

# Talking About The L-Word



Loneliness can hit us no matter how many people there are in our lives. *WW* dilemmas expert **Keren Smedley** answers your questions about this emotional condition

**I**ssues around loneliness always figure in the top three themes of the letters I receive from *Woman's Weekly* readers. Loneliness is not the same as being alone; it's an emotional state where we feel overwhelmingly isolated and empty. It's often more than just a longing for company or someone to do something with. If we're lonely, our self-esteem is usually pretty low and we feel convinced that there's something wrong with us. As we tend to feel socially unskilled and inadequate at these moments, we're less assertive, convincing ourselves we've become invisible. This leads to us becoming reluctant to do anything new or make any changes, and so a vicious cycle is created.

However, as with any emotional state, we can change things – sometimes on our own and at other times with professional help. I hope the selection of letters here helps you to manage during any times of loneliness.

## How would you like to see yourself?

**I**retired recently from a very busy job I really enjoyed. I often stayed late, so I rarely went out, except occasionally with my work pals, and I savoured my quiet weekends. I live on my own and I thought I'd go on seeing my work colleagues, but that has rarely happened. Over the years, I lost touch with my other friends. I now feel very isolated and a bit scared about the future.

**T**hink about how you'd like your future to be and write it down. You know where you are and now know where you hope to be. The next step is to work out how to meet your goal. List the activities you could start to increase your social life. Decide which you'll do first, and by when. Prioritise and diarise the others. All that's left now is for you to work through your list and build the social life you want.

## Change takes time to settle

**W**e always wanted to move to the seaside and when I retired, we finally did. We really love the place, but what I hadn't realised was how hard it would be to meet people. We talked the move through with our children beforehand, and they said it would be great as they'd have a weekend retreat. In reality, they visit very rarely and I miss them and the grandchildren, as well as my old friends, but we can't afford to go back.

**Y**ou're not alone in dreaming of a new life and then finding you miss family and friends. You say you can't afford to go back but do you really want to? You obviously like where you are, but need to increase your social group and find a way to see more of family and friends. Talk to your children – perhaps you can go and stay with them for a bit and your grandchildren can come and stay with you. Change takes time to bed in. Try joining local groups, too, and I'm sure that slowly you'll meet new people and create a richer life.

## Look into respite care

**M**y husband has Alzheimer's and is less and less able to be around people. None of our friends want to come and visit and he struggles when we're out. I don't feel I can leave him and I'm becoming isolated. We used to be good together, but he can't connect with me any more. I'm so lonely.

**T**hat must be very hard. It's sad that your friends feel unable to visit. Do you know why? People can be embarrassed as they're unsure how to behave, or they're uncertain you really want visitors. It would be good to talk to them. You say you can't leave him alone, which I understand, but does it always need to be you who's there? Talk to your GP about respite arrangements, so your husband will have company and be safe, and you can recharge your energy by seeing friends and doing some nice things for yourself.

## Don't knock what you've got

**I**'m really fed up with life at the moment. It seems to me that everyone else is meeting friends, having them to visit or going to stay with old friends, and having a better time than me. I feel a bit lonely (and envious) of them. I have a good time with my husband, whose company I enjoy, and I see quite a lot of my children, but I still feel I'm missing out.

**I**f you were having the perfect life, what would you be doing? And what's stopping you from doing it? It's very easy to fantasise about what's going on in everyone else's lives. It's also very easy to believe the grass is always greener. You've no idea what's going on behind others' closed doors. Spend your life imagining everyone else is having a better time and you'll forget to live your own life. If there are things missing from yours, come up with a plan – for example, by asking a few friends round to dinner or to stay. They'll invite you back and your social life will improve. Also, don't underestimate what you've got. It sounds pretty good to me!

## Re-learn how to talk to one another

**I**'ve been married for more than 20 years. Our children are now all in their late teens and my husband and I are often at home alone. I've realised we've stopped communicating about anything other than the house and the kids, and there's less and less to say. Last week, we went out to dinner and just sat there in silence until I started to cry. Then he sat in silence, unsure what to say.

**Y**ou raise an important issue: the fact that we're often at our loneliest when we're with others and there's no connection. We all lead such busy lives, especially when bringing up a family and working, that we literally forget to communicate with each other. It sounds like you and your husband need to re-learn how to talk to one another. The first step is to

acknowledge there's a problem and then start to flex that muscle. Firstly, agree to talk to each other for 10 minutes a day (make sure you're doing nothing else at the same time) and then slowly build it up until you're able to spend time happily connecting. If you get stuck, you'd benefit from some counselling. Contact Relate via relate.org.uk or by calling 0300 100 1234.

## A bereavement counsellor can help

**M**y husband died last year after a long illness. My friends and family were amazingly supportive, but now I feel increasingly lonely. When I go out, I dread coming home to an empty house. I don't want to be alone but of course I am and maybe this is

how it's going to be. How can I feel alright about it?

**I**'m sorry about your loss. It takes time to grieve and find a new way of being without your partner. What are the things you enjoy doing that you can do on your own? Do at least one a day. Also, think

about how you can fill the emptiness at home, such as playing music or switching on the radio. When you're ready, join some groups where you can make new friends and possibly meet a new partner. It may help to talk to a bereavement counsellor – contact Cruse on 0844 477 9400.