God called to the man, “Where are you?”

He answered, “I heard you in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid.”

In the Septuagint, the earliest Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures, the word used for “eyes” is *ophthalmos*, which refers both to literal and figurative sight. This means that their mind’s eye and their awareness of both good and evil was opened. This

awareness didn't lead to greater understanding; it led to greater fear and separation. God knew that the human intellect couldn't comprehend the mind of God, so it was his plan to protect them from this amount of knowledge and awareness. Instead, the planted lie of the serpent grew in Adam and Eve, and they thought they knew better. In that moment, separation, fear, anxiety, confusion, shame, and blame established the problem of loneliness. We've been searching for redemption ever since.

The Crisis Continues

“The eyes are the window to the soul.” I've heard this phrase my whole life. When was the last time you slowed down and noticed someone? Was it your spouse? A friend? A colleague? A stranger? Think back—do you have that mental picture in your head? Now, focus on their eyes. What story did they tell? Joy? Sorrow? Hope? Despair? Confusion? Contentment? If you didn't hold their gaze long enough to determine this, why? Were you uncomfortable? Scared? Uncertain?

Whatever your reasons, you aren't alone. The average length of a mutual gaze is three seconds.¹ *Three seconds!* Three seconds to determine how someone is doing. Seems impossible, right? Well, in all actuality, it is! There is little-to-no possibility of assessing the health and well-being of someone if we're unwilling or unable to peer into their soul.

Why are the eyes so important? The eyes have a way of telling a story where words often fail. Eyes will tell you if a smile is real or not because eyes will often smile first. Pupil dilatation is a sign of engagement and interest. A mutual gaze is a sign of affection and love. Though the appropriate length of time a person should hold

a gaze is debated, eye-to-eye connection is an important tool in the development of relationships and attachment.

Many years before I was a counselor or had a doctorate, I was a youth and family pastor at a small church in the Rocky Mountains of Colorado. As a young, single, recent college graduate, I found this an ideal job—if you could even call it a job. I was paid to hang out with middle school and high school youth, create programs, teach them about the Scriptures, and walk with them along life’s journey. To top it off, I lived within fifteen minutes of four of the best ski resorts in the country. Part of the fun was getting to play in the two-hundred-plus inches of snow every year by getting first tracks (the first ski run of the day after a big snow). It was an amazing place to live!

One of my routines each week was to meet with my students at the local main-street coffee shop. I’d set aside around two hours for students to “drop in” for coffee and conversation with their youth pastor. Some weeks, I’d have five to eight students show up; other weeks, I’d have one or two. One week, I had only one show up—a kid named Tre.² Tre was one of my ninth-grade students. Born and raised in this mountain town, he was a moderately extroverted young man with a very dry sense of humor, one that was mature beyond his years. He made many adults laugh while causing his peers to scratch their heads. If this wasn’t enough to make him stand out, his tall, lanky stature solidified his awkwardness. If you met Tre for the first time, you’d assume everything was okay as he presented himself as having it all together. He played off his awkwardness with a skilled sense of humor that could get a room full of adults laughing within a matter of seconds. But it was all a diversion, a carefully planned defense mechanism to keep people from getting too close.

I got to know Tre over the course of a couple of years and learned that his parents were first-generation entrepreneurs looking to prove themselves and achieve status in this rich mountain town. Tre's dad owned several trendy restaurants in the area, while Tre's mom was a successful realtor. Thus, Tre's parents were rarely home. An only child, Tre was often left by himself to finish his homework, eat dinner, do chores, and put himself to bed. Tre came to every event we put on at the church and was very active in the youth group, but he kept people at a distance.

This was my first one-on-one with Tre, and it was a divine arrangement. Tre walked into the coffee shop, surveyed the room, and quickly realized he was going to be by himself with me. He briefly made eye contact, and I could almost hear his mind screaming, *Great! No one else is here. That means I have to actually talk with Mark.* Before he could escape, I jumped up out of my seat. "Tre!" I exclaimed, "Good to see you today!" I motioned to the counter, "What do you want? I'm buying." I said.

Caught a bit off guard, Tre approached the counter and ordered a large milkshake. I ordered the same. As we returned to our seats, I asked the generic question, "How are you?" He briefly looked at me and then quickly looked down to find his straw. After taking a large sip of his milkshake, he looked up and replied, "Okay," in a forced jovial voice.

Pausing for a second and holding his gaze for a couple more seconds, I could tell something was slightly off today. "Okay?" I responded. "That doesn't sound convincing." I paused and asked, "What's really going on?"

I could tell Tre realized I'd seen right through him. For a moment, he looked trapped. His eyes darted back and forth as he looked for a way to avoid the deeper question. Without any

diversion, Tre took a deep breath and proceeded to say, “Mark, I’m . . . I’m . . . so lonely.”

As he said those words, he broke down and started to cry right there in the bustling coffee shop. I sat with Tre for several hours that day, allowing him to be truly seen and heard for the first time in his life. He revealed that he’d been fighting loneliness for several months, and while he was not currently suicidal, he had, at times, contemplated suicide. He went on to disclose that he’d begun experimenting with drugs, attempting to numb the pain.

I was honored that Tre shared these things with me, yet it angered me that he’d had to carry this burden by himself for so long. In the days and weeks following our coffee-shop conversation, I was able to support Tre by facilitating a couple of heart-to-heart conversations with his parents. Tre was able to express how he was feeling, and, to my surprise, his parents were able to listen with minimal defensiveness. They came up with a plan where, after school, Tre would join his dad several times a week at the restaurants, and he would join his mom on several of her showings throughout the week. They also agreed to have dinner together three times a week, and both mom and dad agreed to take Sundays off.

This was a great outcome to a potentially volatile situation. I often wonder what would’ve happened to Tre if he and I hadn’t met for coffee that day. Or if I hadn’t slowed down to pay attention to the warning signs. Or if I’d accepted his superficial responses. What would have been the outcome? Would he have taken his life? I shudder at the possibility.

My focus then shifts to wondering how many people in my life are currently suffering silently and are unable or unwilling to ask for help. As I look around and observe others in our culture,

I wonder how many people are silently suffering in loneliness and wandering about in despair. *Why do we see asking for help as a sign of weakness instead of a sign of strength?* In my humble opinion, this question is the problem with the basic crisis of our contemporary society.

What Is Loneliness?

What does it mean to be lonely? How do we nail down a comprehensive and universal definition of loneliness? Defining terms can be a laborious process that takes years of research. I want to make this simple, so instead of throwing a wad of statistics and studies at you, I'm just going to give you questions to consider.

First, I want you to ground yourself in this moment, the one right now as you are reading these words on this page. Sit up in your chair and have your feet firmly planted on the ground. (I'm serious—do it! This posture will help you focus.)

Now, when you hear the word *lonely*, what is the first thing that comes to mind? Is it being alone? Isolated? Fearful? Is it loss? Or grief? What is it?

When that word or thought came to your mind, what did you feel in your body? Panic? Anxiety? Depression? Sorrow? Sadness? Where did you feel it in your body? Your head? Chest? Shoulders? Stomach?

When I think about loneliness, I think about relational isolation. I think about being misunderstood, dismissed, unseen, invalidated, or invaluable. When I feel it in my body, I feel it in several places. First, I feel it in my throat, like I have something stuck there and I cannot speak or I have lost my voice. Second, I feel it in the pit of my stomach, almost as if I were riding up a roller coaster, getting ready for it to drop.

Dictionary definitions of *lonely* yield vague descriptions:

- “Being without company.”
- “Cut off from others.”
- “Not frequented by human beings.”
- “Sad from being alone.”
- “Producing a feeling of bleakness or desolation.”³

Such definitions do not paint the depth of the actuality of the feeling or experience. For many of us, our definition of loneliness is born of our experience. I want you to connect with that definition and hold it loosely as you read this book. Your experience is your lens and current reality, and it’s valid. I will share my own definition of loneliness at the conclusion of this chapter.

Unique feelings accompany loneliness, and, in my opinion, those feelings are specific to the one experiencing it. To begin to develop a deeper understanding of this topic, I created an online survey for individuals to fill out anonymously. I asked five questions:

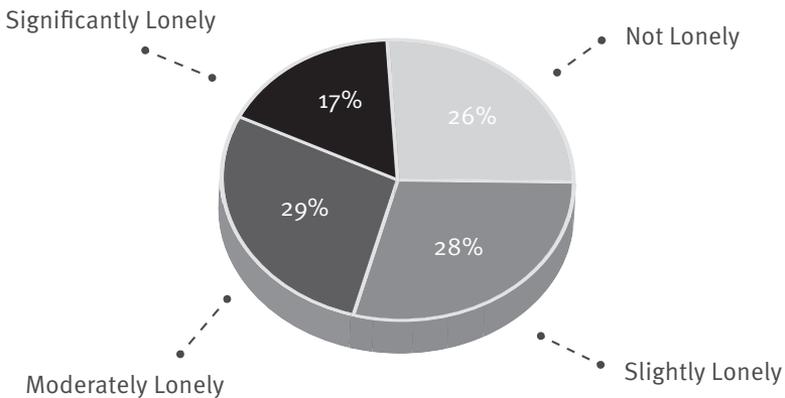
1. On a scale of 1 (not lonely) to 5 (very lonely), how lonely do you feel on a daily basis?
2. In your own words, how would you define *loneliness*?
3. When you feel lonely, what do you typically do to feel better?
4. Why do you think loneliness is on the rise in our culture?
5. If you had a magic wand and could fix the loneliness around you, what would you do?

THE PATH OUT OF LONELINESS

I recognize that there's not much of a scientific framework in this survey, and the answers won't produce a statistical analysis of loneliness, but that's okay. I wanted to understand the lived experiences of the individuals answering the survey. I wanted to hear what was said and observe what was not said. There were 168 participants from 28 US states and 3 additional countries. Here's what I found (see Figure 1).

On a scale of 1 (not lonely) to 5 (very lonely), 26 percent of people surveyed said they weren't lonely (1), 28 percent said they were slightly lonely (2), 28.6 percent said they were moderately lonely (3), and 17.3 percent said they were significantly lonely (4/5). The average overall loneliness score was a 2.4 out of 5.

Loneliness Scale



Being a geeky researcher, I wanted to see if other studies out there would correlate to my small survey. Cigna, a major player in the insurance world, did a loneliness survey of twenty thousand

LONELINESS

adults ages eighteen and older.⁴ They found that on a loneliness scale ranging from 20 (less lonely) to 80 (very lonely), the average of all responses was 44, which is very similar to my survey results. They found that:

- 54 percent of people surveyed felt no one knew them well.
- 46 percent reported feeling alone, with 47 percent feeling left out.
- 43 percent lacked companionship.
- 43 percent felt their relationships weren't meaningful.
- 43 percent felt isolated from others.
- 39 percent no longer felt close to anyone.
- 59 percent felt like their interests and ideas weren't shared by others.
- 36 percent didn't feel like they had anyone to turn to.

Though these statistics are interesting, they don't get to the heart of the matter: lived experiences. Circling back to my survey, I want to focus on two of the five questions. I asked participants to define loneliness. Here are some of their answers⁵:

“Feeling despair at times, exhaustion, immobil[ity], keeping to yourself, not knowing how to fix it.”

“Feeling sad, hopeless, self-isolation, depression.”

“Feeling like no one cares for you.”

“The absence of human connection. You can physically have people around you but experience no movement from them toward you.”

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“Feeling isolated, even when surrounded by people.”

“The absence of deeper connection and understanding by others.”

“The only sounds you can hear are your own echoes.”

“Feeling like you are all alone mentally and emotionally. Even if you are married or surrounded by people, you still feel like no one really knows the real you.”

“Not feeling seen, heard, or known.”

“No one to share my heart with.”

“Loneliness can feel much like depression, though I wonder if it has a sharper edge to it that is personal, as if you have been singled out as being unworthy of companionship, friendship, or love.”

There were many more responses that could've been placed here, but these captured the essence and depth of the rest of the 168 participants. I found it interesting that a major theme was *not feeling seen, heard, or understood*. We'll talk more about this in later chapters.

I then asked the question: Why? Why are so many souls in our world struggling with loneliness? Why is this epidemic growing? And why is it moving to a pandemic, with no signs of slowing? Here are some of the answers to that question:

“We are so obsessed with posting and getting likes that we mistake reactions and comments for relationship. We are so

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unused to conversation that even the thought of talking with a friend can produce anxiety.”

“Too much electronic entertainment and not enough in-person connection.”

“Social media is an illusion of connection. The youngest generation reports people don’t care, ghosting them for something better.”

“We overextend what we perceive to be our authentic selves into the universe via social media, which creates this illusion to ourselves and others that we are flying high, life is super-duper fantastic. This can lead to a feeling of being lonely because we have nothing to share in real life with others. Our culture seems to believe, by posting our lives online, that we create community and connection. If anything, I think it isolates us even more because we have nothing left to talk about to an actual person who may care.”

“Social media is a huge cause . . . people have more ‘friends,’ but less connection.”

“The disintegration of the traditional family structure and traditional Christian values.”

“I blame the rise of social media. We are no longer a society that meets face-to-face anymore, but one in which we have ‘conversations’ that consist of short posts on a social media platform or a few words in a text message. We don’t hear people’s voices or see their faces when they talk. We don’t look people in the eyes and have a conversation; instead, we hide behind a keyboard.”

“Connection isn’t a shared value.”

“People aren’t talking about their feelings with others because they are ashamed or are afraid they will be judged.”

“We don’t know how to talk with each other. We stay in the shallows, or we get angry. We remain unknown and unseen, and we don’t see or truly know others.”

“Because true human connection takes vulnerability, which is hard for many.”

“Over the years, people have been encouraged to become more independent (which is not bad) but also to follow a dogma that ‘I can do it alone, and I don’t need to depend on others.’”

I was blown away at how similar these answers were: 168 participants across 28 US states and 3 additional countries, and there’s a basic agreement that our rise in loneliness is due to social media, a lack of vulnerability, and a genuine lack of relational connection. I guess we have the answer, and I can end the book here, right?

I wish the answer were that simple, but the bigger problem is that we know what the issues are, but we still aren’t doing much about it. Why? Is it fear? Apathy? And where does this fear or apathy come from? I believe the lack of response to loneliness is linked to a systematic misunderstanding of the value of human connection, mixed with a fiercely independent streak that directly leads to a selfish, “me-centric” mindset.

The “I Do It!” Independent Spirit

Where does the independent spirit come from? I ask this question of my counseling students during their very first semester. The

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class is Human Growth and Development, and the pervasive question in this class is the conversation about nurture versus nature: whether we get our attitudes, behaviors, emotional responses, mental acuity, and mental health from genetics (nature) or from the way we were raised, cultural factors, and caregiver responses (nurture). To emphasize just how gray this topic can become, I split my class into two groups and have them prepare a debate. One group focuses on nurture, while the other group focuses on nature. I instruct them to pour themselves into the topic, cite resources, give examples, and share opinions. I give them ninety minutes to plan, research, and discuss and then ninety minutes to debate. I've been teaching this class off and on for the past ten years, and the results are always the same: a stalemate. Why? Because both sides have valid points.

Once the debate is complete, we discuss whether the following scenario is primarily due to nature or nurture:

You're the parent of a four-year-old girl. It's Sunday morning, and you're getting ready to go to church. In preparation for leaving on time, you laid out your daughter's clothes the night before. This morning, the choice of clothes is not the issue; it's the speed at which she's putting them on. Finally, she's dressed, but she's having a hard time putting on her shoes. Yes, they're Velcro, but that's not the problem. The issue is she can't figure out which shoe goes on which foot. In your haste, you bend down to help, and she reacts by pulling away and saying, "I do it!" As you insist, her reaction gets stronger. She begins to scream, "I DO IT! I DO IT!"

Is the little girl's desire to complete the task a result of nurture or nature? Of course, from our outside perspective, the answer is "yes."

Autonomy (I am able to do this by myself) and interdependence (we do this together) are topics that we don't often consider as the cause of loneliness. These concepts can be illustrated through the example of marriage. Sarah (my wife) and I grew up in what we thought were very similar families. Both of our families were in some form of ministry (e.g., Christian schoolteachers), were actively involved in the church, emphasized hard work and relationship, and the list could go on. Entering the marriage, we thought that our similarities would allow for a smooth transition into married life. We were wrong! Married life was much harder than we initially expected, for a couple of reasons:

1. We brought our independent spirits into the marriage. Instinctively, we thought that the way we were raised was the way it should be, and we didn't have a healthy concept of each other.
2. We didn't understand the importance of the reciprocal relationship between autonomy (self) and interdependence (us), and because of this, significant loneliness crept in.

I'll break down these concepts—and how they contribute to the increase of loneliness—later in this book.

Cultural Norms—the “Shoulds”

Loneliness is not the absence of relationship. That's isolation—the physical separation of both person and relationship. Loneliness can be linked to cultural norms. When I was pursuing my master's

degree from Denver Seminary, I worked several jobs to provide for my family. One of those jobs was being an inner-city youth minister at a local community center. There was a diverse population of immigrant families, but the main population this organization served was the Latino/Hispanic population, many of whom immigrated from Central America. Traditionally, this culture, like many others, is very family-centric. Family structures appear to be loving, welcoming, and engaging environments ideal for relationship and community.

My first mistake was assuming that loneliness wasn't a problem in that community. My second mistake was verbalizing that in one of our youth-group meetings. After a night of games and a short Bible study, one of the high school students came up to me to talk. "Mister Mark" (as they called me), "thank you for tonight," Tony stated. "But I'm struggling with something you said."

As he talked, he worked hard to avoid eye contact. "Tony," I said, "help me understand."

"On the outside looking in," Tony told me, "I can see how you'd assume everything is good, but it isn't. I feel very alone." Tony proceeded to tell me how overwhelmed and ignored he felt in his family. As a first-generation American, he was caught between his culture of origin, being loyal to his family, and wanting to be part of the culture he was living in. In Tony's story, multiple factors played a part in compounding his loneliness.

Loneliness knows no cultural bounds. It can and does affect everyone at some point in their journey. Every culture and subculture throughout history has a list of "shoulds" and "should nots"—expectations that you just know without being told—that often overlook the uniqueness and specific needs of individuals. Think about it: What were your shoulds and should nots growing up?

Every household has a culture, and it's made up of many factors, such as race, socioeconomic status, religion, denomination, education, and so on. Your culture directly or indirectly taught you how to view emotions, religion, faith, mental health, and relationships, and that plays a direct role in your present struggle with loneliness.

The question becomes: How do we respect culture while eradicating loneliness? This will take intentionality, vulnerability, and reflection.

Conclusion

I'm sure many of us can relate to Tre and Tony. We've all experienced loneliness to some degree and have a basic framework for what it feels like. Our personal experiences and perceptions might vary, but there's commonality in the fact that most, if not all, of us have experienced some form of "being alone."

For this book, I believe it's important to have a baseline definition of loneliness. You may have your own definition, but I want to give you mine so that we can be on the same page moving forward into the following chapters. I define *loneliness* as:

The state of being unseen or unnoticed relationally, mentally, emotionally, physically, or spiritually. It can be driven by lack of purpose or meaning, relationship, and/or identity and is marked by a deep sense of hopelessness.

You picked up this book for a reason, and I'm grateful you're joining me in this exploratory conversation. Something systematically must change; we must confront the mental, emotional, physical, and spiritual roots of loneliness. If we don't—or if we choose to

ignore the warning signs within us and within our communities—this crisis will continue to worsen, and precious lives will be lost.

Let's explore answers together. I'm passionate about this conversation, and I'm willing to take the risk of starting it. Thank you for joining me! What I will ask as you read this book is that you stay humble, teachable, and vulnerable. Take time to ask questions and reflect, wrestle with this conversation, and allow it to change you where necessary.

Questions for Reflection

1. What's your experience with loneliness been?
2. How would you answer the questions from my online survey?
 - a. On a scale of 1 (not lonely) to 5 (very lonely), how lonely do you feel on a daily basis?
 - b. In your own words, how would you define *loneliness*?
 - c. When you feel lonely, what do you typically do to feel better?
 - d. Why do you think loneliness is on the rise in our culture?
 - e. If you had a magic wand and could fix the loneliness around you, what would you do?
3. Who else in your life should be reading this book? Give them a copy, and read it with them.