LONELINESS

Almost everyone is lonely sometimes,
but this common feeling arises not from a person's circumstance,
but from how he decides to interpret his situation.

CARIN RUBINSTEIN, PHILLIP SHAVER,
AND
LETITIA ANNE PEPLAU

God says in the Book of Genesis, "It is not good that man should be alone," and decides to make a fitting companion for him. The Old Testament discourses at length about the benefits of fruitful multiplying, and about the intricate attachments and intrigues between men and women, parents and children, friends and kin.

Modern evolutionary biologists, who have developed their own creation story, also emphasize the need for human beings to be together. They offer evidence for the genetic advantages of sexual reproduction, the adaptive benefits of prolonged attachment to parents in childhood, and the survival benefits of belonging to complex groups. The human ability to form strong emotional attachments has a long evolutionary history, which is why people can be seriously hurt if their attachments are disrupted by rejection, separation, or death.

The Bible and biologists share a major premise: It isn't good for people to be alone. This evaluation bodes ill for modern industrial societies, especially the United States, where the divorce rate is soaring, geographic and social mobility are high, and an unprecedented number of adults of all ages are choosing or being forced by events to live by themselves.
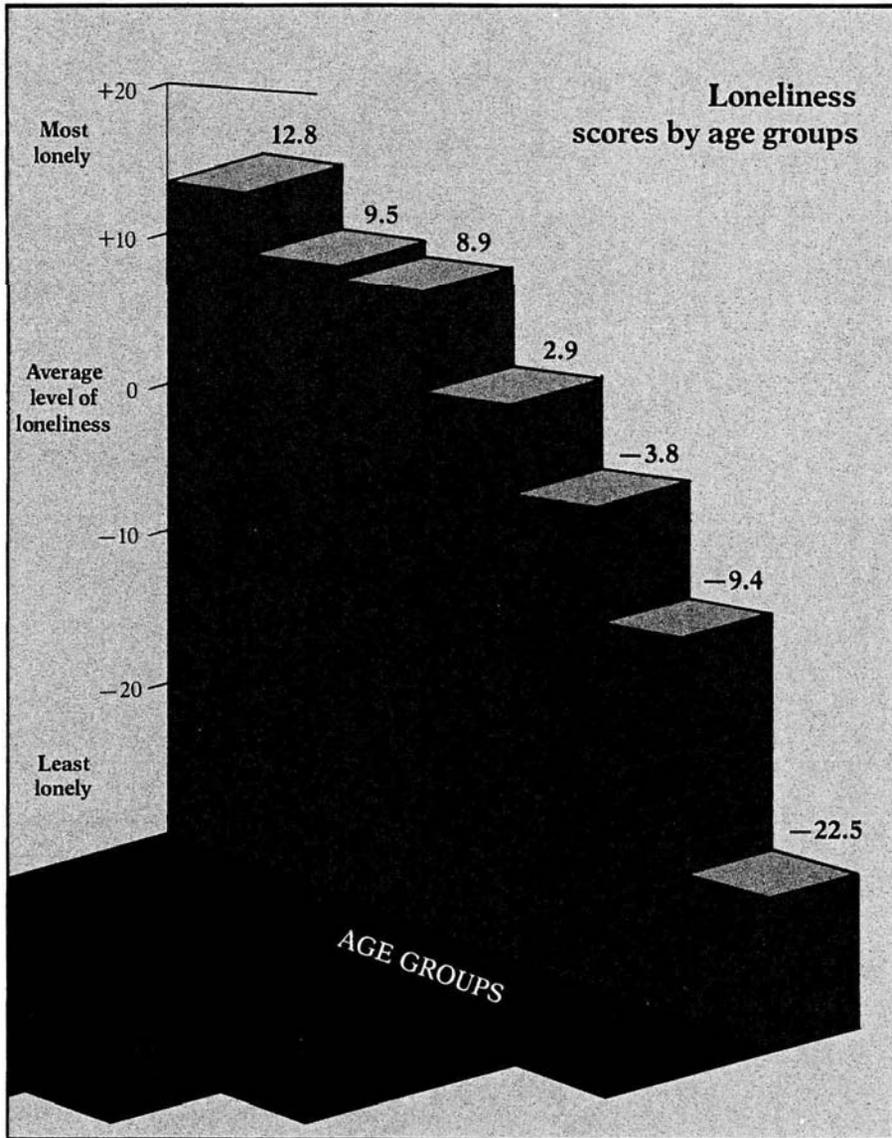
Many social commentators and popular writers have inferred from these statistics that *alone* means *lonely* and use the terms interchangeably. In *The Broken Heart: The Medical Consequences of Loneliness,* psychologist James Lynch argued that people who live alone (and are, he assumed, lonely) are especially susceptible to serious illnesses and may even die prematurely. Sociologist Philip Slater's *The Pursuit of Loneliness,* based primarily on armchair analysis, denounced the American commitment to individualism and competition, which, he said, frustrate the basic human desires for community, engagement, and dependence. "The competitive life is a lonely one," Slater concluded.

Like these writers, many social scientists arrive at conclusions without putting much stock in people's own interpretations of their feelings or actions. Once researchers begin talking to individuals, however, they quickly learn that "alone" is an objective term—indicating whether a person lives with someone else, how many friends he or she has, and so on—but that "lonely" is subjective, a matter of what goes on in a person's head. As we have learned, the two experiences occasionally but by no means always over-

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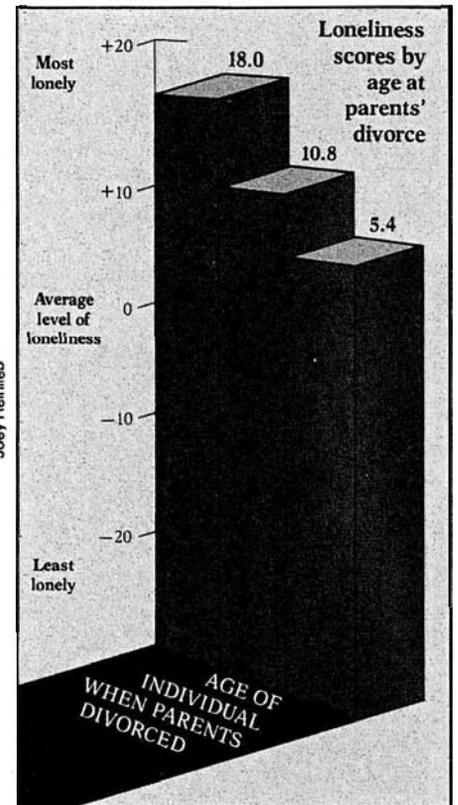
Loneliness scores by age groups

Most lonely — +20

12.8
9.5
8.9

Average level of loneliness — 0

2.9
—3.8
—9.4

Least lonely — —20

—22.5

AGE GROUPS

Senior citizens are not the loneliest people in America: Young people are.
NYU surveys found a steady decline *in loneliness* as *people get older. The*
researchers believe that young adults sense an impossible gap between romantic
expectations and reality; older people interpret things more realistically.

Joey Reinlieb

Loneliness scores by age at parents' divorce

Most lonely — +20

18.0
10.8
5.4

Average level of loneliness — 0

Least lonely

AGE OF INDIVIDUAL WHEN PARENTS DIVORCED

The older a child is when his or her
parents divorce, the less lonely he
is likely to be as an adult. In an
NYU survey, people who were younger
than six years of age when their parents
separated got the highest scores on
the loneliness scale; people who were
in middle childhood got lower scores;
but people who were adolescent or older
were the least lonely as adults.

lap. Feelings of loneliness do not inevitably follow from solitude or circumstance; they depend on how people view their experiences and whether they decide to call themselves lonely.

Among us, we have conducted two independent programs of research on loneliness, one at New York University (Rubenstein and Shaver) and one at the University of California at Los Angeles (Peplau). The NYU research was based on a carefully pretested questionnaire that was published in the Sunday magazine sections of several East Coast newspapers in the spring of **1978.** More than **25,000** people responded, a large sample of adults of all ages, races, and income levels. The research at UCLA by Peplau and her co-workers is developing a model of loneliness that emphasizes the thought processes of lonely people. This work is based primarily on college students, who answer questions about their own experiences with loneliness and their impressions of lonely people. So far, nearly **1,000** undergraduates have participated. These different methods and the diversity of people interviewed offer the first coherent picture of adult loneliness based on data rather than on speculation.

Although newspaper surveys are subject to the bias of people who choose

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to fill out the questionnaire, we believe that the results are valid and representative of most of the population. Regardless of city size and location (for example, small town or metropolis, northern or southern city), the findings within each sample remained virtually the same. And although a few people noted that "only a lonely person would bother to fill this out," we received thousands of questionnaires from people who said they were not lonely. Only 15 percent of those who replied said they felt lonely most or all of the time, and only 6 percent said they never felt lonely. The majority, as one would expect, felt lonely on occasion.

The survey results dispelled many of the popular assumptions about loneliness and confirmed others. One common prediction favored by sociologists turned out not to be true. The American fondness for moving—for changing jobs, partners, cities, and social networks—has long been considered a cause of psychological distress. In A *Nation of Strangers,* Vance Packard described the chronic rootlessness of Americans, which he believed to be at the heart of the country's social problems. The NYU surveys included a number of questions to test Packard's claims, such as how often people had moved during childhood and adulthood, the length of time they have lived at their present locations, and whether, if they were lonely, moving too often was responsible.

But none of these questions was connected with current feelings of loneliness; people who had moved frequently and those who had never strayed from their birthplace had equal chances of feeling lonely. People who change cities often have just as many friends and are just as satisfied with their friendships as people who remain rooted in one spot. We recognize, of course, that moving is often fraught with difficulty; separation from friends often causes bouts of loneliness. But the NYU data suggest that such feelings, for most people, are temporary reactions during the adjustment phase. People who move frequently, it seems, learn quickly how to make friends and put down roots in a new community.

The sociologists turned out to be correct in predicting that the loneliest people are likely to be poor, uneducated, and of minority groups; we found too that an even stronger companion of loneliness is unemployment. But none of these conditions, however adverse, was as strongly related to feelings of loneliness as a person's perception of reality—to feeling a painful mismatch between *actual* life and *desired* life.

A good example of this comes from the surprising but reliable finding that old people are less lonely, on the average, than young adults. This pattern has turned up in other large surveys as well as the NYU study, and directly counters the cliche of the lonely senior citizen. Although more old people than young live alone, and although older people see their friends less often than young adults do, the elderly are more satisfied with their friendships, have higher self-esteem, and feel more independent. They join social and civic groups more often, and get drunk far less often than the young. Old people even complain less than young folks do about physical and psychological symptoms—such as head-

aches, poor appetite, depression, irritability, and poor concentration.

We think that young people are so susceptible to loneliness because they feel most sharply the discrepancy between the search for intimacy and the failure to find it. Young people are romantic and idealistic; they think it is more important to find a "romantic or sexual partner" than older people do.

Because loneliness is more in one's mind than one's circumstances, living alone does not by itself foster the feeling. The NYU researchers tested the notion that living alone produces serious medical problems, but found no differences in the mental and physical health of people who live alone and those who live with others. Lonely people do have more medical and psychological problems than their less lonely peers, even though the lonely are as likely to be living with roommates, or spouses, or families, or on their own.

The NYU questionnaire included a number of items about a person's social life, which showed that although lonely people do have fewer friends and contacts, on the average, than less lonely people, their dissatisfaction with the ties they have is what makes them feel lonely. Lonely people are dissatisfied with everything about their lives: their living arrangements (whether solo or with others), the number of friends they have, the quality of those friendships, their marriages or love affairs, the number of conversations they have each day, and their sex lives.

We cannot say for sure, yet, whether dissatisfactions create feelings of separation and loneliness, or whether loneliness turns the whole world sour. But we did glean evidence that some causes of adult loneliness have their origin in

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childhood. Psychiatrist John Bowlby has argued persuasively that separation from parents can have lasting detrimental effects on children, and Bowlby's thesis was supported in the survey. Lonely people tended to remember their parents as being disagreeable, remote, and untrustworthy; individuals who said they were not lonely described their parents as close, helpful, and warm. (Current feelings of loneliness, though, may color one's memory of events.) But the loneliest people of all were those whose parents had divorced. As one man commented, "My mom was married twice and my father and stepfather have been nothing but pure hell for me. I have lost all of my confidence and feel not worth anything to anyone."

If their parents did divorce, people fared better the later the separation occurred. People who were less than six years old when their parents split up were by far the loneliest as adults; people who were older than six were lonelier than those who were adolescents; and so on. This is disturbing, for the Census Bureau predicts that 45 percent of all children born in 1977 will spend a significant period of their lives with only one parent.

The loss of either parent by divorce is more detrimental, in terms of later loneliness, than loss by death. Whether a parent dies when a person is a child, a teenager, or an adult has no effect on later feelings of loneliness. It is as if children regard divorced parents *as* having *chosen* to reject them and are tormented by the parent's inaccessibility. But most children come to understand that a parent's death is not their responsibility. It is thus not the event of parental separation itself but *how children perceive it* that will affect their later adjustment.

People who have had unhappy childhood experiences, who feel that their parents neglected or rejected them, may grow up with fragile self-esteem. Psychological research has shown that people who dislike themselves also tend to dislike or be less tolerant of others, possibly because a hostile stance protects a vulnerable person from the risk of rejection. We suspected that this defensiveness is part of a self-fulfilling prophesy: A guarded lonely person is hard to get to know and is therefore likely to remain isolated.

Recent experiments by Warren Jones at the University of Tulsa find that lonely students do tend to be self-focused and difficult to talk to. Jones observed college students who said they were lonely conversing with students who were not. Lonely people, he noted, talked more about themselves, asked fewer questions of their partners, and changed the topic more frequently than their socially adept peers did. Jones concluded that many lonely students simply do not know how to behave in social situations, so their encounters tend to be superficial and emotionally unsatisfying to them.

In the NYU surveys, too, lonely people had lower self-esteem than people who were not lonely. They also tended to dislike others more readily, to have fewer friends, to be less busy during the week and on weekends, to join social groups less frequently, and to say they feel bored.

Loneliness does not feel the same to everyone. The NYU surveys asked people how they usually feel when they are lonely, and found four different sets of feelings. For some people, the largest group, loneliness feels like desperation; words they use to describe the sensation include "desperate," "panic," "helpless," and "afraid." Such individuals feel cut off from others when they are lonely—abandoned and frightened. Another cluster of feelings, which we label "impatient boredom," represents a milder loneliness, the kind that people may feel when they are unexpectedly left alone on a Saturday night, or when they are stuck in a boring hotel room on a business trip. This temporary feeling of loneliness includes such emotions as "bored," "uneasy," and "desire to be elsewhere."

The last two factors, self-deprecation and depression, are common reactions to prolonged feelings of loneliness. Self-deprecation is anger at oneself: "I am alone, unattractive, and stupid; I deserve to be lonely." Depression is a more resigned and passive state marked by self-pity: "I am isolated, cut off, sorry for myself."

The four meanings of loneliness suggest a progression from occasional dissatisfaction with one's social situation, to chronic and more intense dissatisfaction, and finally, if things do not get better, to self-hatred and self-pity.

The NYU surveys were deliberately broad and exploratory, making up in coverage of many issues what they lost in clinical detail. The UCLA studies aimed at constructing a theoretical model of the conditions and interpretations that go into the self-label "lonely." Researchers at UCLA have worked primarily with college students, and this is one topic for which it makes good sense

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he or she will behave in the future.

to use them. As we mentioned earlier, the young are far more likely than the old to report feeling lonely—college students and high-school seniors most of all. (In one UCLA study, more than 70 percent of all undergraduates thought loneliness was an important problem.)

The UCLA research started off with the importance of the explanations people give for being lonely—in social-psychological terms, their causal attributions, One young woman blamed her environment, for example, noting that "UCLA is such a big impersonal factory that it's hard to meet people." But another student blamed himself: "I'm just too shy to get to know people or ask a girl for a date." Many previous studies of the attribution process had suggested that people would ask themselves three basic questions about why they are lonely: Who's to blame? Can it change? What control do I have over my feelings?

In a series of five studies, the UCLA researchers found that the answers to these questions can be arranged along three dimensions: *locus of causality* ("Am I to blame for my loneliness, or is it something in my environment?"); *stability* over time ("Is my loneliness transitory, or is it likely to be permanent?"); and *controllability* ("Is there anything I can do about being lonely, or is it out of my hands?").

Some students blamed external causes, emphasizing elements of the university situation that led to loneliness (the immense size of the university, the impersonal classes, the lack of opportunities to meet people, or the existence of social cliques). Others gave internal attributions, focusing on lack of social skills, shyness, physical unattractiveness, or fear of trying. One student wrote, "The fault, I believe, always lies in the individual who is lonely. If a person is lonely it is because he or she has not taken the initiative in attempting to meet people."

The students regarded some causes of loneliness as more stable than others. They thought shyness was a temporary quality that could change with effort, but they regarded unattractiveness or an unpleasant personality as causes that would be very hard to change. Students felt that they had the most control over causes that were internal (such as lack of effort) and unstable (such as being shy). UCLA undergraduates are, by and large, an optimisitc group. They were reluctant to blame loneliness on looks or personality; the single most common explanation for loneliness was that a person was not trying hard enough, a matter relatively easy to remedy, in their view. Many students, of course, recognized the complexity of the problem, assuming some personal responsibility for feeling lonely but also noting the difficulties imposed by the large university.

Attributions for loneliness determine how a person will feel (depressed, accepting, optimistic, angry), and how he or she will behave in the future. The man whose attributions are internal and stable is saying, in effect, "The fault is in me, and I am unlikely to change." The woman whose attributions are internal and unstable is saying, "The fault was in me, but next time I will try harder and make it work."

The attribution process is linked to self-blame or blame of others. The NYU surveys found that lonely people are less friendly to others, which understandably would exacerbate their social isolation. But on closer inspection of the UCLA studies, it appears that hostility and anger are marks only of people who believe they are lonely for external reasons—such as being excluded by ingroups. Several of the NYU interviewees expressed hostility toward people for rejecting or ignoring them. "You can't do anything for people," a middle-aged woman said. "Everyone is ungrateful." (In a study by Bernard Weiner of reactions to success and failure, people who felt they failed because of other people's efforts or motives tended to feel "revengeful," "furious," "bitter," and "fuming.")

When people aim attributions at themselves, the resulting emotion is not usually anger, but disappointment, shame, or embarrassment ("Why didn't I try harder?" "How could I have been such a stupid clod?"). Their behavior in turn depends on whether they view the problem as unchangeable or fixable. Attributions are of pivotal importance in explaining why some lonely people become depressed and withdraw socially, and others ward off depression and actively work to improve their social lives. Depression occurs primarily when people account for loneliness in stable, internal terms ("I am hopelessly fat, ugly, and unlovable; there's nothing I can do about it'); other attributions may galvanize them into effective action ("I won't find fellow skiers in a place this big unless I advertise in the school newspaper"). The longer a spell of loneliness lasts, the more likely a person is to think the reasons are permanent rather than temporary, to lose the hope that life will improve.
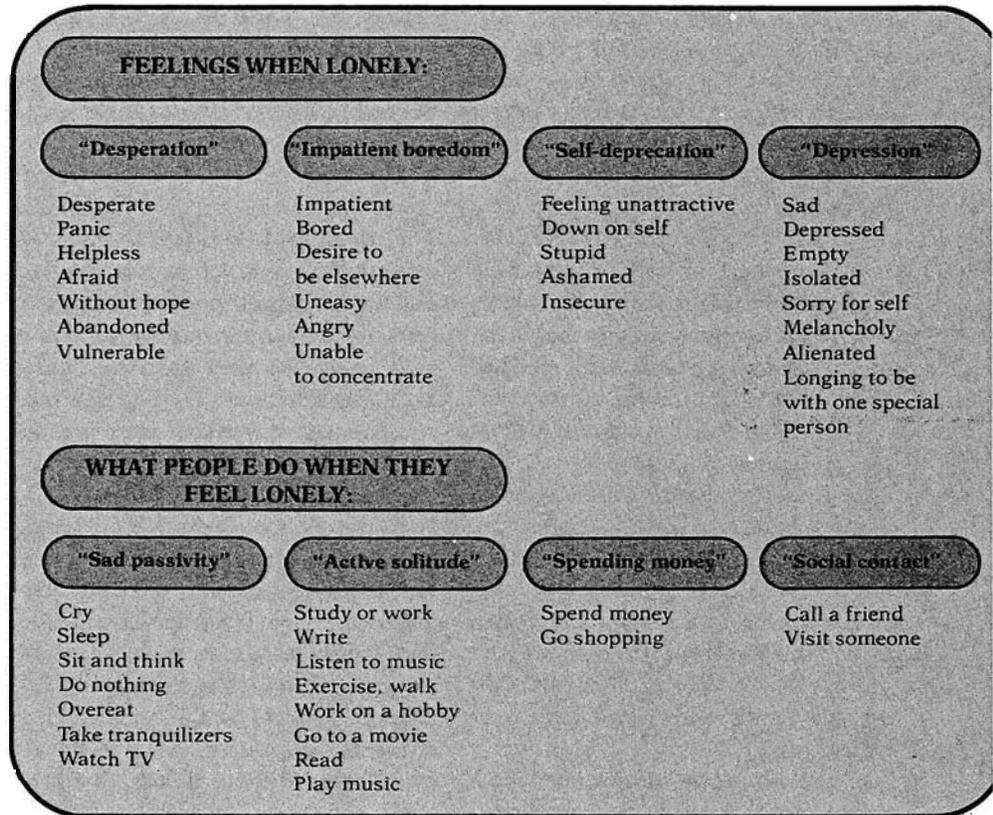
Of course, the particular precipitat-

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ing causes of loneliness that are relevant to a college student undoubtedly differ from the explanations that a recently divorced 35-year-old, an unemployed factory worker, or a disabled 80-year-old might have, but their attributions still fall along the same three dimensions of internality, stability, and control. In the **NYU** studies, young single people and the recently divorced were most likely to say they are lonely because they are unattached, longing for "one special person." Young adults also linked loneliness to **alienation**— not being understood, not having close friends, not being needed. Among older people who felt lonely, the main reason was forced isolation (being housebound or handicapped), not the lack of friends or lovers.

Another key influence on a person's experience of loneliness is expectations: People want to know when their feelings of loneliness are "normal," and typically decide by watching how other people react in the same situation. If everyone else seems to be suffering, one's own problems are tolerable. But if everyone else seems to be happy, one's own suffering becomes unbearable. One of the **NYU** researchers (Rubenstein) interviewed a young black woman who expressed this sentiment well: "When I'm lonely, I don't know what to do for myself. . .I just sit in the house with my two kids and look out the window and see everybody else going by and having a good time." As social psychologist Stanley Schachter put it, "Misery doesn't just love company. It loves *miserable* company."

Past experiences also shape expectations. As psychologist Marjorie **Lowen**thal showed, elderly people who have lived most of their lives with minimal

FEELINGS WHEN LONELY:			
"Desperation"	**"Impatient boredom"**	**"Self-deprecation"**	**"Depression"**
Desperate	Impatient	Feeling unattractive	Sad
Panic	Bored	Down on self	Depressed
Helpless	Desire to	Stupid	Empty
Afraid	be elsewhere	Ashamed	Isolated
Without hope	Uneasy	Insecure	Sorry for self
Abandoned	Angry		Melancholy
Vulnerable	Unable		Alienated
	to concentrate		Longing to be
			with one special
			person

WHAT PEOPLE DO WHEN THEY FEEL LONELY:			
"Sad passivity"	**"Active solitude"**	**"Spending money"**	**"Social contact"**
Cry	Study or work	Spend money	Call a friend
Sleep	Write	Go shopping	Visit someone
Sit and think	Listen to music		
Do nothing	Exercise, walk		
Overeat	Work on a hobby		
Take tranquilizers	Go to a movie		
Watch TV	Read		
	Play music		

NYU studies uncovered four clusters of feelings that people have when they say they feel lonely. Some people associate the experience of loneliness with desperation and abandonment; others feel bored; others sink into self-deprecation or depression. What people do when they are lonely depends on how they feel about their loneliness. The severely depressed and most lonely individuals fall into "sad passivity." People who are only mildly or rarely lonely prefer to attack the mood with vigorous strategies: They work, exercise, write letters, read books, or call or visit a friend.
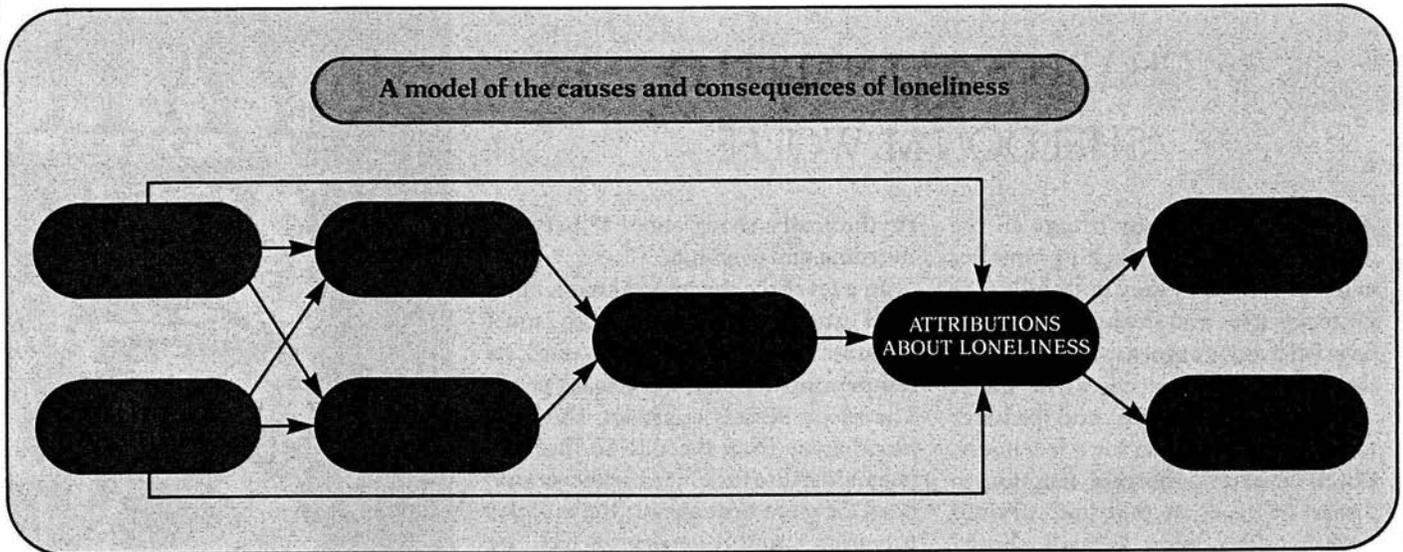
social contact are content with few friends and do not feel deprived or especially lonely. But elderly people who suddenly face a change in the number of friends and activities they are used to *do* feel lonely. Likewise, a person who has had an unusually good relationship may feel lonely if he or she cannot duplicate it. A woman wrote the **NYU** researchers: "It is possible to be

alone and never be lonely. It is also possible to be lonely and never be alone. Since the death of my first husband, there has been a core of loneliness within me, a void that is never filled, despite the fact that I remarried less than a year after his death."

Our studies suggest that people can benefit from understanding the multiple causes of loneliness, and from rec-

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*Feeling lonely has its origins both in qualities of the individual (sensitivity to rejection, shyness, physical
appearance) and in qualities of the situation (unemployment, recent divorce or loss, large lecture
classes, moving to a new city). The intersection of these two factors in turn affect a person's desired and actual
social life–whether the person expects to have many friends, finds them, is satisfied with them. When a gap occurs
between expectation and reality, the individual feels unhappy and frustrated,
and is motivated to account for the discrepancy. Depending on the explanation (attribution)
he makes, he will take action to overcome loneliness, or become depressed, ill, bitter, and further isolated.*

ognizing their own role in perpetuating or extinguishing it. Research has long demonstrated that people tend to underestimate the effects of situations on their behavior; they overemphasize personality factors. The trick is to understand which causes of loneliness are under one's control, and which are not; which events *precipitated* the lonely feelings (such as the death of a spouse, forced retirement) and which ones *maintain* it (refusal to find new friends or interests, shyness).

The phenomenon of loneliness is both a personal and a social one. Therapy may be appropriate for people whose parents rejected them (or who feel rejected by their parents), and for lonely souls whose self-esteem is low.

Therapy usually won't help people made lonely by loss of work, racial discrimination, or competition.

While collaborating coast-to-coast on this article, we discovered that we had unintentionally developed different opinions about the prospects for treating loneliness. Rubenstein and Shaver, after surveying thousands of adults of all ages and occupations (residing mostly in gray northeastern cities) and interviewing middle-aged people who have been lonely for years, felt pessimistic about reversing many of the social and personal forces that cause loneliness. Peplau and her colleagues, working with college students (in sunny California), were much more optimistic. By nipping negative attri-

butions in the bud, she argues, severe loneliness and depression can be prevented or overturned. The three of us agree on one thing: The earlier loneliness is dealt with the more likely it is to be dispelled. ☐

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