

Overcoming Loneliness: A Case Study on Friendship

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Abstract—Loneliness is an issue that has haunted me since I made the fateful decision to transfer schools in 8th grade. In this paper, I reflect on the overarching battle of loneliness and its origins. I find the reassurance presented by an online friend effective. By continuing to make an effort to put myself out there, opening up to others, and having a good amount of luck, I am able to find solace in life and wash away my worries.

**Names have been edited to preserve privacy*

I. RELATED WORK

It was an ordinary day when I walked into my science class, dreading another day of having to sit next to one of the people that would often tease me. Middle school was a difficult time for me. I had to endure bullying and didn't know how to deal with it. Our long-term interim substitute teacher must've seen what was going on as she moved the bully's assigned seat to the back of the class. Replacing him was a new student to the school.

"What's your name?" I asked. He seemed startled and said something that sounded like "Tiger." "What was that?" I asked again.

"Tiger," he mustered. I was an incredibly quiet person at the time, probably the shyest person I knew. However, Tiger was somehow on a whole other level.

"Could I borrow your eraser?" he squeaked. He seemed almost fearful. It must've taken a lot for him to ask such a basic question. I happily handed him my eraser and spent the next couple of days helping him catch up with the class and acclimate to the new school. We quickly hit it off and became good friends. It was that easy.

School had become more bearable having a close friend beside me. Having a friend shyier than myself forced me to start taking initiative more often and take my first steps to develop my confidence. But although we would spend time together in school regularly, friendships at that time never seemed to be particularly deep. They were often built on little more than sharing a class

or some other common friends. That's not to say I didn't value him at the time, but I don't think it held the same weight as what the friends I would make later had.

In 8th grade, I took advantage of an opportunity to transfer from my local middle school to the higher ranked one on the other, richer side of town. Switching schools seemed like a natural choice. I would be put in a more pleasant environment with better academic opportunities. However, I made a grave miscalculation on the importance of my current friend group.

II. BACKGROUND

Making friends in a new setting proved to be harder than I ever could have predicted. Being a "new student" for the first time, I struggled to find my place in the new environment. While people were more welcoming and I was able to make some friends, I never felt as close to them. I started to long for someone I could call a close friend.

In 9th grade, I befriended a girl named Frita. She was in several of my other classes, and we got along well. We texted each other regularly, filling each other in on our personal lives. It felt the closest I've ever been to someone else, even more so than Tiger. She was kind, outgoing, and always seemed cheerful. She had a persona that always seemed jubilant. However, when talking to her privately, she was much more open about her real-life struggles. How many of her own seemingly close friendships had been diminished over and over.

"Everything that I love dies," she once told me. "In a year, you'll hate me too."

I promised her I wouldn't, but as that year went on, her constant talks about her doubts, toxic relationship, and unhappiness slowly began to

wear me out. I felt I could only do so much and grew increasingly frustrated. I eventually started distancing myself from her. At times, it felt like I did hate her and I hated how she was right when she foresaw it all. We ended up having a falling out but were able to make amends and stayed on good terms. We would talk occasionally, but neither of us no longer wanted to initiate.

I had online friends through gaming communities that I found real joy in connecting with. At the same time, it sometimes felt they were just an escape from my real-world problems, a bandage rather than a solution. They provided genuine joy and fulfillment, but they weren't the same as in-person connections. It also allowed me to be complacent and not have to develop my real-life relationships. I would have shallow friendships during the school day and look forward to engaging with my online friends at night.

My parents had extremely great expectations of getting into a prestigious university. Much of that felt like it stemmed from their disappointment with my older brother. They used gaming as a scapegoat for any struggles I would have with school or extracurriculars. As college admission season drew closer, they forced me to quit gaming and thus leave behind many of my online friends. This broke me.

I was in a dark place and felt lonelier than ever. For the rest of high school, every day was a slog. It was as if there was a constant, overwhelming force of negativity that followed me. I wished Frita would reach out, but out of pride, I didn't want to open up with my problems the same way she had done with me before. She seemed like she was in a better place now, though it was always difficult to tell whether she actually was or if it was just a facade. I couldn't rekindle our friendship just so I could trouble her with my newfound problems. If only we had maintained talking to each other all this time. Then it wouldn't be a problem. I had so many regrets about how I had handled our friendship.

By sheer chance, we were assigned to sit next to each other during our high school graduation ceremony. While we still casually talked, even during dress rehearsal, I knew that this could be one of the last times I talk to her in person and a significant opportunity if I wanted to preserve that friendship I once so highly valued.

Even then, I couldn't get myself to speak to her again.

III. EXPERIMENTAL SETUP AND METHODS

I was glad to get high school over with and soon became focused on college. I would have a blank slate, just what I needed to turn my life around. It would be the perfect opportunity to reinvent myself. I dreamt of the newfound freedom, a fresh start, a chance to make lifelong friends. The summer before college proved to be the longest of my life. While I was hopeful for a new beginning just on the horizon, I had three months to wait and couldn't help but worry. What if I wouldn't be able to make friends? If I fail at this perfect opportunity, would I be doomed to a life full of solitude forever?

I returned to gaming and expressed my concerns to my online friends. One really went out of their way to reassure me that it would all work out. He went by the alias, Banzai. He was patient, well articulated, and just seemed to have all the answers. Even though I was just a random 17 year old on the internet, he recognized my concerns and treated them seriously. He continuously emphasized that he didn't want to downplay my problems, that it was normal to be fearful about entering a new stage of life, but there really was nothing to worry about. What really struck me was how Banzai always acted so certain. Like it was an impossibility that my life wouldn't get significantly better. I wanted to believe him, but it was still hard to get excited about the future. He eventually made a deal that if I ended up having a successful first year, he would reward me. When I asked what a successful first year entailed, he answered,

"If you maintain a B average or better."

"Oh, I can do that... hopefully."

"And can say at the end of the year that you've enjoyed your social life."

"Oh shit."

"You simply need to have done enough that you, yourself personally are comfortable with where things are. For someone like you, it might simply be something like deciding, 'Y'know what? I might be nervous, but I'm joining that club.'"

I had a clear goal to work towards. By the end of the year, I needed to have a social life that I am happy with. Of course, this seemed like an

insurmountable task. How could someone as unsociable as me get to that point? How can I be friends with others when I didn't even like myself?

I had received a plethora of advice on how to go about meeting people. Banzai had me list off five of my interests to demonstrate how my university had a club for every interest. I would participate in several and find people with similar interests to bond with. I would make an effort to introduce myself to my classmates and get to know those around me. I would leave my room door open to let my hallmates know that I wanted to hang out. I would smile at people and force myself to have a conversation with at least three people a day. People assured me that with even a slight effort, making friends would be a breeze. As summer came to a close and my new life was about to begin, I was ready to begin the next chapter of my life.

IV. EXPERIMENTAL RESULTS

I felt at peace arriving on campus. I slept easy feeling a real distance from my past. I had the blank slate I had envisioned. However, things wouldn't come that easy. The clubs I was interested in seemed to be either overly serious and time-consuming or overly casual and unorganized. Getting to know people through class didn't work out as anticipated either. I tried initiating conversations, but they almost never went anywhere. I didn't vibe with my hallmates and didn't find many opportunities to connect with them as most hangouts were spontaneous. And unsurprisingly, striking conversations with strangers as a socially inept freshman quickly led to discouraging results.

In the meantime, schoolwork wasn't going well either. At orientation, I discovered I could skip my introductory computer science class due to a dual enrollment class I took in high school. While this put me ahead, I quickly realized that a community college class I took over a year ago wasn't enough to prepare me for the class I was in now. I felt hopeless working on project 2 and had little done the day before it was due. Not only did I feel lost socially, but now I was questioning if I was even fit for college academically. I felt like a failure.

I was on the bus on the way to my physics exam, when a girl who was a leader in one of the

clubs I tried out, got on. Sarah was a sophomore in the same class that I was struggling with. We had talked a bit before, but at this point, I would hardly even call her an acquaintance, let alone a friend. She recognized me and excitedly sat next to me.

"How's the EECS 280 project going?" she asked.

"It's pretty bad," I replied honestly.

"Do you need help?"

Normally I would be hesitant to accept help, especially from someone I barely knew, but I was desperate and took her up on it. That night, we met up and she helped for a couple of hours, allowing me to better understand the project. With a better grasp of the project, I ended up pulling an all-nighter to get as far as I could. The next day, she checked up on me and helped for a couple more hours before the deadline.

"You're too nice," I told her amid the help.

"Nah, I'm not nice"

"This is literally the nicest thing anyone has ever done for me"

"College is all about helping people and struggling together" she answered.

I never felt more cared for before. That act of kindness changed my outlook. Rather than be full of despair, I had hope. I had found at least one person that I could trust and wanted to see me happy, even if I had nothing to offer. I began to spend more time with Sarah and continued attending the club she had led. With a more positive outlook, I was more open to accepting others into my life. I found myself finally immersed in a community of people that made me feel welcome. It was what I was looking for all this time. I soon found my group of friends who'd study together, explore campus events together, and just wanted to get to know one another. As the semester went on, my life slowly began feeling better. The overbearing cloud of negativity that had followed me for years was weakening, and I found myself smiling much more often. Those around me could see the stark change in my personality within the span of just a few months.

At the end of the semester, I wrote back to Banzai to update him on my year. Before rereading the deal we made, I wasn't actually sure if I had accomplished enough to satisfy it. I remembered how impossible the task seemed. But reflecting back on my freshman year, I felt things

were incomparably better than they were during high school. I felt real joy and had people that truly cared about me. I enjoyed my social life and at the end of the day, I could confidently say that I felt comfortable with how life was going.

V. DISCUSSION

Once when I was talking about how much of a joy my first semester had been, one of my new friends, told me, “You really seemed to make an effort to put yourself out there. You came out to lots of events and even reached out to a lot of people.”

I believe a large part of this was due not to confidence, but rather, desperation. I wasn’t pushing myself outside of my comfort zone because I didn’t have a comfort zone in the first place. I had nothing to lose by putting myself out there. And while that idea may seem dismal, it proved to be my greatest weapon. As I grew more discouraged and desperate from failing to make friends early on, that desperation allowed me to try things I normally wouldn’t have. I opened up to people and had extremely meaningful conversations that quickly build trust. So once I had a group of friends, I would sometimes catch myself becoming complacent. Sometimes, I’d start to turn down invitations because I was comfortable with what I had, but now I would be more regretful as I knew the power of pushing myself to go do things.

Of course, I was also extremely lucky to find Sarah to be so willing to invest in me. While I didn’t expect to ride the bus with her, I did force myself to accept her offer. That’s another difficult thing. Putting yourself in uncomfortable situations doesn’t always pay off. More often than not, you should expect it to not. However, you have to persist, and in the long run, you should see positive results. Failures are discouraging, but you should use any bit of hope and optimism you must motivate yourself to keep trying. With some luck, you might just find a great payoff.

VI. THREATS TO VALIDITY

The COVID-19 pandemic hit my junior year and forced a quick and abrupt end to many of my close friends. It left me devastated. Many of my friends were a year older, and I felt robbed of so many potential moments that I was going to

have with them. There were too many goodbyes never said as the pandemic forced people off of campus in an instant. I kept in touch with as many of them as I could online, allowing us to maintain some amount of connection.

The next year was rough. After losing friends to graduation, the friends that I still had were hesitant to meet in person due to COVID. This problem was exacerbated once winter came around and it was too cold to spend time together outside. Meeting new people and connecting with others through online classes proved to be a fruitless endeavor.

There were points where I felt lonely once again, though it never got nearly as bad as it was in high school. I would find satisfaction through video calling my friends who graduated and the occasional meetup. However, having been spoiled by surrounding myself with others the last few years, I had a hard time dealing with being by myself again.

VII. FUTURE WORK

I returned to school for an extra semester to finish up my undergraduate degree. Classes were back in-person, and I was quickly overjoyed to see the return to the usual flow of attending class in person, comfortably meeting up with people, and planning new student outreach events. I felt more confident, being older than almost everyone else and thus having experienced much more than most. Even with the vast majority of my closest friends now gone, I was able to meet people again and spend time with more of my younger friends. I also knew my time in college would be coming to an end. I needed to join the rest of my friends who moved on with their lives.

I don’t know how my friendships will look once I’m gone and I’m physically separated from them, but I still want to make an effort, especially to the ones I grew closer with. People are often be surprised, how many people I keep in touch with that have already graduated. I care too much about them. I’ll never forget how each one of them has shaped me to become who I am today.

At the same time, I’m excited for all the new friends and experiences to come as I enter a new stage of life. The circumstances are certainly different. I won’t be surrounded by people my age anymore. I won’t have weekly club meetings with people of similar interests, and I’ll have to make

an even greater effort to find people willing to be friends. Yet, I'm still not worried. I was extremely worried before college despite what others were saying, but things ended up great. I welcome the new challenge. I'm not the same person I was in high school. I've gained confidence in myself,

I've learned the importance of putting myself in favorable situations, I've got a support system to lean on when things get tough, and I've dealt with the lowest of lows, but I have genuine joy and optimism now that will prepare me for whatever's next.