

Unit 1: What is Loneliness?

Axel Seeman: The Psychological Structure
of Loneliness

Core Argument

- Loneliness is not simply being alone or lacking social contact.
- It is a subjective psychological state rooted in how a person *experiences* their relationships.

Key claims

- Loneliness arises from a **perceived mismatch** between desired and actual social connection.
- Someone can feel lonely **even when surrounded by others**, and not lonely while alone.
- Therefore, loneliness cannot be reduced to:
 - Social isolation
 - Lack of friends
 - Objective social circumstances

Unresolved question

- what constitutes social connection, its absence, and the nature of the distress involved.

The Standard View of Loneliness

The standard view shares three core features:

- Loneliness is an **experience** (a subjective mental state or event).
- It has a **negative valence**, being unpleasant or distressing.
- It is **intentional or representational**, involving awareness of a discrepancy between desired and actual social relationships.

Each of these features corresponds to a distinct area of philosophical investigation.

Phenomenal Structure of Loneliness

Seemann analyzes loneliness in terms of lived experience:

- Loneliness involves a **felt disconnection** from others.
- This disconnection is:
 - Emotional (feeling unseen or misunderstood)
 - Existential (feeling cut off from shared meaning)
- Lonely individuals experience others as **psychologically distant**, even when physically present.

The Phenomenal Dimension of Loneliness

- The **phenomenal dimension** of loneliness focuses on its **first-person, subjective character**.
- According to the standard view, loneliness necessarily **involves an experiential aspect**.
- A complete understanding must clarify **what kind of experience loneliness is**.
- Key questions include whether loneliness is best understood as a **feeling** or an **emotion**.
- This raises the issue of which philosophical theories of emotion can adequately account for loneliness.
- Another question is whether experiences of loneliness have **success or correctness conditions**.
- If loneliness has correctness conditions, individual experiences could **misrepresent** one's actual social situation.
- Alternatively, one might deny that misrepresentation is possible and hold that **feeling lonely is sufficient** for being lonely.

Three Approaches to Loneliness

- **Objectivist** views that seek to understand loneliness by a description of its **intentional object**,
- **Subjectivist** views that consider its holistic relation to other aspects of the **sufferer's psyche**, and
- **Embodied and Enacted** views that focus on the relation between the lonely person's mental life and her **social environment**.
- all three approaches have something to contribute to a fuller understanding of the condition and may be of use in devising measures aimed at improving sufferers' health. They are not mutually exclusive.

The Social Dimension

This dimension examines what kinds of **social relationships or interactions** are experienced as lacking in loneliness.

Not all social interactions are equally relevant for alleviating loneliness, so further clarification is needed.

Key questions include:

- Who counts as relevant partners in meaningful social interactions?
- Must interactions occur **in person**, or can **virtual or technologically mediated** interactions suffice?
- Is there an essential **bodily or embodied** component to relevant social interactions?

The **developmental role** of social interaction in emotional regulation is important for understanding loneliness.

Factors beyond mere interaction (e.g., stability, intimacy, recognition) may be necessary to constitute relationships that alleviate loneliness.

Normative/ Cognitive Dimension

In the standard view, loneliness involves a **perceived discrepancy** between needed and available social relationships.

This introduces a **normative aspect**, in the philosophical sense: something is experienced as missing that *ought* to be present.

Two central questions arise:

- What is the **intentional object** of loneliness—specific relationships, or abstract social goods such as friendship?
- How is the **absence or loss** of these relationships experienced by the sufferer?

Related issues include whether loneliness is experienced against:

- A background sense of how relationships *should* be, or
- A memory of how they *once were*.

It is unclear whether this normative background is part of the **phenomenal experience** itself or operates at a **cognitive level**.

Clarifying these issues has practical importance, as it can guide interventions aimed at reducing the perceived gap

Role of Expectations and Norms

- Loneliness depends on **expectations about relationships**, not just relationships themselves.
- Cultural and personal norms shape:
 - What counts as “enough” connection
 - What kinds of relationships are meaningful
- This explains why loneliness varies across individuals and societies.

Social and Relational Nature

- Loneliness is **inherently social**, not merely internal or pathological.
- It reflects a **breakdown in interpersonal attunement**:
 - Lack of mutual understanding
 - Absence of recognition or reciprocity

Distinction from Related Concepts

- Loneliness ≠ solitude
 - Solitude can be positive and chosen.
- Loneliness ≠ depression
 - Though related, loneliness is specifically about **social disconnection**, not general mood.
- Loneliness ≠ social anxiety
 - It concerns *absence of meaningful connection*, not fear of interaction.

Philosophical Contribution

- Seemann argues loneliness should be understood as a **relational phenomenon**, not just an individual mental state.
- This challenges purely medical or individualistic approaches to loneliness.

Implications

- Addressing loneliness requires more than increasing social contact.
- Effective responses must focus on:
 - Quality of relationships
 - Mutual understanding
 - Shared meaning and recognition

LONELINESS AND THE EMOTIONAL EXPERIENCE OF ABSENCE

Tom Roberts and Joel Krueger

Loneliness: An Emotion of Absence

An affective state in which valued social goods are experienced
as missing and out of reach

Not just lack of interaction, but the felt unattainability of
meaningful connection

Learning Objectives

- Define loneliness as an emotion of absence, distinct from mere social isolation
- Distinguish between objective loneliness (low contact) and subjective loneliness (felt deprivation)
- Explain the two-part structure of emotions of absence (desire + unattainability)
- Identify the social goods that are missing in loneliness (companionship, support, intimacy)
- Describe the phenomenology of loneliness and how it shapes self-perception
- Articulate the philosophical significance of loneliness for understanding human social nature

What Are Emotions of Absence?

Some emotions are fundamentally about **what is missing**, not what is present

These emotions are intentionally directed at **absences** or blocked possibilities

- **Grief**
 - The absence of a loved one who has passed away
- **Nostalgia**
 - The absence of a past time or place that can never return
- **Homesickness**
 - The absence of home when far away, feeling unreachable
- **Unrequited Love**
 - The absence of reciprocated affection from the beloved

Two-Part Structure of Emotions of Absence

1 Pro-attitude Toward Valued Good

Desire, longing, and appreciation for something that is valued

This creates the emotional investment in the missing good

2 Awareness of Unattainability

Realization that the good is missing or unreachable

- **Cognitive: Judgments about loss or impossibility**
- **Embodied: Felt inability, lack of confidence**
- **Perceptual: World no longer affords certain actions**

Defining Loneliness

Objective vs. Subjective

Objective Loneliness

1 Low frequency/quantity of social contact

2 Measurable networks and interactions

3 Can be observed and quantified objectively

4 Not sufficient for the emotional experience

Subjective Loneliness

1 Felt unattainability of meaningful social connection

2 Can occur when alone, in crowds, or within relationships

3 A dispositional state with recurring episodes

4 The emotional experience of absence

What Is Missing in Loneliness: Social Goods

- **Companionship & Shared Pleasure**
 - The presence of others to share experiences, activities, and moments of joy with. The absence of mutually enjoyable social interaction.
- **Emotional & Moral Support**
 - Trust, sympathy, validation, and understanding from others. The absence of someone who listens, cares, and offers comfort during difficult times.
- **Physical Affection & Intimacy**
 - Touch, hugs, hand-holding, and other forms of physical comfort. The absence of safe, welcoming physical connection with others.
- **Friendship, Romance, Family Bonds**
 - Deep, meaningful relationships that provide belonging and identity. The absence of chosen and given connections that define who we are.
- **Opportunities for Social Agency**
 - Chances to act and flourish as a social agent, expressing traits like humor, affection, and vulnerability. The absence of social contexts for self-expression.
- **Cognitive & Emotional Burden Reduction**
 - Sharing life's cognitive and emotional loads with others. The absence of collaborative problem-solving and emotional processing through social connection.

Phenomenology: How Loneliness Feels

Feeling **excluded or alienated**, even when surrounded by others in crowded places

Perceiving others as **unwelcoming or socially inaccessible** - a wall between you and others

Experiencing one's own body as **socially awkward or ineffective** - a sense of physical disconnection

Expression Blocked

Inability to fully express one's identity or thoughts with others

Painful Past Comparisons

Cognitive comparisons with better social pasts, highlighting current absence

Bleak Future Anticipation

Anticipating a socially impoverished future, reinforcing the sense of loss

Social Performance

Feeling unable to be authentic, forced to perform social roles without genuine connection

Self-Directed Dimensions of Loneliness

- Feeling **burdened** by having to manage life alone - social tasks feel heavier, daily challenges become overwhelming
- Experiencing **loss of purpose, confidence, and social roles** - the sense of having meaningful contributions to make
- Suffering from a **diminished sense of self-realization** - feeling unable to express one's full identity or potential
- The self is felt as **cut off from the conditions of flourishing-with-others** - growth and development require social interaction

Loneliness vs. Solitude

Loneliness

1. Desire for social goods + perceived absence/unattainability
- 2 Painful and alienating experience
- 3 Blocks possibilities for connection and expression
- 4 Can occur with or without others present

Solitude

- 1 Being alone without desiring social goods
- 2 Positive or neutral experience
- 3 Can enable rest, reflection, creativity
- 4 Not a weakness; choosing absence ≠ suffering absence

Chronic Loneliness

- Affective flattening replaces acute pain with emotional numbness
- Loss of social desire reflects deeper devitalization
- Social world loses salience - social possibilities no longer appear as options
- Emotional responsiveness to others is diminished
- Resembles aspects of depression; defined less by pain than by emotional devitalization

Philosophical Significance

Emotions About Absences

Loneliness helps clarify how emotions can be intentionally directed at absences, not just present objects or events.

Suffering from Blocked Possibilities

Shows how emotional suffering can arise from blocked possibilities rather than negative events themselves.

Sociality & Identity

Highlights the deep connection between sociality, identity, and wellbeing - we are fundamentally social beings.

Clinical Relevance

Offers framework for understanding depression, phenomenology of psychiatric conditions, and social suffering in clinical settings.

- **Relevance to philosophy of psychiatry**

Understanding social withdrawal patterns

Intervention strategies for social isolation

Key Takeaways

- Loneliness is the **felt impossibility of social flourishing** with others
- Pain arises from **unattainable social goods**, not just isolation itself
- A capacity for loneliness reflects **human dependence on social bonds**

1 How does loneliness differ from sadness or anxiety in everyday cases?

2 Can one reduce loneliness without increasing social contact? How?

3 Where is the line between chosen solitude and loneliness?

4 What implications follow for mental health interventions?