

Kimberly Brown

*In It Together: Kindness through Crisis*

Part 2: “When You're Feeling Lonely”

May 8, 2021



Welcome back to the second week of our Dharma Talk series, "In It Together: Kindness through Crisis." Today our topic is loneliness. This year during the pandemic, for many of us, has been the most lonely time of our lives. We've been isolating at home and we haven't been able to socialize or visit family members. Even going to the grocery store or the park we have to stay six feet apart from everyone else. It's very hard. I have close friends and family members I've not seen in over a year and I miss them, and it's likely you have too.

If you live alone you are probably especially affected by this situation, and I encourage you to take very good care of yourself. That's for all of us, but especially those of you at home alone. Make time each day to turn off your devices and do something you enjoy—walk, take a bath, cook, or read a book. Take a few minutes everyday to just be silent and reconnect with yourself. Take care of your body and physical health and keep your house tidy, so you're not living in a disordered place. For those of you living along, it's especially important to keep in contact with other people. Be sure to connect with someone via phone or text or Zoom at least once a day.

Now whether you live by yourself or not, you might really be missing other people and feeling alone and sad at times. This happens during a crisis and not during a crisis too. The truth of our lives is that we need one other and we're all dependent on each other. So, of course you might be feeling lonesome at times and wishing for contact with other people. This is perfectly normal, and especially now during this pandemic. And it's a painful sensation.

You might not even know that what you're feeling is loneliness—you might just feel sad, empty, lost, alone, unwanted, or rejected. When I'm lonely I feel very restless and dissatisfied with everything. Sometimes when loneliness arises, we want to find a reason for this painful feeling—to find someone to blame for it. If you're like me, you might become self-critical or blame yourself—“No one likes me, something must be wrong with me,” or “Maybe if I were taller or smarter or more successful I won't feel so alone.” Those are very painful thoughts and they are not true. They just create more suffering and struggle, and sometimes looking for blame leads us to avoid the underlying painful feelings.

Now, as we talked about last week, kindness is a form of skillful means, *upaya*. It's a way to orient your thoughts, words, and actions to alleviate suffering and to prevent causing more. Loneliness is a type of suffering, and we can open our hearts with patience and attention to it to ease it.

We know all suffering has a cause. We know this from the four noble truths, the foundational teachings of Buddhism—there is suffering, there are causes of suffering, there is an end to suffering, and a path to take us there. We also know this just from looking around. The cause of the suffering of loneliness is from a type of ignorance. It's from what Buddhist's call a “wrong view,” a belief that we're all alone in life and separate from other living beings. But even if you live by yourself, or if you're in a cave doing a meditation retreat alone, you're never separate

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from everyone else. You're supported and connected to countless other creatures all the time. Right now there are living beings all around you all the time, and that includes *yourself*. Deep loneliness is forgetting that you can always connect with your own heart and that there is nothing inherently wrong with you.

This is the paradox to loneliness: if you can connect with yourself you will feel less alone. Even if you're still by yourself and no other people are with you, if you can experience what's arising in you, you will feel less lonely. This is a way of being a good friend to yourself and caring for yourself.

Connecting with yourself is simply paying attention—to what's arising in your senses, your thoughts, and your emotions—without pushing anything away, grabbing at anything, or ignoring what's happening. It's a type of allowing. It's saying to yourself “It's okay to experience whatever is happening.” You don't have to be better or get rid of your judgements or make anything happen, you're fine just as you are. This is a way you can show yourself kindness. In my life, there have been times when someone has just listened to me or sat with me quietly and didn't give me advice, or try to fix me, or try to make me feel differently—and that kind of attention was very loving and healing. You may have had this experience too, and now, connecting with yourself, you're offering the same kind of love and kindness to yourself.

Recognizing all the support you receive from other beings, and that you're not alone ever, is also simply paying attention. Noticing that your clothes were made by others and delivered to you by other people. Even a glass of water was brought to you through the efforts of so many. There are countless city employees who maintain the water source and pipes. All of our food is cultivated by farmers and delivered by truck drivers. And we can use our senses and attention to notice other beings too—just listening and seeing, we will notice living beings to our right, left, in front, behind, and above and below us too.

Let's do a brief practice so we can learn to reconnect with our hearts and minds and with so many others, gently and wisely.

But before we begin, I want to encourage you to truly notice what is happening with you. If you're someone experiencing overwhelming sadness and disinterest in life; if you're having really difficulty coping with everything—sleeping all the time, not eating or overeating, just don't care about anything—then I encourage you to reach out to a mental health professional. I'm a Buddhist student and meditation has helped me so much, and so has psychotherapy. So don't be afraid to reach out and ask for help when you need it, it's very useful. It's a skillful means and it works together with contemplative techniques.

So let's do a meditation together, with an intention to cultivate kindness for ourselves. Take a minute to find a comfortable seat. Just like last week, you don't have to sit in front of your computer. You can sit in a chair, you can lie down on a couch, you can sit on the floor. But I

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would like you to sit, stand, or lie down near a window if possible; I would like you to be able to hear the outside world. Don't look at your phone or speak, and stop moving or looking around. Get still.

Pause. Settle in, and take a few breaths, conscious breaths, at your own pace. Don't force it. You can close your eyes if you like, or you can keep them softly open with an unfocused gaze. Bringing your attention to your body, noticing your feet, seat, belly. Adopting an attitude of friendliness, and treating yourself as you might treat a friend who is struggling, with real attention, caring, openness, and non-judgement. Allowing sound to enter your ears.

Begin to notice what's arising. You might notice places of tension or tightness in your body, warmth, ease, coolness, pain, pulsing. You might notice thoughts, images, memories, or conversations in your head; you might be planning or remembering. Whatever is arising is fine. Just allow it to arise and don't get tangled up in it. Let it come and let it go—thoughts, sensations, emotions. Noticing your emotions—sadness, loneliness, annoyance, peace, joy, excitement—again, let it all arise and letting it all go. Allowing yourself just to be with yourself and your experience. In this way you can let life unfold with kindness and openness. We're being present with what's arising without having to ignore anything or react.

Now bring your attention to your heart center, the center of your chest, allowing whatever is arising to arise. Make a connection with yourself. You can imagine you're looking in the mirror or just getting a sense of yourself here with you. And say this phrase silently to yourself, “May I be happy, healthy, and safe.” “May I be happy, healthy, and safe.” “May I be happy, healthy, and safe.” Just taking a few seconds to give this phrase to yourself like you're giving yourself a gift. “May I be happy, healthy, and safe.”

Now start to notice the sounds around you. First the sounds outside—birds, automobiles, human voices, wind. Allow the sounds to enter your ears—you don't have to “listen” or do anything, just experiencing these outside noises, allowing yourself to hear them. They might be pleasant, unpleasant, or boring. It's okay.

Now, notice sounds near you—the washing machine, your roommate walking in the hall, water running in the bathroom, the neighbor's television, the whoosh of your breath. Again, you don't have to “listen” or do anything, just experiencing these nearby indoor noises, allowing yourself to hear them. Just rest here for a moment with these sounds.

As these sounds from outside and inside wash over you, you can recognize that most if not all of these sounds are made by other living creatures. You can offer them this phrase, “May we be happy, healthy, and safe.” “May we be happy, healthy, and safe.” “May we be happy, healthy, and safe.” Just taking a moment to include yourself and everyone you can hear in this generous, kind gift. “May we be happy, healthy, and safe.”

You can let go of these phrases and notice your feet, your seat, your belly. Relaxing your

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shoulder blades. You can take a couple of conscious breaths. As we conclude this meditation, take a moment to appreciate your time, your efforts, and your good heart, saying “thank you” to yourself. I encourage you to practice this whenever you feel lonely or sad. You can do it for as short or as long as you like. We just did this for seven or eight minutes; you can do it for 30 minutes or you can do it for five.

Next week, we’ll discuss boredom. What is it? Can we get curious about it? Thank you again for today’s practice. I rejoice in your good hearts and wisdom.