

Transcript Talking Therapies Episode 8:

‘Why do I feel lonely in my relationship?’

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 Suzy Walker, and I’m the editor-in-chief at Psychologies. Each month on Talking Therapies we will be talking to a UKCP therapist about a range of topics. In this episode we will be uncovering the impact of loneliness in relationships.

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Preview clip: Often people say ‘I want to go back.’ We can’t go back, but what you can do is go forwards and I find very often with couples that, where there’s a strong love and commitment then actions can be worked with.

Suzy: That was UKCP psychotherapist Fe Robinson. Fe has previously worked in organisation and leadership development and as a coach and trainer. After receiving support during a difficult time Fe trained as a psychotherapist to help others on their journey. Fe now works in private practice in Durham, having previously worked with a number of organisations including NHS Primary Care, on Teesside and My Sister’s Place in Middlesbrough. She seeks to help both couples and individuals thrive, whatever life challenges they may be facing.

Shortly, Fe will be talking to Sarah Niblock, the CEO of UKCP.

But first, here are some comments about loneliness in relationships from people we spoke to on the street.

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Street comments

Comment 1: They don’t necessarily have a network in place where they feel that they can talk to people about their issues, so I think that can create loneliness.

Comment 2: You can be surrounded by millions of people and still feel very lonely in London.

Comment 3: If you feel lonely whilst in the physical proximity of another human being that's not going to necessarily make the other half of that partnership feel great. You're always going to end up with tensions there.

Comment 4: Relationships are always changing, power dynamics within the relationship are changing, people don't stay the same. You know you have periods of emotional growth and emotional instability and people tackle things in very different ways, so it all comes down to communication within those relationships.

Comment 5: Reach out. Reach out, talk to someone. The second you open your mouth the power of that's taken away.

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Suzy: A study by the Co-op and the British Red Cross found that over 9 million adults in the UK feel lonely often or always. And in a survey by Action for Children 43% of 17 – 25 year olds that used their service said they had experienced feelings of loneliness. Less than half of these individuals said they felt loved.

There seems to be a connection between feeling lonely and feeling unloved, but why can we feel lonely despite being in a relationship?

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Sarah: So, Fe why does loneliness matter from a psychotherapeutic perspective?

Fe: Well, I think the main reasons loneliness matters is because it hurts. It's not a pleasant experience to feel lonely. Loneliness can mean different things to different people. It might be that someone doesn't feel heard, it might be they don't feel loved, it might be that they feel isolated. But what happens when you feel lonely and you feel lonely in a relationship is that you start acting differently, so your behaviours change. You might withdraw, you might not want to be intimate with your partner or you might be picking fights and arguing, and, you know, coming out in a more aggressive way. But ultimately if you're lonely the relationship might not last, so it's important that it's something that's addressed.

Sarah: It's hard isn't it? You think of loneliness as people who are quite isolated, people who are physically cut off so it's hard I think for me and for listeners to think about being lonely when you're very closely

knitted with somebody, living in the same house or flat. So, how can you be lonely when you're actually in a relationship with someone?

Fe: Well I think the important thing is that being lonely is not the same as being alone. It's possible to feel lonely in a crowd and it's possible to feel lonely when you're supposed to be intimate with somebody. Because quite often in a relationship, intimacy isn't something that is a given or a constant. It ebbs, and it flows. And that can be because something has changed for one or either of you. A job change perhaps, having a baby, moving house, a bereavement in the family. Or it may even be that there's been infidelity or some other kind of breach of trust. But things change in relationships and also people change over time and sometimes a relationship that's been really great can be one where all of a sudden, we're just not feeling met somehow, we're not feeling seen or appreciated or heard and then loneliness can become an issue.

Sarah: You've written about people feeling there's something wrong with them. They come to you feeling that something must be wrong with them if they're feeling lonely. Why is that?

Fe: Well I think people have one of two explanatory styles generally. Some people will do what you're suggesting and say, 'It must be my fault, it must be me.' Other people will say, 'It must be the world I couldn't be wrong.' But in psychotherapy, we tend to see more of the people who are saying, 'No it's me at fault, there's something wrong with me.' I don't think blame is particularly useful, but I think insight is hugely beneficial. So what you can do is look whether there are patterns across your relationships. Is this perhaps a familiar feeling that at this stage in the relationship you've started to feel lonely? Has this come up before? And really start to understand what it is about the way that you've been brought up, the way that you function in relationships that's contributing to that.

So, a useful thing to reflect on is what were relationships like when you were growing up around you? What was mum and dad's relationship like? What about your grandparents, your aunts and uncles? What were your siblings' relationships like? Are there patterns there? Is it stability, long-term relationships, is there infidelity, lots of changes? Because whatever that web of relationships around you is, is likely to be unconsciously impacting how you relate and the assumptions you make that you might not even be aware of and it's bringing those kinds of things into the light that can be very helpful to understand what you might want to change, what old belief you might have that might need a dust down and a kick out and what might be more helpful for you. So that's the work of individual and couples' therapy if you're working with these sorts of things.

Sarah: That's so interesting. And you mention there about couples therapy, if both partners feel lonely in a relationship, does that mean there's something wrong and that relationship necessarily has to come to an

end?

Fe: No, not necessarily. Quite often things could have gone in a bit of a difficult direction and actually talking about it, discovering you both feel that can be enough to turn people back towards each other to start to do things in a different way and to find a new connection. Often people say I want to go back, we can go back, but what you can do is go forwards. And I find very often with couples where there's a strong love and commitment then actions can be worked with. So, it doesn't mean there's necessarily anything fundamentally wrong with the relationship, but it might be that at the moment what one or both people want from the relationship is not what their getting and that being the case that's something that can be changed.

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Sarah: I'm very interested in the balance of power within relationships. We hear about kind of unequal levels of commitment or levels of reasonability. Could you tell us a little bit more about that?

Fe: Yeah, power is an interesting one because power comes in so many different types and we each have personal power, we have power in lots of different ways. Now we can use that for the benefit of our partner and ourselves in support of the relationships. Or we can use it as power over and when there's been power used over a partner that can be emotionally, financially, physically, sexually or any kind of hostility then that can be really problematic and if that's the case then that's something you might want to explore. But quite often we just have patterns where one person is doing more giving and one person's doing more taking and that can become more and more entrenched over time and sometimes it just needs bringing into the light, it needs uncovering and the balance of power can be restored.

Sarah: So, you might be doing it quite unconsciously?

Fe: Yeah, and I'm thinking in particular when people have young children, for example, there's often a difference in the roles that are taken in the care of young children that can affect the relationship dynamic as well. So, as life happens and you go through different phases, those sorts of things morph and change how

you relate and quite often it's just unspoken and unnoticed and when it is talked about, small changes can have big effects.

Sarah: So, making spaces to reflect on where your relationship power balance lies at different phases, as you say when life conspired against you or circumstances just change, seems like a really beneficial thing to do. I'm interested to know what can be done about a relationship where loneliness exists.

Fe: Yeah, I think lots of different things depending on exactly what's happening, but the number one is often the thing most people don't want to do and that's to talk about it. You know there's something quite vulnerable I think about saying 'I feel lonely.' It can feel quite high risk, but it is a really important conversation to have. Often times I will see people in individual therapy who might come wanting to kind of prepare for how I'm going to get this across and really build up their sense of confidence and strength to be able to have that important conversation. But once loneliness is on the table, then there are lots of things as a couple you can do. So one of them is looking at the way you communicate with each other. So how do you get past the daily, weekly humdrum of what needs doing to talk actually about the two of you are, about what matters to you, about your hopes, your fears, your feelings. And having those sorts of conversations can really bring back an intimacy and a sense of belonging and togetherness and overcome loneliness.

Now, they are not skills that everybody has, or has right now. So sometimes working with a psychotherapist as a couple can be really beneficial to sort of teach you skills, if you like, of how you get to communicate better with each other, how you really can listen instead of reloading your next comment in your head whilst someone's talking. So, there can be practical things like that. And there is also something about looking at the way you are managing your relationship. So is your relationship one where there's space for you, space for your partner and space for the relationship? Because if any one of those three gets neglected it's not going to feel particularly stable. So sometimes the answer to loneliness in a relationship is one or both partners starting to do more things outside of the relationship, which then means they've got more to bring back and there's more to talk about and you can keep it fresh and interesting. But also, often there's something about reconnecting again as a couple. So whether that's about a loving note in the lunch box or on the pillow, or a loving touch as you walk past. It can be really small things that just say, 'you're special.' And doing those kinds of things doesn't take a huge amount of effort, it's not about grand gestures or big gifts, it's just about letting your partner know that they matter. And those kinds of things can really, really help.

Sarah: We lead such busy lives now don't we? And it's so easy to be ships that pass in the night. And trying to make time to talk about the relationship when you probably spend very little time talking as a whole, must be quite intimidating. But I think it's really interesting the way you talk about the three parts of the relationship, both the individual couple but then there's the relationship itself and that's a whole different

entity.

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Sarah: What if it's your partner, not you, that says that they're feeling lonely? That must be quite a blow to hear that. What can be done if we're faced with that?

Fe: Yeah, I think the key thing is to listen. As you say it can feel quite a blow. We can take that in and think 'Oh my goodness, I'm doing something wrong here.' But just really being able to open up and hear what is it that's going on with your partner and talk about that and help them find the answers for them. So, what combination of things might make it feel better because it's seldom one thing that's going to solve a problem like loneliness, it might be a whole combination. But also being open to what you might need to change if you want to help your partner to feel more contented and more connected. I think it can be important just to be open to those conversations.

Sarah: And I suppose working with a therapist as a couple can at least create that safe space to have those conversations in a way that hopefully is positive and constructive as opposed to feeling intimidating. Or at least being able to work through those feelings if you do feel 'Gosh I feel a bit under threat here.'

Fe: Absolutely because having a third person in the room I think takes away the back and fourth and the arguing. You know, sometimes couples will come in to couples counselling and have a you know humdinger and it's about kind of you know being about to look at how do we move into a different space so that everybody can feel heard and as if their point of view is valid and find different ways, rather than it being my truth or your truth. How can we let both of those truths be there and find something that works for everybody?

Sarah: Yeah, no I can see that. I suppose there's always the danger though that one or either of you won't see what the problem is. You know, you're trying to express your feelings, your innermost fears to a partner who may be perhaps dismissive or unwilling to take responsibility. What can we do if we're faced with that?

Fe: Yeah I think that's a difficult situation, but that's real. You know, not every story has a happy ending and the crux of it is relationships do take work. If it's not ok with you the way the relationship is now, you can't fix

it by yourself. But the other thing to bear in mind is the only person you can change is you. So step one might be communicating the problem, step two is taking responsibility for your part in it and your end of the pattern, if you like, and changing your behaviour. Now, often times as you do that, a partner will begin to shift as well and will begin to reciprocate. Sometimes though they don't want you to change, they don't want the relationship to change and they certainly don't want to change. And if your exploring what's happening and there isn't a way forward that you can both live with, then sadly getting some individual support to really think about what do you want from here and what's going to be okay for you, is important. Because for anybody to be just surviving long term in something that really doesn't help them thrive, it's not ideal.

Sarah: And if the relationship does end what advice would you give to parents when perhaps managing the impact of that ending on their children.

Fe: It's a common scenario these days and a very difficult one for families that are living apart. But the most important thing to remember is that children are people in their own right and they do have a right to a relationship with both of their parents that's not hampered or mediated by the other parent. Difficult as it is, I think putting your children's needs ahead of your preferences, whilst challenging in the long run, will be a really good thing for your relationship with your children. So, I would encourage people if they need to seek out a couples psychotherapist or a mediator and find a way behind closed doors to work through whatever it is you need to work through to separate well and then parent together and really minimise, as much as you can, the impact on your children.

Sarah: Because although the relationship might not be intimate in the future, it's still a relationship, isn't it?

Fe: Yeah, your ex-partner is going nowhere, and you are both parents and, helping children to feel secure and loved by both parents is a really valuable gift.

Sarah: I think it's so useful to hear your insights because I think most people still think psychotherapy is about working with one person, one individual. And you know to hear your work with couples, I think that creates a whole new opportunity for people to build their relationships from strength to strength for decades, hopefully and possibly into the future.

Now if anyone is listening to this who is feeling acutely some of the issues we've raised today, I wonder what would you say should be the next thing that they do.

Fe: Well I think there's something about really creating a space for yourself to connect in with what you are thinking and helping yourself find ways to express that. And that might be by yourself, some people like to journal or to draw, or to create music or whatever it might be to help you connect with yourself. But if you feel that you need to reach out and have some support with that then I would be going on the UKCP directory and having a look at couples counsellors, couples psychotherapists in your local area and seeing if you can find some support.

Sarah: Thank you very much Fe. Thank you.

Fe: Pleasure.

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Suzy: That was psychotherapist Fe Robinson 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 are also featuring the subject of relationship loneliness in Psychologies magazine this month. Or you can find us online at: www.psychologies.co.uk.

We'll be doing a podcast each month for the next year with some of the UKCP's psychotherapists and remember like and subscribe to our channel to hear it first and it helps others find us. So, join us again next month

Till then, thank you for listening, and take good care of yourselves.

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