

# All by YOURSELF?

Feeling lonely? You're not the only one. Therapists are calling it the 'silent epidemic'. And it's young women who are really suffering.

*t*his summer, in front of her horrified family and a sceptical public, Cheryl Cole attempted to resuscitate her relationship with ex-husband and five-time cheat Ashley.

The explanation leaked by 'friends'? That she was lonely. She may have legions of fans, but she felt friendless and isolated by her fame.

She's not alone. In an age of frantic social networking, one in 10 people suffers from long-term loneliness. And it's hitting the people you'd least expect hardest; a recent survey found that the young worry more about loneliness than the elderly: 21% of those aged between 18 and 24 said that it was one of their main worries, as compared to just 8% of the over-55s. Now studies are showing that loneliness is as bad for your health as smoking; lack of connection raises the blood pressure, ups stress levels and ruins sleeping patterns.

I should know. During the 18 months I lived in Jo'burg, I suffered from intense loneliness, and it came with real, physical symptoms: I developed insomnia, and rarely slept before 3am. After nine months, my hair started to fall out.



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It wasn't always like this. Like many of those surveyed, I wasn't the awkward loner of popular imagination, or an elderly woman stranded on the fringes of society. I was 28, with a good job, a close family, and a life in England that I loved. I lived with four friends, and our house was always busy; weekends consisted of noisy nights out. I broke up with my boyfriend of six years, and started seeing someone else four days later. I had no idea how to be alone. When your life is that full, you never need to learn.

But when I met my new boyfriend, and we moved to Jo'burg for his job, I said goodbye to all that. Transposed to a country where I knew no one, I learnt that popularity doesn't travel. Always socially lazy, I struggled to make friends. It didn't help that as a freelance writer, I worked from home, and as a woman who didn't drive, I was virtually housebound. At first, my boyfriend tried to set me up with the wives of colleagues, but as my sense of isolation increased, I lost the confidence to talk to strangers. Eventually he gave up. He often travelled for work, and I spent the long hours alone writing, or with our dogs.

On my 30th birthday, I woke up by myself, then went for a pedicure. The therapists in the salon had spelt 'Happy Birthday' out on the floor in rose petals. They were the only people to say it to me all day. When I saw it, I burst into tears, but didn't tell them why. Because loneliness is a bruise on the bone, an ache you learn to hide. People think it's catching.

'There's a huge stigma attached to loneliness,' confirms Emily White, author of *Lonely: Learning to Live with Solitude*. 'People prefer to pretend their loneliness is depression, since depression is so much less stigmatised.'

'People are ashamed to admit to being lonely, because it implies you have failed in some way,' agrees author Kamin Mohammadi, who opted for self-imposed exile in Florence to finish her book *The Cypress Tree*. 'Failed to find love, or enrich yourself with close friendships or interesting pastimes.'

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This sense of stigma means we can't talk about it – the one thing that might salve our pain. And while this will be debilitating for either gender, evidence suggests that lonely women suffer more than lonely men: 'Talk is the way women process their emotions,' explains counsellor Mary Ovenstone. 'When we stop sharing our feelings through conversation, we start to shut down emotionally. The female brain generates oxytocin through talk and touch. It's very stressful for the female brain to be cut off and alone.'

Despite this basic need for connection, solitude is a growing trend: levels of loneliness – along with the number of single-person households – have increased in recent years. 'We live in small, individual units, whereas before we used to live in extended families,' says Ovenstone. 'Young women choose careers over early marriage, so the need for companionship is no longer met by their husbands.'

And, says White, 'we used to belong to clubs, unions, church groups... Now we're more likely to be on our own. For many that will translate into a greater degree of loneliness.'

The way we live has changed, but our attitudes are lagging. It's acceptable to search for a partner, but there's still something embarrassing about deliberately setting out to find friends. Friends, it seems, should flock to you spontaneously, no matter what your circumstances.

Ovenstone reckons we should reframe solitude and draw the distinction

between being alone, and being lonely. 'Every woman should have patches of time in her life that she does spend on her own.'

We'll all be alone at some point. Perhaps we could stop treating loneliness as a shameful secret, and accept it as a state we've all experienced?

It's also worth remembering that while long-haul loneliness can create lasting problems, periods alone can change you for the better. Researchers have now found that it's not *being* lonely, but *staying* lonely that's the problem. For my part, I'll always be glad of my long, lonely sojourn in South Africa. It transformed me: from someone needy, into someone self-sufficient. Strong, or at least, stronger. In life, there won't always be someone to turn to, nor should there be. And it feels good to know that the next time I find myself utterly alone, I'll have the wherewithal to face down my problems. All by myself. ❖

### Solitude on the big screen

Films often portray life as one long Abercrombie & Fitch advert, full of effortless friendships with attractive people. By contrast, lonely characters are shown to be unsympathetic; their solo status, it's implied, is their own fault.



#### Notes on a Scandal

Spiteful, cynical, lonely schoolteacher Barbara Covett (Judi Dench) traps beguiling colleague Sheba Hart (Cate Blanchett) into friendship, with disastrous results.

#### The Social Network

Facebook co-creator Mark Zuckerberg is portrayed as an outsider who forges an online revolution that connects everyone – but leaves him friendless.



#### Lost in Translation

Trapped in an alien city, neglected newlywed Charlotte finds that just because you're in a relationship, doesn't mean you won't be lonely.

