

# THE Encourager

DAVE DRAVECKY'S OUTREACH OF HOPE

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## HOPE FOR THE LONELY HEART

by Dave Dravecky



We need companionship.  
We need fellowship.  
That's something God  
has built into us.  
But . . . in those dark  
caverns of being all  
alone, we have a  
Companion who  
stays with us  
through it all.

DAVID JEREMIAH  
OVERCOMING LONELINESS

There isn't a person in the universe who can say, "I've never been lonely." It's something we all experience whether our loneliness lasts for a relatively brief moment or settles in for a season. It's a reminder of how very much we need each other. The irony is, our loneliness is often much more acute when we're enduring a season of suffering—at the very time we need the benefits of good relationships the most.

There is a loneliness that comes from being alone, such as when we move to a new place and leave friends and family behind. There is also a loneliness that comes when we are surrounded by people but don't have the kind of relationships we need with those people. I call this the loneliness of having friends but not really having a friend. When we're enduring a season of suffering, we may experience both kinds of loneliness.

I experienced the first kind of loneliness during my early years as a baseball player. I left home and went to Florida to prepare for spring training. I was by myself—no friends, no family—and I was lonely. I didn't like it.

Later, I experienced a time of being alone when I was in isolation from radiation, but I wouldn't describe that time as particularly lonely. Although I was by myself, I realized I wasn't truly alone because God was with me. So I chose to focus my thoughts on God and reflect on who I was as a person and who God is and what was happening in my life in relationship to Him. As I sought God, that period of isolation became very precious to me. Looking back, I view it as a God-ordained time in my life.

One of the most frustrating and hurtful kinds of loneliness is what we feel in relationship to other people when we suffer—



# UNDERSTANDING THE NEEDS OF A LONELY HEART

when we don't want to be alone and people are present physically but are not connected with us emotionally. When those relationships aren't what we need them to be, we can end up feeling terribly lonely. This loneliness comes because people don't understand our suffering or how to respond. They perceive that there's something different about us because we are suffering, so they tend to treat us differently. They may be unwilling to truly listen. They may dominate the conversation. They may just stay away.

It is hard to deal with such disappointments in relationships when we are suffering. It's easy to begin to wonder if there's something wrong with us. But what I've learned is that God is very much with us during the lonely times. Although it's easy to feel like God's not anywhere to be found, the truth is, He is there. So I have learned to trust the truth, not my feelings. I have learned to consciously remind myself that God never leaves me nor forsakes me. He is with me in the midst of it.

My hope is that this issue of *The Encourager* will help you discover God's presence in the midst of your loneliness, and that it will encourage you to honestly pursue and nurture the relationships that will be a blessing to you through the seasons of life.

God has said,  
"Never will I leave  
you; Never will  
I forsake you."

HEBREWS 13:5

She would sit on the couch and stare out the window for hours, hoping a passing car would slow down and turn into the drive. She sat there and waited, hoping that someone—anyone—would enter her lonely world. Sometimes she recognized the cars of friends, but they passed right by. Friends seldom called, but she carried the phone with her everywhere just in case it rang. While the rest of the world sped by her living room window, Sandy\* was alone and lonely.

Many people who go through a season of suffering find themselves abandoned by friends, colleagues—even family members. Like Sandy, they suffer alone when they desperately need the company of companions who care. People who know them stay away for many reasons, some of which are listed below. But if those who suffer had the opportunity to respond to the fears, objections, and excuses, here's what they might say.

## Why They Stay Away

They don't know what to say and are afraid they might say the wrong thing.

They are afraid of their emotional responses to a friend's suffering. They don't want to cry and make their friend feel worse.

They "don't want to be a bother."

Affliction and illness remind them of their own mortality. Suffering is a warning sign that health is not a given and longevity is not a certainty.

They are busy with their own lives. They just don't have a lot of time to spend with someone who is suffering.

## Why They Need to Stay

I don't need someone to solve my problems or give me answers. Most of the time I don't want you even to try. I just want your presence, your company.

When my friends show emotion, I know they genuinely care for me. Their emotional response helps validate my pain. It gives me permission to express what I'm feeling.

If I'm not up for company, I'll let you know. Even if I'm not able to see you, your visit may encourage my spouse or other family members.

The reality of my suffering can be a blessing to others. It can be a reminder for parents to hug their kids more, an encouragement to take time to smell the roses, and an admonition to be thankful and count each day as a precious gift.

If my friends only knew the power they have to lessen the pain of my struggle. I don't expect them to be at my beck and call or to sacrifice their health or family relationships for my sake, but an occasional call, visit, or card can make all the difference in how I feel on a given day.

\*Not her real name



## NOT MADE TO BE ALONE

*Two are better than one. . .  
If one falls down, his friend can help him up. But pity the man  
who falls and has no one to help him up!*

*ECCLESIASTES 4:9, 10*

Loneliness is the first problem God addressed in the Garden of Eden, and He declared it “not good.” Why? God created us for relationship. He designed us to connect with, or *bond*, with God and with other people. Despite our design specifications, many of us admit to being “relationally challenged.” We don’t bond well. We don’t know how to have healthy, intimate, life-affirming relationships. Perhaps that’s why the Barna Research Group reports that half of all adults say they are still trying to find a few good friends.

So what is bonding? In his book, *Changes That Heal*, Christian psychologist Henry Cloud describes it as “the ability to establish an emotional attachment to another person. It’s the ability to relate to another on the deepest level. When two people have a bond with each other, they share their deepest thoughts, dreams, and feelings with each other with no fear that the other person will reject them.”

Dr. Cloud goes on to describe what happens when we don’t bond with others. “The soul cannot prosper without being connected to others. No matter what characteristics we possess, or what accomplishments we amass, without solid emotional connectedness, without bonding to God and other humans, we will suffer sickness of the soul.”

When we don’t bond, we will be lonely.

When we’re disconnected from others, we miss out on their strength and wisdom during difficult times. Our self-esteem falters because we aren’t receiving affirmation or encouragement from people who care about us. Without the input of true friends and close family members to help bring balance and perspective to our emotions, our thoughts can turn inward and dark. Other indications of a lack of bonding can include depression, feelings of detachment, feeling unloved, defensiveness, and addiction. The longer we remain unbonded, the lonelier, more unwanted, and more unlovable we may feel.

No one wants our wounded hearts healed more than God. He knows how much we need each other. He knows how much we need Him so that we can endure the hardships and celebrate the victories of life. God, who is near to the brokenhearted (Psalm 34:18), promises to give us the strength (Isaiah 40:28-31) and wisdom (James 1:5) we need to heal. More than anyone else, He doesn’t want us to be alone.

To learn more about healthy relationships, consider these resources: *Changes That Heal* by Dr. Henry Cloud; *Hiding From Love* by Dr. John Townsend; *Safe People* by Drs. Cloud & Townsend; “Relationships” *The Encourager*, Summer 2000. Call the Outreach of Hope 719-481-3528 to place an order. To find a Christian counselor call New Life at 800-639-5433 or the American Association of Christian Counselors at 800-520-2268.

## Building Relationships that Count

Our ability to bond with others requires more than a change of mind. It requires a change of heart and some hard work. We have to be willing to:

- ❖ Admit to God and to ourselves that we need healthy relationships with others.
- ❖ Ask God to bring into our lives people with whom we can have healthy relationships—people who can be trusted with our pain and our needs.
- ❖ Be vulnerable, open, and honest in our relationships.
- ❖ Empathize with others. We begin to bond as we allow our hearts to be softened to the needs and hurts of others. We learn that we are not so different from others; we are not alone in our pain.
- ❖ Accept that healing of emotional wounds takes time and always happens in the context of relationships.
- ❖ Learn more about the inner workings of the heart and how relationships work. A recommended reading list is provided below.
- ❖ Consider talking with a counselor or pastor who specializes in emotional health (see below) and can help us begin healing from our relationship wounds.

Loneliness is not the  
absence of faces. It is the  
absence of intimacy.  
Loneliness doesn’t come  
from being alone;  
it comes from feeling  
alone.

MAX LUCADO

TRAVELING LIGHT

Quotes are from *Changes That Heal* by Dr. Henry Cloud, published by Zondervan. Used by permission.





# SURVIVAL GUIDE FOR A SEASON OF LONELINESS

**D**espite what well-meaning family and friends may suggest, there is no pat answer or quick fix to loneliness. The isolation of serious or long-term illness simply can't be wished away. The loneliness that accompanies grief often remains throughout the grieving process. New relationships don't happen overnight; they take time to develop and mature. So if there's no quick, easy way out of loneliness, how do we live with this uninvited guest? What can we do to lessen the pain?

For suggestions we turned to some friends of the Outreach of Hope who have walked through a season of loneliness. We asked them to share what they learned and what helped them survive (and, yes, even thrive). Perhaps their insights and experience will help and encourage you.

## Be Honest

Loneliness isn't something you wear on the outside, it's something you feel on the inside, and feelings aren't always visible to others. So don't assume that family and friends will know when you're feeling lonely. You will probably have to tell them.

More than a decade ago, Barbie Kolar lost two of her four children in tragic accidents. In the aftermath of devastating grief, she lost her marriage too. Although her loneliness has subsided during the years since her losses, it still drops by for an occasional visit. But Barbie has learned not to "court loneliness" and takes aggressive measures to keep it from consuming her.

Instead of simply telling family and friends that she's feeling lonely, Barbie takes action. She doesn't want family and friends to feel responsible for "fixing" her loneliness, so she fixes it herself. She invites the family over for dinner, a friend out for coffee, or plans a group outing. "I will initiate contact and suggest things to do rather than just sit here and drown in my loneliness. I know when I've had enough solitude and need to reconnect with people."

## Make New Connections

The growth of support groups based on a specific need or interest shows our need for companionship with others who share similar interests or challenges. A recent widow and single parent, Patty Douglas finds such groups to be helpful in dealing with her loneliness. Although "talking to someone helps the most, especially close friends who understand," Patty is careful not to let her needs overwhelm family and friends. "Support groups are good," she says, "because you don't feel as though you are imposing on someone else's time."

Being with people who understand your particular struggle or interest not only combats loneliness but can provide support and understanding that family and friends may not be able to offer. Patty belongs to a grief support group (as do her children). She also attends a quilting class. She finds that spending time with people who share her passion for quilting helps lessen her loneliness and encourages her to continue doing things that are positive and fulfilling.

If your loneliness is the result of a loss, find a grief support group. (To locate one in your area, contact [www.GriefShare.org](http://www.GriefShare.org) or call 800-395-5755.) If your loneliness is the result of a move, consider joining a class or club where you can meet others who share similar interests. If your loneliness is the result of a lifestyle change due to a serious illness and you can't find a support group that deals with your particular medical condition (check with your doctor, hospital, or church), do what Beve Geddes did—start one yourself. Beve didn't have the energy to host a group in her home, but she did start a phone support chain with several cancer patients she met during chemotherapy. Sharing with others who understood her fears and concerns lessened her loneliness. (For information on starting a support group, visit [www.OutreachofHope.org](http://www.OutreachofHope.org) or call 719-481-3528 to order a free support group packet.)

## Refocus Your Perspective

During his four-year battle with colon cancer, Mark Forrest has watched his circle of friends dwindle. “People are scared to be around you,” he explains, “scared to talk to you. So loneliness is a constant companion lurking in the back of my mind. Sometimes I try to run from it. Sometimes I sleep to get away from it. But what really helps me is to hunker down with worship music, read the Psalms, and focus on God’s promises. Focusing on God in worship gives me a sense of renewed hope. It gives me peace and comfort. It helps bring things into perspective, so I can look at my situation realistically.”

For Mark and so many others who battle overwhelming loneliness, the waves of loneliness make it feel as if one is drowning. But Mark has discovered a life raft to cling to when loneliness threatens to drown him. He “hunkers down” with God and regains his perspective.

## Get Involved

Our friends unanimously agreed that the best antidote to consuming loneliness and its downward spiral into self-pity is to serve others. Serving others takes our eyes off ourselves and our situation. But getting involved is more than good advice from those who’ve endured a season of loneliness; it’s a biblical principle. Acts 20:35 tells us that “it is more blessed to give than to receive,” and Jesus promises us a return harvest if we sow seeds of service (Luke 6:38).

Getting involved was a blessing when Goldie Travis suddenly became a widow during her children’s teenage years. Her faith in God helped her cope with the challenges of being a single parent, but it was an “assignment from God” that was especially helpful in her battle with loneliness. “God opened the doors for me to work for a ministry that served the local rescue mission and jail.” Goldie not only found a new purpose, she gained a new “family” of coworkers who shared the same passion for the hurting. More than a way out of loneliness, Goldie’s “gift” as she calls it, was the start of a lifelong mission of service to those who are less fortunate or who are suffering. Today, twenty-plus years after retiring from her first “assignment,” Goldie is still serving. She helps process mail at the Outreach of Hope.

Of course the despair of overwhelming loneliness can make wanting to serve a challenge. As one honest objector asked, “How can I serve others when I really don’t feel like it, when my own pain is front and center?” It is true that we don’t always have the emotional strength to do more than put one foot in front of the other, so during times of severe stress we need to take care of ourselves and limit our activities. But eventually the crisis will subside and it will be time to take positive action against loneliness. So to those who lack inspiration or motivation, Pastor David Jeremiah offers this advice: “The truth is this; feeling follows action; feelings follow the will. If I want to, I will. And when I do, my feelings follow.”

Service to others is an act of the will, not the emotions. Like an exercise program or running regimen, it’s getting to the gym, that first mile down the road, that is the most difficult. Once you get over the initial hurdles, the benefits and blessings will come. More than a temporary reprieve, serving others helps provide a way out of loneliness. As Morris West says, serving others helps us “remember that there are a million others like us and as we reach out to comfort them and not ourselves, we discover in the end that we are lonely no longer.”

Quotes from *Overcoming Loneliness* by David Jeremiah.



## Companion for a Lonely Heart

Family and friends can’t possibly meet all of our needs or be there for us every time we feel alone or scared. But the good news—the best news—is that Someone is always with us, no matter the hour or location. Although we may not feel His presence, that Someone is as near as our own heartbeat, as close as our own soul.

He is not only near, He understands the pain of our affliction better than anyone else in all of creation. In the Garden of Gethsemane, on the night before His crucifixion, that Someone—Jesus—asked his closest friends to stay nearby and pray for Him. While He sweat drops of blood in anguished prayer, they slept. Three times He turned to them for comfort. Three times He found them sleeping. Certainly He understands your disappointment, pain, and loneliness.

So Remember, Jesus is not only the God of heaven, He is the God of Gethsemane. Never think He doesn’t understand your loneliness. He knows—better than you can possibly imagine.

## Then everyone deserted Him and fled.

MARK 14:50



# LESSENING THE BURDEN OF A LONELY HEART

by Kim Jones

Turn to me and be gracious  
to me, For I am  
lonely and afflicted.

PSALM 25:16

## Be a Companion

Companionship is the universal need of every lonely heart. In his book, *Overcoming Loneliness*, Pastor David Jeremiah emphasizes our need for human closeness: “The Lord is always with us, but most of us are like the little boy who was told that he shouldn’t be afraid of the dark because the Lord was with him. ‘I know that,’ he replied, ‘but I want somebody with skin on.’” We all want someone with “skin on” and these suggestions can help.

- ❖ Plan to be with your friend when you know he or she is especially lonely, like weekend evenings or Sunday afternoons.
- ❖ Swings are comforting places to share—whether they are on a front porch or in a park.
- ❖ Invite your friend to join in your regular activities such as taking a walk, going to the movies, gardening, playing a sport, or taking a drive in the country.
- ❖ If your friend wants to join a support group or attend a class but hesitates to do it alone, join him or her for the first few times.
- ❖ Don’t assume you have to go somewhere or do something special. Cancer patient Wayne DeReu says just “being there” is encouraging.

## Listen with an Open Heart

Words are not the key to encouragement. A lonely friend probably needs a safe and trusting heart more than words of wisdom. Lonely people, especially those with a serious medical condition, need a listener so they can unload and sort through the trauma and pain they carry. In his book, *Love for a Lifetime*, Dr. James Dobson says the average woman speaks 50,000 words each day, the average man, 25,000. So chances are good your lonely friend has a backlog of unspoken words and thoughts that need to be expressed.

- ❖ To help you remember to listen more than you speak, consider that God gave us two ears but only one mouth—and ears don’t shut, but mouths do!
- ❖ Use phrases that give your friend permission to share: “Is anything troubling you right now? Would you like to talk about it?” “I promise not to interrupt.” “That seems difficult for you. Would you like to talk about it more?”

**D**uring one of her most painful moments, my sister-in-law, through uncontrollable sobs, expressed the pain of her loneliness after the death of her husband. For a long time I simply listened because it is so important to have someone listen to the cries of your heart when loneliness overwhelms you. When I finally spoke, one of the things I asked was if she had expressed her pain to God. I will never forget her reply. “Of course, I tell God everything. But He doesn’t hold me at night when I’m scared or crying or lonely.”

Everyone who walks beside a lonely person needs to take my sister-in-law’s words to heart. Even when we know that God is with us, as close as our own heartbeat, we still want and need human companionship and intimacy. We, the family and friends of the lonely, are God’s primary answer to their cries for help and companionship. Although we may feel ill-prepared and inadequate, there is much we can do to lessen their pain.



- ❖ A recently widowed friend said her loneliest moments are when she first comes home from work and no one is there to ask, “How was your day?” Invite your friend to share the mundane events of the day.
- ❖ Listen with your whole heart and your full attention. Your friend can tell the difference between an interested and an uninterested or hurried listener. The former is encouraging, the latter only adds to the burden of loneliness.
- ❖ Some lonely friends are almost too happy to have a good listener. You may need to set limits on their exuberance by letting them know how much time you can spend with them. Good boundaries make for healthy relationships.

## Offer the Comfort of Touch

Our skin, weighing in at nine pounds, is our largest organ! Skin is much more than a protective covering; its sensation of touch helps us relate to the world around us. Although my sister-in-law has worked hard to deal with her loneliness, she readily admits, “The physical side of loneliness is much harder to deal with. No one hugs me anymore.” Whether it’s a hug or a hand on the shoulder, nothing says, “You’re not alone” as effectively as human touch.

- ❖ Be sensitive to your friend’s preferences. Some people aren’t comfortable with hugs but are fine with a hand on the shoulder.
- ❖ Backrubs are a slice of heaven. Consider a gift certificate for massage therapy.
- ❖ Sometimes the loneliest place is in a crowd. When possible, make sure your friend doesn’t sit alone, especially in church, at weddings, or public events. In addition to your immediate presence, a gentle touch on a friend’s hand or shoulder can ease feelings of awkwardness and isolation.

*It was as if I was at the bottom of a well, alone and in the dark. Family and friends would peer over the edge, exchange pleasantries or drop off a casserole, but they couldn’t reach my lonely heart, much less understand how exhausted and isolated I felt.*

CARLA

## Invite Your Friends into Your World

One of the hallmarks of loneliness is the feeling of being cut off from the rest of the world. Like sidelined players in the game of life, lonely people need to be brought in off the bench by including them in our activities and lives.

- ❖ Invite your friend to join in your family activities such as sporting or school events.
- ❖ Holidays can be especially lonely. Make every effort long before the holiday arrives to make sure your friend knows you want him or her to be a part of your celebration.
- ❖ Many families share jokes, stories, and family news via e-mail. Ask if your friend would like to be in on the action.

## Share Your Friend’s Burdens in Prayer

We need to ask God for the wisdom to know how best to encourage a lonely friend, and our friend needs to know that someone else is lifting his or her needs and burdens before the Lord in prayer. Those who are lonely often feel alone in their relationship with God, too. So knowing that someone else is standing in the gap for them in prayer can be especially encouraging.

- ❖ Don’t assume your friend knows that you’re praying. Tell your friend you are praying, and offer to pray with him or her.
- ❖ Ask your friend for prayer specifics: “How can I be praying for you right now?”
- ❖ Follow up on your prayers, “I’ve been praying specifically about (fill in the blank). How is that going?”
- ❖ With your friend’s permission, share his or her prayer needs with your family or close friends. It’s almost impossible to pray for someone and not feel compassion for him or her or receive direction from God on how to help.

Try as we might, we cannot eliminate a friend’s loneliness, but we can help. Ask God to give you wisdom as to how to lighten the burden. Sometimes it may be as simple as making a phone call at the right time. Sometimes it may be as difficult as accompanying our friend to a loved one’s graveside. Because no one is more concerned about our friend’s loneliness than God, He will equip us with the strength, wisdom, and grace to be “Jesus with skin on.”

For more helpful suggestions on ways to help a hurting or lonely friend, we recommend *Stand By Me*, by Dave & Jan Dravecky. To order, see the order envelope in this issue, order online [www.OutreachOfHope.org](http://www.OutreachOfHope.org), or call 719-481-3528.

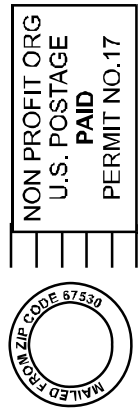


# Loneliness

is a prison where the only

shoulder you have to cry on  
is your own.

MARK FORREST  
CANCER PATIENT



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