



You are not alone

It's the single most solicited piece of advice I've received lately, be it over Zoom, FaceTime, Teams, WhatsApp, Instagram, Clubhouse, Facebook, red telephone booth – have I missed one? Tin can. I count the five walls of my bed sit, a modest trapezoid of twenty square meters that is actually a bedroom, classroom, reception, kitchen, salon, library, office – anything else? Pub.

I try and remember the last time I actually spoke to a human outside the confines of the glowing rectangle (which needs charging, btw). No, talking to yourself does not count. Must have been days, perhaps a 'thank you' at Tesco. Now when is the last time someone touched me? Likely a collision. Last week I bumped into someone on a crowded park path. Yesterday a young child not looking where he was going ran into me. Does the dentist count? No, those were only instruments.

The NHS has a section of its website dedicated to coping with loneliness – it seems to have been an epidemic long before the words 'corona' and 'virus' became household Voldemorts (back when viral referred to the latest grumpy cat video). The page is called the "one you" area. Here one finds a wealth of information to endure isolation and stabilize mental health. If this area is for 'one me,' there must be other 'me's out there - somewhere else, living a different version of this sordid game. They are surrounded by people - many 'me's – as well as 'he's, 'she's, 'them's, and all sorts. Yes, they're all together, laughing.

A recent study revealed that pain from loneliness activates the immune pattern of primordial fight or flight response. Lonely people's white blood cells literally become more active, causing inflammation and lowered antiviral compounds. As a defense mechanism, it also reduces the capacity to fight viral infections due to increased norepinephrine pumping through the body.

Increased production ramps up white blood cells while lowering our defense against viral disease. Just to confirm; the lonelier we are and the longer we remain that way, the less chance our body has at fighting a virus on its own. Furthermore, my generation, the Millennials, is the loneliest one to date.

Isn't *alone* precisely what I am? I get it – they're trying to tell me that if millions of people share the same lonely experience, none of us are alone in our loneliness. Except, how true is this? Does it temper loneliness to know there is someone equally isolated in another corner of your Zoom room? Does it matter whether they're on the other side of a wall or the other side of the globe? It certainly makes experiencing of experiences harder to share. The weather. The smell of a room. The taste of a meal. Plenty is done to mimic shared experience, but whether it's enough to trick our bodies into believing we aren't speaking to a metal notebook - questionable.

*Absent presence* is a phenomenon characterized by being overly absorbed by digital media whilst in close proximity to other humans, rendering one unavailable to establish any kind of in-person connection. The individual retreats to virtual worlds – each comprising a remote community. Today that feels like a luxury, a relic of the past. Contrarily, we find ourselves in the opposite conundrum: desperate to connect and left with only digital means to do so. Technology is head architect of our capacity for intimacy.

The most significant connection these days is the one with my internet provider. So have we entered *present absence*?

When can we have *present presence*?