LONELINESS AND THE EMOTIONAL EXPERIENCE OF ABSENCE

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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?