

That We May Not Be Alone

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In my capacity as a mental health professional and as a member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, it is an honor to be invited to speak at the BYU Women's Conference on loneliness. I have sought counsel from my Heavenly Father that I might share a message directed by the Spirit that is applicable to all. My remarks will include clinical information, spiritual directives, and personal experiences.

As I interact with women and sisters in various geographical locations in my professional career, I hear their heartaches as they discuss and share with me their

feelings and journeys of loneliness. Aside from the sisters and women who speak with me, I would like to emphasize that there are many women and sisters from a variety of backgrounds, social statuses, ethnicities, and family situations who are and or have experienced similar loneliness. The phenomenon of loneliness knows no boundaries and affects each of us at some point in our lives.

According to the Center for Disease Control, loneliness is a worldwide problem affecting youth and adults alike. Loneliness can be experienced in varying degrees, ranging from a mild feeling of being alone to a deep sense of despair and hopelessness. Perhaps you have felt such?

A growing body of research indicates that loneliness is a leading cause of heart disease, cardiovascular disease, hypertension, stroke, and metabolic disorders such as obesity. Psychological problems such as depression, stress, anxiety, insecurity, suicidal ideation, loss of hope, loss of faith, and inability to trust are also associated with loneliness.

Loneliness has different definitions. A general assumption is that emotional loneliness is related to the absence of an attachment figure, while social loneliness refers to the absence of a social network, the lack of people who allow an individual to feel a sense of belonging, of being part of a community. That is a very interesting definition to consider in this ever-growing social media and virtual reality world. Scientists across the board

agree that the social media world can provide connection but that virtual connections should not take the place of face-to-face human connection. Research also indicates that spending too much time in the social media world increases levels of depression, anxiety, comparison, and loneliness.

It is also worthwhile to note that loneliness is not necessarily a symptom of being physically isolated, which is what I will discuss today. Instead, it refers to the feeling of being alone and isolated even when surrounded by others. President Russell M. Ballard noted in his general conference remarks, "I have experienced this loneliness since the death of my precious wife, Barbara, over two and a half years ago. I know what it is to be surrounded by

family members, friends, and associates but still feel lonely.” (April 2021 General Conference)

It is inevitable that each of us will experience both types of loneliness at some point in our lives. Many listening to this talk today may be in the throngs of their own loneliness battle. My heart longs to offer you comfort and inclusion if you are. There is a possibility that these feelings of emotional isolation are a results of the following: you desire to feel understood while seeking to conquer deep-seeded feelings of never feeling good enough. You Belong to a ward family; however, remain isolated on Sundays as families claim their benches and return to their homes without inviting you, as a single members of The Church, to join them when possible. You long for comfort in the mourning process as your loved one

is lost either physically, spiritually, or emotionally. You are offered comfort at the moment of loss but find yourself comfortless as the days and months progress, as life moves on and those who came with the Balm of Gilead return to daily life while the hole in your heart and the emptiness in your arms persist. You know the loss of personal dreams when the life you imagined is not what you imagined whether that is due to divorce, death, career change, economic hardships, your choices, or others' choices. You face the complex and often relentless battle to overcome an addiction in which you are choosing to fight alone either out of personal shame and or fear of judgement. You are seeking to understand the path of trust and forgiveness as you battle through the complex and lasting impacts of sexual, physical, and or emotional

abuse in silence. You are experiencing pain when your children struggle and hurt when you feel your children are judged and criticized. In a culture that values family, as a sister without a child you wonder if you belong and/or are unsure of your womanhood. The result of a marital conflict leaves you feeling confused, misunderstood, and possibly facing divorce. On a daily basis you face life through the lens of depression and/or mood disorders which create personal disabilities not visible to others yet often judged. The silent doubts and questions experienced within your heart. Fearful of sharing out of judgment or misunderstanding. You fear appearing needy. These are just a few of the examples of loneliness sisters are facing. I know there are so many more.

These struggles are very real and not to be taken lightly. Having said that as scientists we know this about the mortal human condition, which is contrary to our Heavenly Fathers plan, more often than not when we are faced with such complex lonely battles instead of reaching out that our spirits might know comfort and strength, we tend to adopt the mantra of going it on our own. This mantra is adopted for a variety of reasons. Perhaps in the past a person experienced judgement. Perhaps there is the belief that no one will understand. I know I have felt that way at times. Maybe we think that those around us are so busy that they cannot listen. Maybe it would be better to ask Facebook.

Regardless of the reason for going it alone the alone path can increase the severity of loneliness and shackle

our spirits' resilience to heal. God himself proclaimed from the beginning that man or woman was not meant to be alone. He thus organized His children into families while also encouraging through the example of His son Jesus Christ the importance of connecting with those around us in positive and uplifting ways. Christ, during His mortal experience, formed friendships, spent time with those around Him, lifted others, while healing and inviting God's children to follow Him.

God has structured His Latter-Day Church into wards and branches for unification, support, sisterhood, protection, and comfort. It saddens my heart that many sisters feel most alone within the organization of Relief Society, but I know we can change this.

Remember that as Christ prepared to leave His disciples, He assured them that He would not leave them comfortless. He promised to send them The Comforter. That same promise is given to us. There are many examples in the scriptures of when people who felt abandoned sought Heavenly Father for comfort through the Comforter. Not only did they ask for Heavenly Father for comfort they also allowed others to offer physical comfort in the hope that such might alleviate loneliness. When was the last time you sought comfort from the Comforter through personal prayer, scripture study, temple attendance, or a priesthood blessing? It is a faith-based process to ask God to lift the burden of loneliness. It is a faith empowering process when we act by allowing others into our circle that the burden of loneliness might be lifted.

Let me say that again. It is a faith-based process to ask God to lift the burden of loneliness. It is a faith empowering process when we act by allowing others into our circle that the burden of loneliness might be lifted. Consider the following.

As Mormon grieves both physically and spiritually, he shares the burden he bears and the responsibilities he holds with his son Moroni. Joseph in liberty jail who in supplication asks Father how long his hand will be stayed is incarcerated with his companions Hyrum Smith, Sidney Rigdon, Lyman Wight, Alexander McRae, and Caleb Baldwin. When Hagar and her son are required to leave their people and home, God comforts her and assures her that Ishmael will not die. Instead, he will become a mighty nation. Consider the women with the issue of blood who

struggled for twelve years alone searching for a cure. When she heard of the Savior's coming, she left her sick bed with faith that in his presence she might touch him and be healed. Consider Mary who when told she would conceive a child out of wedlock sought comfort and guidance in Elizabeth and Zechariah's home. The woman at the well burden of drawing physical water was lifted as she listened and sought understanding from The Master who offered and instructed of living water. I also remind you of the man unable to seek help on his own was lowered to the Savior by his friends that he might be healed. Take a moment and return to The Garden of Gethsemane. The Savior of the world invited his disciples to keep watch with Him that night as He partook of that most difficult cup. Consider also that at Christ's death, at

His tomb, and at His resurrection it was primarily women who had loved Him and known Him who stayed and watched.

The key is to learn to navigate loneliness through the light of Jesus Christ, guided by the comforter, within the gospel of Jesus Christ as sisters united to lift, comfort, offer understanding while navigating with humor, light, lightness, hope, time, and healing. I had to learn this lesson for myself on a personal level. Following the finalization of my divorce I felt as if I had failed and was alone. At the time, I was the only divorced single sister in my ward. For weeks I pleaded with the Lord that the sisters around me would invite me to join their circles. Furthermore, I prayed that the Relief Society Presidency or the Bishopric or my visiting teachers at the time would feel

prompted to visit me. No one did. I found myself attending church alone for the first time in years. Although I longed to be invited to sit with others, I did not receive an invitation, nor did I ask for one. In Sunday School and Relief Society, I found myself occupying the last seat right before the meeting began. I left when the services were over. I retreated. I began to isolate myself. In my mind, I told myself negative statements. I experienced a greater sense of loneliness and despair as a consequence of my isolation. Eventually, I accepted that divorce is not a failure or a sin as I worked through my personal feelings. In that acceptance I moved from the back of the meeting room while opening my home, in my new ward, for a book group with sisters I did not know. This book group was the perfect gift for me as women from various backgrounds

and ages loved me, taught me, learned from me, and grew with me. I also found great comfort and acceptance in the presence of my next door neighbor and dear friend as I spent almost every Sunday night for a few years on her back porch sharing my week of both joys and sorrows. Although we were several years apart Kam Capik loved me right where I was.

Months later I shared with a dear friend my feelings about my divorce and the months that followed as the cloud of shame and loneliness lifted. In response to my heartfelt confession to her, my friend wisely stated, "I am so sorry you felt that way." She then added that, given your strong independence, we assumed that you preferred to be left alone for a variety of reasons. This was a valuable learning experience for both of us. My friend

learned not to assume, and I learned that I needed to act as well as pray. I needed to step in and not step away. The gospel of Jesus Christ invites us to step in with the very clear truth that God will never leave us. Anytime and for any reason, we are able to come to Him in prayer. When we do so He will put His spiritual arms of comfort around us. In addition, He will invite us to seek out those within our physical circle who will embrace us, sit with us, cry with us, include us, understand us, and listen to us.

Making the responsibility of processing loneliness not only for the individual dealing with loneliness, but also for those around them, whose arms are needed to lift the individual out of loneliness.

Sisters are not meant to fight loneliness alone, regardless of its form. We increase the severity of

loneliness and shackle our spirits' ability to heal when we isolate and/or feel we have to face it alone. Loneliness that causes sorrow, despair, loss, shame, judgment, etc. is meant to be shared in the gospel of Jesus Christ. God does not intend for us to fight alone. Scientists know that when we allow others to join us in our loneliness, spend time with us eye to eye knee to knee and face to face, our brains release oxytocin, a neurotransmitter that promotes safety, love, security, and hope. In order to face the difficult and challenging challenges of this world, we are stronger together. God designed our spirits to need each other. There are so many who suffer loneliness in silence out of fear, not knowing how to act or ask, or due to past experiences. We can change that. The key to decreasing

loneliness is increasing authentic connection. Together we can take such steps as:

- Take 15 minutes each day to connect with a friend
- Be your authentic self - authenticity increases connection
- When taking time to be with others decrease distractions - such as silencing our phones
- Decrease social media and increase face to face connections
- In the gospel of Jesus Christ we know the value of service. Science also supports service. When we serve others we feel better.
- Pick up the phone when your long lost friend calls - true story I called my son who did not take my call but

instead sent me a message. "Don't call me just text me." I didn't want to text him. I wanted to hear his voice.

- Focus on the conversation
- If you are dealing with loneliness - tell someone - reach out, step in and connect. Remember many years ago AT&T had the slogan Reach out and touch someone. Let's do that sisters let's reach and touch someone be that a friend, a stranger, our sister, our family members, let's make those front porch visits.

Sister, we are capable of doing more. It is possible for our arms to embrace more, our hands to lift more, our hearts to express more, and our souls to share more.

Sister, we can do more. We can keep our doors open, we

can invite others in, we can take risks, we can trust again, if necessary. As we lift, we can be lifted.

Sisters, come to the well. It is Christ who is seated and waiting for you to draw water with him. He understands your loneliness. There is enough water in His well for all - He may however, ask you to borrow your sister's bucket as you gather together to share a cup of water. In the name of Jesus Christ Amen.