

The existential dimensions of loneliness: A dialogue among four existential therapists

Preamble

Loneliness is a quintessential human experience. Some philosophers and existential thinkers (Kierkegaard, 2009; Moustakas, 1990; Yalom, 1980) would argue that loneliness is a fundamental state of being human once we become aware of our irretrievable separateness and distinctiveness, and realize that our most personal, intimate experience of the world and of ourselves is uniquely ours- irreplaceable and never fully known by the others—even under the ideal condition of a perfect empathic attunement. In Existential Analysis (EA), the experience of loneliness is understood as an experience pertaining mainly to the second fundamental motivation (FM2; relationships) and the third fundamental motivation (FM3; self development, personhood, encounter). Thus, loneliness stems not only from a lack of outer relationships but also from a disconnect from self or a loss of sense of self.

Illustrating this existential-analytical perspective, the present article provides the readers the opportunity to witness a live, uncensored dialogue about loneliness among four EA trained Canadian psychotherapists^[1]. This dialogical format reflects the EA dialogical stance, and allows the main themes related to the experience of loneliness to emerge organically and to illuminate various perspectives on this topic. To ease the readers' transitions among various parts of this dialogue, we will introduce the main theme and a summary of the main points of that theme at the beginning of each major section, before allowing the dialogue to unfold.

^[1] The dialogue presented in this article is an excerpt from the episode 7 (Loneliness) published by The Existentialists podcast at www.existentialistspodcast.com

Loneliness and aloneness

It is relatively common for lay people and some philosophers to use terms such as “lonely” and “alone” interchangeably at times. Although there may be some degree of overlap or even blending between these terms, in our dialogue we differentiate between the experience of loneliness lived as a painful disconnect

from self and/or others, and that of being alone experienced as a peaceful or even joyful encounter with oneself in which we can celebrate our uniqueness and intimacy with oneself.

M[2]: I'd suggest that it would be good to clarify our terms, because the term "loneliness" sometimes gets confused with "aleness" or "solitude". For myself, I make a distinction between being alone or in solitude and being or feeling lonely. Being alone is something that I very much appreciate, I choose, and I enjoy, because it allows me to be with myself, and to touch base with my inner ground. It gives me the space and the time to process my experiences, to sit with these experiences, and to live in and from an intimacy with myself. It is an experience that's rich and enriching. Feeling lonely is quite different. When I feel lonely, I cannot find that warm space within myself that allows me to feel connected with myself, and there is a weird feeling of estrangement, of not being fully with myself.

J: I liked the use of the word "estrangement"- estrangement from self but also estrangement from other people. And I think when my clients and even friends and family talk about loneliness, typically it means that there is a disconnect between myself and other people, or other people are not available, or they are not around. And I have historically felt loneliness that way, but, in more recent years, I would feel loneliness more like estrangement from myself. So, I like how you distinguished between loneliness and being alone and in solitude. I think, for me, I see loneliness as the feeling that arises first, maybe? I'm not sure if there's an order, but it just seems like in order to get to a place where being alone and in solitude is welcomed, there often is that walking

through the darkness or the painful experience of a feeling of loneliness. In confronting the loneliness, we may be able to come to a place of finding our center and solitude. Thus, I agree about distinguishing these terms, but I also see them as intimately connected as well.

C: I like what you said, Janelle, because I was thinking about it too, and in more recent times, or in the past couple of years, I've certainly felt more solitude, but it feels very different than the loneliness that I maybe would've experienced before. In loneliness there was an insatiable quality to it where it did not really feel like it could ever really be filled, but I was seeking something to fill it. And then I feel like somewhere in the process or along the way, coming home to myself and having that relationship with myself converted or transmuted that loneliness feeling to one of solitude. I think the connection between the two is close and intimate, and, as Janelle was saying, in confronting or facing the loneliness, we may find a way to solitude.

X: For most of my life, I have not really felt lonely. That just shifted as I have gotten older, for a host of reasons, but I have always largely been content with being in my head, let's call it. Alone, but kind of knowing that I could go and play in my own

head. I could go ahead and revel in fantasy, I could explore, I could philosophize, I could do a whole bunch of things even in, say, the presence of others that I don't really agree with or where I did not fit in- places where I imagine I could be lonely—but that was always kind of okay. And certainly that's something that's come up recently with clients talking about how they're often so lonely when they are with other people, not so much on their own, which seems really paradoxical, that you would be lonely with others. And of course, for me then, there is this idea that no matter how close you ever get to somebody, you will never actually know what it's like to be them, and they will never fully reach us. And any attempts to overcome that are ultimately futile, which in many ways sounds quite... dark. But, at least for me, it has been quite revelatory.

C: I was going to say 'dark'? Or kind of precious? In that you have your own unique experience, your own unique separateness that only you can be in a relationship with.

X: Certainly, and that is how it has been for me, for sure. It almost kind of gives us permission to stop trying not to feel lonely. And I do not mean to give up, but to stop trying to overcome the futility of really trying to overcome it, particularly as it pertains to relationships.

M: Because there is always going to be some degree of aloneness and perhaps loneliness even in our most intimate relationships given our separateness and differences. It also seems to me that your remark, Xav brings up a different level of loneliness sometimes called 'existential loneliness', which is a fundamental experience of being human, in the sense that our separateness represents an existential given. And as you said, Chelsea, this is not just a dark place, but it could be a very fruitful experience. To me, there is something almost miraculous in the fact that we are separate, that we can enjoy that uniqueness and being different. And of course, there is also the beauty that comes from encountering the uniqueness and differences in others, which is only possible because we are separate and different from one another.

[2] The first letter of the authors' first names is used to identify the speakers throughout this dialogue.

Lonely relational beings

If we are relational beings as some philosophers and researchers claim, how come that, at times, we all feel the throbbing, unrelentless pangs of loneliness or the terrifying spectrum of the possibility of feeling lonely or left alone? Shouldn't our relationships that we cherish as our ontological ground prevent us from

feeling so disconnected and lonely? The EA stance on this suggests that fulfilling relationships based on the encounter of two real persons—not just of their projections of each other—are possible only between people who embrace their uniqueness and separateness and are able to live in the dialectical tension between the desire and capacity to relate with the others, and the desire and capacity to be alone. We turn both towards the others and towards ourselves, and every time we are in an authentic relationship with another person, we are always in relationship with ourselves. In and through this double openness and dialogue, our personhood emerges.

M: Given our discussion about separateness and existential loneliness as fundamental human experiences, are we then relational beings, or are we fundamentally alone? Or both? Some people say a lot these days, in certain communities at least, that we are relational and they claim that quite boldly and without much nuance about what that actually means, which, sometimes, creates the breeding soil for enmeshment, codependency, relational transgressions and wounds inflicted under the pretense of relationality. For myself, I think that we are ontologically relational, we are 'being-with' as Heidegger wrote, in the sense that our being-in-the-world is constituted and exists in relationships. At the same time, we are also alone, in the sense of being separate, distinct, unique persons. As we assume our own existence, become aware of our own separateness, become ourselves and live authentically, being alone becomes a fundamental human, existential experience that deepens our capacity for being in relationships. It is not just a dark experience, but also a beautiful, rich experience.

J: So then, is loneliness perhaps an inability to accept that fundamental given that we are alone?

M: I think that to a certain extent that could be the case. Heidegger seems to suggest that most of us, most human beings, prefer to experience the security and often times the ignorance of being embedded in roles and functional relationships rather than being fully aware of the fact that we are also standing alone as being-towards-death, solely responsible for our existence. Most people are reluctant to take up their existence as separate, unique persons, and fear the perceived danger or burden of their authenticity. Hence, I guess there could be a comfort and safety in belonging, in the sense of blending in, and not assuming one's aloneness. It is also possible that instead of assuming this existential dimension of separateness and our authenticity, some of us frantically try to overcome it by searching outer relationships and roles; thus, we become more and more estranged from ourselves and lonely.

X: Is this not where something like codependency becomes a thing, or cults become a thing, where you are effectively trying to lose yourself, to not-

M: ...not to be yourself. Exactly, because there is a comfort in not being oneself, and not assuming the full capacity for becoming one's separate self. It is easier sometimes to blend in and to be part of a cult, or a community, rather than to fully, consciously, assume one's separateness and authenticity.

J: I think that there are a lot of people who grew up with quite different worldviews, that say that life is all about relationality, it is all about you and I, especially if you grow up within certain religious or spiritual communities. It is about you and God, or the transcendent, and not only that but also that our relationships with people on Earth are a microcosm for us to create a relationship with God. And so, for many people who grew up with those world views, the experience of loneliness is profoundly excruciating, because they were told that it should not be this way.

X: It can then be compounded, if the relations—the mortal relations, are a microcosm of the spiritual realm.

M: Indeed, I think that in these cases the suffering, the pain could be felt even more on the spiritual dimension—as if there is some failing or some longing there or perhaps something unfulfilled on a spiritual level.

Loneliness with the other versus loneliness without the other

EA affirms the importance of both relationships with others and of the inner relationship with oneself. Hence, an experience of loneliness can stem both from a lack of relationships with others (the loneliness without the other) and from a lack of relationship with oneself, even when the other is present (the loneliness with the other). Many people feel an even more excruciating sense of loneliness when they are with the others and yet feel lonely and disconnected. This experience highlights yet again the crucial importance of developing our capacity to relate to and be with ourselves and by ourselves as a condition to experiencing fulfilling, mature relationships with other.

J: ... you can be in a room full of people, and still feel like the loneliest person in the world. So, what is going on there? And same thing, you can be in a room with one person whose singular focus is to be with you, and still feel like the loneliest person in the world.

M: Actually, phenomenological research on loneliness recognizes these two fundamental types of loneliness: the loneliness without the other—when I am by myself and there is no other to know me, to encounter me, to be with me—, and the loneliness with the other-- when I feel utterly alone and alienated even in the

presence of the other, usually because I experience myself as being so different and out of reach, to the point that no matter how much the other tries to encounter me, I cannot receive or experience that. Hence, I can be with many people in a room or with just one person who is really focusing on me, and I can still feel utterly lonely. And I guess that points to some degree of estrangement from myself as well, and evokes the question whether I am with myself enough to be able to receive what the other is seeing of me, or whether I am in a bad place for that (disconnected from myself).

And, of course, there are also situations, like the COVID-19 pandemic, that really bring to the fore the loneliness that takes hold because there is limited connection with the other, at least not physical, in person connection. This is in addition to the estrangement from ourselves.

J: For sure, absolutely. I think the latter was harder for people to see. In my experience, it has been harder for individuals to be able to say 'oh, I'm out of connection with myself'. I find that when people are suffering from loneliness, there is often this assumption that it's because 'I'm not in a relationship with the other'.

M: Very much so.

J: And because I relate more to the estrangement of self side of loneliness, it is actually hard for me sometimes to understand, what is it actually that you're looking for from the other? We say 'oh, I want connection', but why? For what? What does that give us? What does that do for us? What are we looking for?

Longing to be known

When we feel lonely, it is very tempting and almost irresistible to reach out for someone or something to alleviate our gnawing feeling of loneliness. At those times, we tend to become restless and frantically try to overcome the unpleasant or painful feeling of disconnect and hollow at the core of ourselves. Most of us would instinctively turn towards someone, towards an existing relationship or we may try to find or start new relationships. It is as if we sense something vital or precious in turning towards the other when we are lonely.

M: What are we seeking to receive from the other that could alleviate our loneliness since we seem to have this hope or longing that the other could relieve some of that?

C: I think on a very basic level, and to go with what you said about the relational ontology, I can have my own self-experience but sometimes it's also helpful to have

that acknowledged or mirrored from the outside. So if somebody, you know, spends the time being open to me and acknowledge my presence or that I'm there or to be with me as I'm with myself, then that adds an extra solidity to how I feel my existence. It reminds me of a client that I had when I first started working, who felt very, very alone and was quite alone interpersonally. And he would go to the hospital, and he'd come back and tell me with tears in his eyes-- he was like, "I go to the hospital because I just want someone to look me in the eyes and acknowledge that I exist". Hence, I think there is something about being with others that is affirming to our existence... like I am here, I exist, someone recognizes me. And I think that is really important.

M: Yes, absolutely. That deep longing to be known, to be seen is very important. As human beings, we are not meant to be completely alone or alone all the time. 'Being-with' is also one important dimension of our existence. I notice again how being with others and being alone are such intimately related experiences and complete each other as well as our experience of being our own person as the person has both a private pole (intimacy with oneself) and a so called public pole (being with others).

J: Interesting observation. I also really like what you said about bringing solidity to the existence... needing to know that I exist. Loneliness is also this harbinger of annihilation. That is huge: if nobody sees me, I do not exist. And then I go to right away—well, if that's the case, to me, it indicates that these people don't have themselves, they aren't with themselves, they can't let themselves feel their own person. So, to me, loneliness always goes back to the relationship to self and estrangement from self.

Developing the capacity to be alone

Our capacity to be alone and even to endure the painful stretches of loneliness develops ontogenetically, and it is intimately intertwined with the process of self development. EA recognizes the critical importance of the external conditions of receiving loving attention, appreciation, and justice from the others in the development of a sense of self and self-worth. Developmentally, it is crucial to experience being seen and known by the other as we truly are not just as a projection of the other. Early developmental trauma and the poverty of such experiences of being encountered while growing up may lead to difficulties in developing a strong sense of self, and, consequently, to a diminished capacity to be alone.

M: I think it's also important to talk about the ontogenetic development, because someone who hasn't been seen, and doesn't feel that solidity of existence as

reflected back by a loving other growing up, might feel probably more lonely and it will be more difficult to be alone when they are adults. In contrast, someone who had some good experiences, even if not the full range of experiences of being seen—may have that experience of the solidity of their existence and of their sense of self. And it may be a little bit easier for them to endure even the existential loneliness, or to be alone.

J: That is a really good point.

C: And I think you can be seen, but I guess the quality of being seen varies, because you can be seen and acknowledged as an individual but maybe not be seen in your authenticity. And I think we need that, being seen by the other as who we are authentically to offset the feelings of loneliness. I think that is confusing for people... many people might have been mirrored growing up, and yet the mirroring maybe was not actually very accurate.

X: Yes, so then what do we say or think about people who—as therapists maybe we have done this. Maybe you've experienced this—I know I have—where I've got a client in front of me who—I'm really trying to be with them, and I'm putting major effort into doing that and to see beyond their primary complex, their superficial complex, and really looking at them. And yet, they will continually tell me that they have not been seen. And that's a difficult one for a therapist, to hear, to kind of go 'but, like, I'm right here with you, we've talked, we've done all these things, and yet still...'

M: Oh yes, I can totally relate to this. I can also think of some of my clients. I feel like telling them: "I'm right here, we shared some very personal experiences, we've done this for a while", and it still doesn't hold. It takes time and patience as some of our clients have never had that experience before. So even to be able to recognize it, first, and then to experience it is a huge thing. Sometimes it's quite threatening, it's very vulnerable. And then to be able to recognize it when it happens again and again, and to hold onto it and bring it up within themselves. It's a very complicated and long process. It just takes time, especially if they didn't have it growing up, to just recognize it and to be with it or tolerate it. Sometimes people feel very vulnerable when they are truly seen and there is also a high risk that they can feel shame or embarrassment as a result..

The pain of loneliness

It is often hard to pinpoint what aches so much when we feel lonely. Sometimes it may be just a feeling of dull malaise, of being out of sorts, disconnected and disoriented. Other times, we may notice our restlessness, a frantic, desperate attempt to quench the unease of sensing how hollow we feel. Or we may feel the throbbing pain of being thrown upon ourselves when we feel unable to support

ourselves. EA suggests that this pain may be stemming from a sense of loss of self or connection with self.

M: What is so unpleasant and painful in being lonely that people would do many things just to get a little bit of relief from that. What is it so painful there?

J: I feel there is a quality, even if clients do not say it out loud, but this feeling of 'nobody can help me, nobody can actually do anything'. There is a helplessness in it.

M: 'I'm out of reach and there is nothing I can do about it.'

J: Yeah. 'I could take medication, I could do yoga, meditate. I could go for walks. I could, you know—but this thing is in me and it will not leave me no matter what I do. And you cannot take it from me, there is nothing that you could do to take this from me, so...'

M: In my most recent acute experience of loneliness, my feeling was that I was completely out of reach, like I was on a different planet, in a different galaxy. The feeling was that there was absolutely no one who could begin to understand my experience or would even want to begin to understand. An experience of complete disconnect. And yet really wanting and longing to be seen and encountered, like a thwarted, torturous longing for connection with the other. And the absence of the other- not only physical but especially emotional and spiritual- was heart-wrenching. It felt like I was thrown upon myself in a moment when my inner ground was rapidly unraveling due to a specific circumstance and when I really needed the other. That experience left me incredibly raw, exposed and vulnerable, and, sadly, it confirmed for me that, fundamentally, I am alone and no one will be there with me in my darkest hour. And, at that time, that realization was terrifying.

J: I think as well that the feeling of non-existence that loneliness can evoke can be obliterating, and I think there's a... a desperation that comes in that, at least in some of the family members I've seen that have really suffered from loneliness. I just feel that desperation, like that needing-- that frantic reaching out—and that being futile.

C: Yeah, it is so strong. Yeah, and I think ultimately... perhaps there must be a receptivity to yourself first in order to create the openness or the ability to receive from the outside.

Dealing with loneliness in therapy

As therapists we work with a lot of clients who suffer from loneliness on a chronic basis. The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated this feeling of loneliness for many of our clients and even for ourselves. This raises the question of how to support our clients in dealing with their painful experiences of loneliness.

M: So how do we deal with loneliness and how do we help our clients deal with loneliness? Or how can we help them be with this experience?

C: For me, I see it, again, as helping them to foster and facilitate that relationship with self, and that receptivity to self. It does not change the fundamental aloneness, but it changes the relating to it.

X: How might people do that, Chelsea?

C: Well, I think it's a very long process and the therapeutic relationship helps create that container or that space for that self-relating to happen- that free emotional experiencing may not get to happen in other places. Through freely relating to oneself and to the therapist in the room, the client gets to get more in contact with themselves. And the loneliness maybe starts to dissipate from there.

J: I have experienced shifts with clients whose main issue is that they feel lonely. It is not until they can actually feel the pain, feel what they're feeling in the present moment, that that loneliness starts to subside. I am sitting in the office with a client, and my gaze is turned toward them, looking at them, trying to access them. But... their focus is on somebody else who is not in the room. So, it's interesting-- even just in the eye contact or the symbolic looking—they look elsewhere. And when the client brings their eyes back to themselves, and I am mirroring and looking at them, now we are dealing with the loneliness. Now we can engage with it and respond to it.

M: I also think it is important to lessen or let go of some relational expectations, like I should be fully seen, I should be fully known, or of that fantasy of finding one's soulmate or whatever idealized quality that intensifies the legitimately human longing of being seen and known. So, working with expectations, and calling out some fantasies-that the other should take away the pain of loneliness. The other- in this case the therapist- can be with the client, as you said, Janelle, fully present and encountering the client so that the client can show up for their own experience. But the therapist cannot and should not fix or take away the loneliness.

It's important though to explore that longing, the intensity of it and where does it come from, what shapes it. For example, I'm referring also to our culture that promotes a lot of unrealistic ideas about togetherness and coupleship, as well as the fantasy that there is someone out there who will just make it all better.

J: Yeah, and the way we communicate on social media. It's designed so that you never have to be lonely. Just open up your phone. Watch videos. Text someone.

M: That's such a good point, Janelle. Yes, that implicit assumption that there is a problem if you are lonely or you must be doing something wrong.

J: Yeah. I think a lot of my work as a therapist has actually been with clients who will come in and ask "what can I do?" ... "Nothing". Loneliness is not a doing thing-- It's a 'being thing'. You have to be in it.

M: Moustakas would agree with you. Loneliness is a state of being that cannot be done away

with as it awaits to be fully lived.

J: For me, this is an ongoing process, and I'm learning how to be with my own loneliness. And I hold the belief that therapists can only be as effective as they've done the work themselves. And so, I think the trap to fall into as a therapist when the client says, "what do I do?" is to immediately try and give them things to do. "Oh, here's all the activities you can do or this is how you can go out and meet people". So it's been interesting to see as I've grown in my capacity to be alone, how I'm also able to be with clients and their loneliness—not that it's comfortable—but there are these moments when I'm in my house and all of a sudden loneliness just descends. And here I am, and I feel it acutely. It's a challenge for myself to not immediately pick up my phone because that's easy but it's not going to do anything. But instead to actually just sit down and feel it... and I agree with what you're saying, Mihaela, that not everybody can do that right away; we have to build up that capacity. Even if you can do that for 5 seconds just to allow the feeling to arise, that is enough to start. In my own moments of loneliness often the feeling is nothingness first. And then something, some other emotion will come up and then maybe I'll start having a dialogue with myself like I'll just start talking to myself, or images will come to my mind, or a metaphor will come to my mind, and I am just leaning into that, whatever the moment is giving to me, whatever needs to be here. So, I think, in how to be with loneliness is in acceptance. We should not do away with it as soon as we feel it, but to accept that it is here and so, what does it feel like? To get curious about it, like what is that feeling of loneliness like for me? And just to notice how it moves, and how it shifts.

M: Such important points, Janelle, thank you. Because if we can be with our loneliness, make room for it and notice how it changes, we are in fact undoing the loneliness by being with ourselves, with whatever we experience. We reconnect with ourselves and the thick fog of loneliness begins to clear bit by bit. I discover that I can be with myself again.

In the spirit of what we just shared, let's wrap up our dialogue with a quote from Moustakas' book on loneliness. He wrote that "Loneliness is neither good nor bad. It's not a bad experience in itself but the point of intense and timeless awareness of

the self which results in bringing a person deeply in touch with his own existence and in touch with others in a fundamental sense. I began to see that in the deepest experiences the human being can know, the birth of a baby, the prolonged illness or death of a loved relative, the loss of a job, the creation of a poem or a painting, or even the grief of a fire or flood or car accident... each in its own way touches upon the roots of loneliness, and in each of these experiences, in the end we must go alone". Hence, loneliness could be a calling to encounter our existence and ourselves on a deeper level, and to become more fully part of the existence by assuming our fundamental aloneness. And from that place, we can connect with others more deeply by respecting their own aloneness, boundaries and differences.

Final words

Loneliness, a fundamental state of existence, is often marked by a painful experience of feeling a disconnect in relationship with self and/or the other, which in EA corresponds to challenges or blockages primarily in the FM2 and FM3, respectively. Loneliness is also a common theme that emerges within the psychotherapeutic process. Ontogenetic development is important to consider when supporting clients who suffer from loneliness, as clients' capacities to sense their own presence and to feel seen by another can differ significantly. Clients' beliefs surrounding relationships, particularly their expectations and assumptions that one should not be lonely, shapes their capacity to endure and deal with loneliness. It is valuable for therapists to consider their own attitudes towards loneliness and their capacities to respond to loneliness when it arises. Since all human beings are fundamentally alone, it is beneficial for both client and therapist to be aware of such a state of being and to strengthen one's capacity to be both in relationship with others and with oneself as a means of dealing with loneliness.

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