

**Transcript Talking Therapies Episode 29:**

Do you feel isolated?

Suzy:

Hello and welcome to Talking Therapies, a podcast made together with Psychologies magazine and the UK Council for Psychotherapy, or UKCP for short. I'm Suzie Walker and I'm the editor-in-chief at Psychologies magazine. Each month on Talking Therapies, we will be talking to a UKCP therapist about a range of topics. Have you lost touch with those close to you? Perhaps you're living by yourself or you may just feel isolated, even the people around you? Either way, it's so important to remember that you can take steps to change how you feel.

Stephen:

I mean, there's a whole thing actually about boredom and creativity. Sometimes it's really good to allow ourselves to feel bored and isolated, because that's where creativity can come up. So, there might be a new hobby you're going to try it or one that you haven't done in a while that be really good to focus on.

Suzy:

That was UKCP psychotherapist Stephen Westcott. Stephen has worked for a range of organisations including Place2Be, Mind, Harringay Council and Brent Alcohol and Counselling Service. Now working in private practice, Stephen is also the co-founder of Sail to Clarity, a company that runs personal and professional development workshops and trainings while selling on the Medway River. Sail to Clarity also produces an online series called Anchoring Therapy, where psychotherapists and counsellors get together to talk about therapy and mental health. Find them on Facebook by searching @SailtoClarity. Did you know that loneliness, living alone and poor social connections are just as bad for your health as smoking 15 cigarettes a day. It can also increase your risk of death by 29%. This month, Stephen sat down with UKCP's CEO Sarah Niblock to discuss the prevalence of isolation and the importance of connection.

Sarah:

What situations could cause someone to feel isolated?

Stephen:

Well, I suppose there's quite a range really. I suppose there's forced isolation or chosen isolation. So, for example, things like lockdown, moving town or country, even, a bereavement, or a divorce can cause those kinds of feelings. One other thing about that, I guess, actually is it’s kind of perception versus social isolation. So loneliness is a set of feelings, a perception, versus actual social isolation. So moving down a country you are socially isolated for a while until you build new networks, that people can feel lonely in a relationship, they can feel lonely in an office, they can feel lonely in a crowded room is the obvious one. Isolation in prisons is a punishment, though, it's not good for us. We can be in isolation with illness, depression itself, things like OCD, agoraphobia, in terms of mental health issues. There's many different things, I guess, that can cause someone to feel isolated, so there's external versus internal as well I suppose.

Sarah

Yes, it's that sense that there's obviously physical situations which may or may not be within our control, but also you can be amongst people but feel isolated.

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Stephen:

Absolutely. And I sometimes think that's the one that people notice more. I mean, maybe we see more of that as therapists, I don't know. But yeah, absolutely.

Sarah:

How important then is it, Stephen, for us to be in connection with others, as a species perhaps?

Stephen:

It's extremely important. I guess the thinking on it is that we're mammals, we descended from the apes and we're mammals, and mammals need contact. Mammals kind of use contact and connection with others as emotional regulation and I think we do the same thing. There's a very famous study on monkeys that was done, I think way back in the 60s. It's not very nice. They took monkeys away from their mothers when they were quite young and they put wire mesh up with milk, two different versions of the mother. And one of the wire mesh mothers had terry cloth on it, has something soft and warm on it. And they found that the monkeys would nearly always go to the soft and warm, to the comfort, to the physical comfort. So they did one where they were given the choice and they did one where they weren't given the choice. And when they did that the monkeys behaved very differently afterwards, in terms of stress situations and other sorts of things. So that connection, that warmth, that physical touch is really really important to us as mammals. The idea of building resilience through connecting with others. Again, an important word in therapy at the moment. But that idea of resilience, flexibility and being able to withstand stressors and emotional push and pull.

Sarah:

Yes, I mean, I've heard of other studies that have taken place, some really grim with human infants where it's been absolutely apparent that children who aren't nurtured or having that physical contact or that sense of attachment with another don't thrive. I've heard about similar things to what you're describing. Does being an introvert or an extrovert affects how isolated we can feel?

Stephen:

It does. I think, again that the thinking is that we're on a kind of spectrum and we move around on that depending on context. You would imagine that extroverts wouldn't enjoy isolation as much because they tend to use other people to regulate feelings more than introverts do. So the idea being that introverts generally are more comfortable themselves or hearing their own thoughts more and okay with their own thoughts. So yes, I think it does. But again, maybe that depends on the context whether it's enforced or not.

Sarah:

Yes, of course and the huge thing that I've learned about psychotherapy during my time with UKCP has just been how specific an individual person’s circumstances and the way they react to them are. There's no one-size-fits-all rule is there with these things, and particularly video calling and those kinds of things, it can change how we might feel. In that sort of vein, is it particularly harder to connect or reconnect with family and friends if you've been feeling isolated?

Stephen:

I guess it can be. I suppose that seems to depend on how feelings are done in the family and the sort of normal levels of contact or intimacy. I guess, as a therapist, I must say this - if there's been a ruptured in the family, it might feel very difficult to break that or to reunite, partly out of pride, partly out of the feeling that you've been wronged, the other person should do it first - I think those things get in the way of it. And sometimes it's a case of working through that and saying, okay, being vulnerable and risking reaching out is not weakness, it's actually very brave. And I mean, sometimes it can't be, that's for sure. But sometimes it can. Of course, it's more difficult because there's so much history, I suppose.

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With family and friends there's more history, there's more that could have gone wrong, but also more than could have gone right. I'm not sure if I'm answering the question that well, is it harder? I guess it definitely can be. And families and friends, we end up being fitted into a kind of box, we have a narrative with family and friends about who we are. And if our life circumstances have changed or if we've changed, it can be quite hard to sort of go back into that and say 'look I'm this person now. What do you think?' And bridge that gap.

Sarah:

Yeah, and recalibrate, as you say, recalibrate your position within a friendship circle or with a family, if you've had to be away. We live in a society where culture seems to be based all around relationships and friendships as a sign of success. So how can you tell someone that you are struggling as a first step with being on your own?

Stephen:

That's a really good point. But in a way that comes back to I suppose the idea that it's not a weakness. Having the strength and vulnerability, taking a risk. I mean, obviously, the first thought might be that you really don't feel you could do with friends or family, there are helplines, online groups. There's different ways of reaching out, that is the strange paradox about the way we live at the moment. It's so connected and yet can be so isolated. So there are a lot of options out there for reaching out to people. But ultimately, I suppose it comes down to being honest. It depends how you frame it. Some people might say, 'I'm missing you.' You might not say 'I feel lonely,' but you might say 'I'm missing you, I haven't seen you in a while, how you been?' That feels maybe less risky because yeah, there is a stigma. Soon as something's named, and brought out into the open, it actually diminishes in its power. If you put a spotlight and a microphone on these inner critics, inner voices that say you can't, shouldn't, all the rest of it, they often diminish, they often don't have as much power as you think they do. So yeah, helplines, neighbours, friends, family, those where you would feel more supported.

Sarah:

It's so good, what you said there. It's normal and natural to feel isolated or alone and lots of people feel that way. There is nothing wrong with feeling that way. And it often isn't about us as you say, it's about circumstance. If we are in a situation where we feel isolated, are there some kind of first steps that we could take, whether that's through interests or educational work, that we could practically do to relieve this?

Stephen:

Yeah, I think that's actually really important. Again, when I'm working with people that's something to really look at. If it feels difficult to reach out to people, then you might look at hobbies, education, to reach out to groups of people that might be like-minded or doing similar things. I mean, there's a whole thing actually about boredom and creativity in a way and focus. Sometimes it's really good to allow ourselves to feel bored and isolated because that's where creativity can come up. So, there might be a new hobby you've never tried or one that you haven't done in a while that’d be really good to focus on. That idea of focusing in itself and mastery, getting better at something again, gives a sense of purpose, gives a sense of time flying by, they call it that kind of flow state, time flies and you really get into something. And we find that with the boat stuff, just being out on the water with the Sail to Clarity thing. It's just fantastic.

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So the idea of discipline and routine as well, with hobbies, you have to have some sort of discipline in terms of routine, it gets you back in the world, back in time where sometimes when we're feeling isolated, alone, time can slip, we don't look after ourselves, we don't eat well. It gives a sense of purpose and discipline and mastery. And then you connect with other people who are doing the same things. I mean, in a way, that's how I got into this, I did music before this and you hook up with people who play music and you have good relationships, bad relationships, but we find our tribe, I guess that's what I would call it. And that tribe could be anything from making curtains to playing music to whatever.

Sarah:

The way that you've reframed isolation as an opportunity, as opposed to being something you got to get out of, you've got to resolve, you've actually said, 'well actually, if you embrace it, it can help you learn more about yourself and connect with people in different ways.' And some of those ways as you've described through music for instance, are non-verbal. We can communicate with others and be amongst others in a way that doesn't center on having to be witty or articulate or outgoing.

Stephen:

Absolutely, which I think is vitally important because I think that's one of the worst inner critics, isn't it? You know, 'I have to be this, I have to be clever, I have to be funny, I have to be this, or that.' Whereas actually, yeah, you're communicating through the work and supporting each other in kind of getting better at something. It doesn't have to be verbal or the things that you do speak about you find you're actually passionate about and you have a great deal of knowledge or you want to learn more and there isn't an issue with not knowing. I think that's another problem in society sometimes or in people let say, it's either that we have to know everything and it's not okay to not know stops people speaking out. If you have a passion, you're quite happy to ask questions about it because you want to know more. And that just leads to better relationships.

Sarah:

If someone's listening to this, Stephen, and they're feeling isolated and perhaps feeling hopeless to know how to make change and reconnect. How can psychotherapy help?

Stephen:

In many ways. I suppose you get to work on yourself, and you get to talk through the difficulties. One of the big things I think is externalising the thoughts and feelings and almost hearing them back. I have a sort of pet theory I suppose, the idea that it comes in different channels, instead of going around around in your head, you speak it out, and some of this stuff may be reflected back to you. And when you hear it back through somebody else, you hear it through a different channel, you hear it through your ears, it goes out through your mouth and back in through your ears. So different parts of the brain have to work with that information, and I think we hear it differently. I think we have different perspective on it. And of course, any therapist will tell you the therapeutic relationship is a vital part of the work, so you've got to find the right person for sure. But when you do, I think acts almost like a sandbox, to use a computer term, it's a relationship you can experiment with, play with, take risks in. It's a big risk to come and talk to a complete stranger about yourself, but what you find is it's completely cathartic because your ideas are sort of fed back to you. And also with that relationship, it's solid. It's a place to experiment with a good relationship that you can then take out into the world and use in other relationships.

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Sarah:

I think that's so true that there are so many media misrepresentations of what psychotherapy is actually about, what that's like psychotherapeutic relationship looks like. And I think you're so well described there how it is a way to have a relationship with someone. who has 50 minutes a week in conversation with somebody who's totally focused on you, and your well-being and is non-judgmental, and accepts you for who you are. I mean, what a fantastic way to explore yourself and explore how you relate to others.

Stephen:

Absolutely. And again, you can break patterns of thinking and the way that you frame life. But I think that is the most important bit, isn't it? Because we have no agenda. We have no judgement on you. We're just interested in curious about how you see life, and how did that come about, and how can we change anything that doesn't work. And accentuate the things that do already work, because it's not always about the bad. I personally think it's really important to have some fun now and again, to be playful. I think that's an important part of the work.

Sarah:

Yes, it doesn't have to be really serious. I wanted to ask you, though, isolation, we've obviously talked about the fact it's normal and unnatural for people to feel like this at some point in their lives. But if it isn't addressed, does that carry some risks for the individual?

Stephen:

Yeah, I mean, it does. I think the evidence is unfortunately it can be linked to increased alcohol or drug use, bad diet. And I think there's research on memory loss, Alzheimer's, heart disease, links to all of those things, inflammation in the body, which again is accumulation of stress hormones. So it can do, but I also think it's really important to remember the good news is that the brain is kind of plastic, more research is being done, they realise that the brain and the body really is plastic, as in all of these things can be undone. You can have a bad diet for 10 years or stop smoking for 10 years, and the body repairs itself and the mind does. So it absolutely can, I mean ultimately it can be a killer can't it, it can lead to suicide, let's be honest. There's lots of negative long-lasting effects, but they don't have to be permanent. All of them are reversible.

Sarah:

Yes, I saw quite a famous Age UK study, Isolation and Loneliness Amongst the Elderly, which likened it to smoking 15 cigarettes a day, which is rather alarmist. But as you say, it can be completely reversed. I suppose the first relationship you have to have is with yourself, isn't it? You have to forge that relationship in order to then be able to have healthy relationships with others.

Stephen:

Absolutely. And actually, that's really important. I mean, I think I forgot to even mention that. But absolutely. I mean, that's where everything starts. Absolutely. And that's the whole purpose of therapy, isn't it? I guess you become aware of your unconscious habits, patterns, ways of thinking, ways of living, and you get the chance to correct them if they're not really working well. The other part about that, I suppose it depends when the isolation happens. It can be very damaging if it happens very young. But again that gives you the opportunity perhaps to do more to correct it.

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But I think you can always work on it. There are studies with elderly people and there are some amazing studies being done in Holland, I think it’s in the Netherlands. Getting college students to live with elderly people to increase their social contact and it seems like it’s brilliant for both, apparently. There’s some really interesting things coming out of that.

Sarah:

Yeah. So what you're saying is it's never too late then?

Stephen:

No, definitely not. No, I think we're work in progress till we stop, I really do. And that doesn't mean 'I'm never perfect, I'm never good enough,' it's not like that, It's just a work in progress. We are good enough. But we're always seeking to keep working on it.

Sarah:

Yeah, we're always growing and we're always learning more about ourselves as we go along. Stephen, before we wrap up, is there anything else that you would like to say?

Stephen:

I suppose the ultimate takeaway from it is that we can do something about it. That if you're feeling that way reach out, take the risk, in whatever way you need to do it. Publicly, privately. I've seen people do that even on Facebook, publicly that way, and people can overdo that, but genuinely people can get a good response from that. So yeah, if you are lonely reach out and I would say go and see a therapist if you feel you want to because it can really help. It can be a great example of how a relationship can really work well, and you can use that template in other relationships.

Suzy:

That was UKCP psychotherapist, Stephen Westcott speaking to Sarah Niblock, the CEO of the UK Council for Psychotherapy. If after listening to that, you feel you could benefit from some talking time with a psychotherapist, then go to the Find a Therapist section of the UKCP website and have a look through. The website address is www.psychotherapy.org.uk and look for the Find a Therapist tab. We'll also be discussing isolation in Psychologies magazine this month, but you can find it online at www.psychologies.co.uk. We'll also being doing a podcast each month with some of the UKCP psychotherapists, so remember to like and subscribe to our channel to hear it first. It also helps others to find us too. So join us again next month. Till then thank you so much for listening and take good care of yourselves.

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