Most people don’t think in-depth about the idea of loneliness. Loneliness is one of those concepts we assume we know. We equate it to the very definable concept of being alone, which means “without other people,” and thanks to “lonely people” archetypes — like the spinster with 10 cats and the misunderstood teenager — we think we know exactly what loneliness looks like.

The trouble is, loneliness is actually subjective (i.e., different from person to person), so there’s no way anyone can truly know what it looks like.

In the Encyclopedia of Mental Health (1998) researchers, Daniel Perlman and Letita Anne Peplau define loneliness as,

“The subjective psychological discomfort people experience when their network of social relationships is significantly deficient in either quality or quantity.”

In other words, loneliness occurs when a person’s social relationships don’t meet their interpersonal needs or desires. I want you to note, the above definition says nothing about the state of being alone. Instead, that loneliness is a feeling of discomfort that arises when a person subjectively feels unfulfilled by their social relationships.

Loneliness is dependent on what a person “needs and desires,” and this measure is personal and varies drastically from one individual to the next. Based on this definition, we see that prototypical characterizations of “loneliness” are misguided. Individual loneliness is defined by what a person wants in contrast to what they have. So whether a person has 100 great family and friends, if they long for something or someone they don’t have —like an intimate partner, a friend they can open up to, a group of people who “get them,” a family, etc. – they are liable to feel lonely.

“Something or someone they don’t have….“

If you’re grieving, you may feel this has become the story of your life. There are aspects of bereavement that make loneliness seem inevitable and unsolvable. Primarily, the fact that what you desire is your loved one, and what you have is an emptiness molded so precisely to your loved one’s likeness that no one else could ever fill it.

People who are grieving are at a disadvantage when it comes to loneliness because the person they long for is forever gone. I’ve come to understand that loneliness after the death of a loved one is many things. Above all else, it’s the ache of having loved someone so much that pieces of you became them, and pieces of them became you.
When they were taken from this Earth, a piece of you, your heart, and your history went with them, and you were left behind to live a life that feels forever incomplete. Now that your loved one is gone, there are parts of you that no longer make sense; the roles you both filled, the jokes and memories you shared, their part of the routine.

What do you do with all these things now that your loved one is gone? If the common experience of feeling misunderstood and alienated in grief wasn’t enough, you have now lost one of the few people in this world who really truly “got” you. You feel alone in a world full of people….you feel lonely.

Not to make things seem worse, but once your brain starts thinking in an “I’m on my own, so I have to look out for myself” kind of way, it may be primed to guard against others by interpreting their actions negatively and by pushing them away. And as you might expect, this perpetuates feelings of loneliness.

The loneliness of grief is not easily solved. It takes time and effort. You will never fill your loved one’s void, that simply won’t happen. Instead, you have to work slowly, slowly to fill in the abyss.

How do you do this? I sadly can’t answer that for you. I guess I would say that, when ready, open yourself up to the love of people in your life. You don’t have to let go of your loved one, but simultaneously decide to accept the company and support of others and maybe, if necessary, seek out new people in the process. It won’t be easy, and it won’t be perfect, but perhaps in time, the hole left by your loved one will be filled by the love of many.

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You may want to access this article on the What’s Your Grief website and read the responses. Loneliness is a common problem among those who are grieving. You are not alone. You may find yourself identifying with some readers, others you might not appreciate... you can skip those and go on to the next one. It’s not surprising how many people are lonely in their grief. https://whatsyourgrief.com/unique-loneliness-grief/

Remember, we’re here for you. We understand your pain.