

# The loneliness paradox

Why we feel alone in a crowded room

AVNEE TANEJA

Sometimes, loneliness is not the absence of people, but the quiet spaces between words, the pauses in a conversation, the distance between two hearts sitting side by side. It's the soft shadow beneath laughter, the invisible thread that feels just out of reach.

It's Saturday night. The café is alive with chatter, the air rich with the smell of coffee and the sound of laughter spilling from every table. You're with friends, smiling when they smile, nodding when they speak.

On the surface, it looks like you're part of the moment – but inside, it feels like you're somewhere else entirely. As though there's an invisible sheet of glass between you and the rest of the room, muting the sound, dulling the warmth.

That's the loneliness paradox. Feeling completely alone, even when people surround you. It's a quiet, private ache – one that rarely shows on the outside. It doesn't always make sense, even to ourselves. How can I feel lonely when I'm not alone?

Psychologists refer to it as perceived social isolation, but most of us simply know it as the feeling of not quite belonging.

Sometimes it's because of our history. The way we first learned to connect – or to protect ourselves from connection – shapes the way we experience relationships now. If your early experiences taught you to expect rejection or question whether love will last, those patterns could follow you into adulthood, whispering doubts even in moments that should feel safe.

Other times, it's about comparison. Without realising it, we hold our relationships up against the ones we see around us. Maybe their laughter seems louder, their inside jokes deeper, their bonds stronger. It can make our connections feel thinner, even if they're not. And sometimes, it's simply that the emotional spark isn't there. You might be in the same physical space, but your hearts are on different frequencies.

Loneliness isn't just a mood – it's a whole-body experience. Your brain responds to it like a threat, sending stress hormones racing through your system. You might find yourself more on edge, more

cautious, less willing to take emotional risks. And here's the catch: the more disconnected we feel, the harder it becomes to reach for the very thing we're longing for. The protective walls go up, but they keep love out as much as they keep hurt away.

The way out doesn't always begin with grand gestures or big changes. It can start with something as simple as paying closer attention. Instead of just being in the same space as someone, tune in – really tune in – to what they're saying, how they're feeling.

Ask a question you genuinely care about and then listen without rushing to respond. Share a piece of your own story, even a small one, that reveals something true about you. Connection grows in these moments of mutual openness.

Even the smallest interactions matter. A shared smile with a stranger in the supermarket aisle. That unplanned burst of laughter with a colleague. A friend texting you out of the blue just to check in.

These are what psychologist Barbara Fredrickson calls 'micro-moments of connection' – tiny yet powerful reminders that we're part of a bigger human web.

It also helps to soften our expectations. Not every friendship will be life-changing, and not every conversation will leave us feeling lit up. That's okay. Lighter interactions can still be nourishing in their own way, and sometimes they lay the groundwork for something deeper later on.

The most important thing to remember is that loneliness, as heavy as it feels, is not proof that you're broken or unlovable. It's a signal – your heart's way of saying, I need more. More closeness, more understanding, more shared humanity. If we can see loneliness not as a failing but as a compass, it can guide us towards the people and places where we feel truly at home.

So the next time you feel alone in a crowded room, pause for a moment. Notice the feeling without judging it. Let it remind you of what you value most in connection. And then, when you're ready, take one small step towards someone. It might be the start of closing that invisible distance. Because in the end, it's never about how many people surround you – it's about the ones who make you feel you belong.



**Avnee Taneja** is a psychologist passionate about mental health, criminology, and human behaviour. With a Master's in Criminology from the University of Manchester and ongoing studies in Psychology, she combines academic insight with real-world experience. From therapy and psychological assessments to research and advocacy, her work is driven by a deep commitment to understanding and supporting mental well-being.

