



WELL-BEING WEEK IN LAW

WELL-BEING WEEK IN LAW ACTIVITY PLANNING GUIDE



STAY STRONG
Physical Well-Being



ALIGN
Spiritual Well-Being



ENGAGE & GROW
Career & Intellectual Well-Being



CONNECT
Social Well-Being



FEEL WELL
Emotional Well-Being

Activity Title:	Strategies to Lessen Loneliness
Well-Being Dimension:	Emotional & Social Well-Being
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Activity Objective:
To provide practical strategies to prevent and lessen symptoms of loneliness.

Well-Being Connection (How/Why Does this Work?)

“[R]esearch suggests that loneliness has a comparable effect on health as smoking cigarettes daily and is worse than being obese or sedentary.” - [Scientific America](#)

Loneliness can seriously harm well-being, contributing to conditions like [burnout](#), depression, alcohol use disorders, suicidal thinking, and poor quality sleep. We experience loneliness when we perceive a gap between our preferred social relations and reality ([Cacioppo et al., 2015](#)). And we can feel lonely even when we are regularly in the company of people we know well.

A 2019 study found that [over 60% of Americans](#) reported feeling lonely, poorly understood, and lacking in companionship. And a [2018 survey](#) found that, of all occupations studied, lawyers had the highest risk of loneliness.

To *not* feel lonely, we need to feel connected to significant others whom we can trust and with whom we can plan, interact, and work together to grow and thrive. We are less likely to feel lonely when we have:

- An intimate partner (e.g. spouse or similar relationship),
- High-quality connections with people whom we see regularly (though it’s the quality not the quantity of relationships that counts) and from whom we feel we can obtain support,
- A sense of belonging to groups that matter to us, and
- Good emotion regulation skills.

Many science-backed, practical strategies may prevent and alleviate symptoms of loneliness, and, below, we offer a few for you to try.

Procedure



STRATEGY 1: CULTIVATE HIGH-QUALITY INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS

“The quality of people’s relationships is the single clearest predictor of physical health, longevity, and quality of life.” — Harvard University Research

An important way to alleviate loneliness is to have high-quality, regular connections with people you trust. Identifying people with whom you would like to connect, and making concrete plans to do so, is a good first step for preventing and alleviating loneliness.

Step 1: Identify people with whom you’d like to connect more

Who are the people in your life with whom you can connect more regularly—in person or via text, phone, or video conference?

A person who almost always makes you feel good when you interact with them: _____

A person who you have not connected with recently as much as you’d like to: _____

A “go-to” text friend: _____

When life REALLY gets tough: _____

A work colleague with whom you like to connect: _____

Step 2: Brainstorm to identify strategies to connect and create an action plan

Now, review your list of people and brainstorm about a variety of ways you can connect with them more regularly—attending events together, going for walks, scheduling regular calls, texting jokes or funny memes every Friday, starting a book club, game night, taking a class together, etc. Some ideas include:

- **Plan & Prioritize Connections.** Complete the Prioritize Positivity activity in the [Resilient Thinking Guide](#), which involves planning mood-boosting activities that include connecting with others, tracking when you feel your best, and planning and prioritizing more of those activities.
- **Have Meaningful Conversations.** High-quality connections with others that foster a sense of meaningfulness and intimacy are especially helpful for alleviating loneliness. Try out this activity that provides [36 questions for increasing closeness](#) with others. [Card decks](#) also are available to spark meaningful conversations.
- **Talk About Non-Work Subjects with Colleagues.** Task-oriented communications are especially important at the beginning of work collaborations, but [research has found](#) that social-oriented exchanges become more important as a means of maintaining trust, satisfaction, and sense of belonging over time.

Procedure

- **Talk To Strangers.** [Being overly cautious](#) in our interactions with others makes us miss out on relationships. Further, [research has found](#) that having short interactions with strangers affect feelings of happiness and human connection on a typical day. So consider putting down your phone, smiling at your coffee barista, and chatting with the person next to you in line.
- **Connect Through Movies.** Check out the [Movie Challenge Activity Guide](#), and consider organizing your own Movie Club in which you structure meaningful conversations around movies.
- **Connect Over Things in Common.** Organize a group at work or in your personal life and follow the [Things in Common Activity Guide](#) to find topics on which to connect with people with whom you might not have thought you had much in common.



STRATEGY 2: BUILD A SENSE OF BELONGING WITHIN SOCIAL GROUPS

“One cannot lead a life that is truly excellent without feeling that one belongs to something greater and more permanent than oneself.” — Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, Finding Flow

We all have a basic need to experience a sense of belongingness to groups that are significant to us (Jetten et al., 2015). A deprivation of this important sense of belonging is associated with depression, hopelessness, and suicidal thinking (Fisher et al., 2015; Hagerty & Williams, 1999). Research has found that social group memberships can be as important as high-quality interpersonal relationships for protecting against loneliness and promoting well-being.

For example, studies have found that multiple group memberships bolster resilience, alleviate depression, and prevent future depressive symptoms. These outcomes depended on members’ connectedness to the group—mere membership was not enough. Identifying with the group and participating in group activities were important conditions (e.g., Cruwys et al., 2013; Greenaway et al., 2016; Jetten et al., 2015; Jones & Jetten, 2010).

Consider the characteristics of social groups to which you would like to belong and schedule concrete plans to build the relationship. This is another good strategy for protecting against and alleviating loneliness.

Step 1: Identify the types of social groups that interest you

Simply joining a group and not truly investing in it will not provide well-being benefits. Therefore, when selecting groups to join, consider the types of activities or organizational missions you find engaging.

I enjoy doing: _____

I want to learn: _____

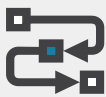
I can and want to assist with: _____

Organizational missions that resonate with me include: _____

Procedure

Step 2: Brainstorm about a variety of social groups that align with your interests and make a plan to join or increase engagement with at least one.

Next, reflect, talk to others, do a Google search, and investigate groups that align with your interests and goals. Consider your family and groups related to your favorite hobbies, work interests, personal values, physical activity, social justice, local community, religious or spiritual beliefs, etc. Then, make a plan to join or increase your engagement. You may need to try out a few options to find a right fit.



STRATEGY 3: REGULARLY ENGAGE IN ABSORBING ACTIVITIES

“People who learn to control inner experience will be able to determine the quality of their lives, which is as close as any of us can come to being happy.”- Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, Flow

Defining Flow & Its Benefits

“Flow” is a psychological state of complete absorption in activities we like that are optimally challenging—meaning that they are not so easy that we’re bored, but not so hard that we’re anxious. We are stretched but not outmatched. It is a mental state that psychologist Mihály Csikszentmihályi says is [key to our well-being](#) and growth, and that [research has found](#) can buffer against negative psychological effects like loneliness.

The flow research aligns with a large amount of related research on attention, which shows that “[a wandering mind is an unhappy one](#).” Our mental health is best when we structure our experience and train our attention on what we’re doing rather than continually being disengaged by distractions.

Flow-Producing Activities

We can experience flow [during almost any activity](#). Most flow research has focused on play and artistic activities, but a growing number of studies have focused on flow during work, finding that opportunities for self-growth play a particularly strong role in generating flow. Keys to the flow experience include:

- Optimal challenge
- Structure or rules that engage attention
- Activities are done for their own sake—not because we feel internal or external pressure, and
- Activities are enjoyable (even if only on reflection).

Find Your Flow

Not everyone will experience flow during the same activities. You may need to reflect and experiment to identify your top flow-producing activities. A few resources for finding your flow include:

- [The Creativity Activity Guide](#): Creative activities are flow-producing for many people. This Guide recommends choosing creative activities that align with who you are, are absorbing and challenging, and enable you to disconnect from stressful thoughts.
- Flow at Work: This [article](#) by Greater Good Magazine offers Nine Steps to Achieving Flow in Your Work.

Procedure



STRATEGY 4: BUILD MINDFULNESS AND OTHER EMOTION REGULATION SKILLS

“Between stimulus and response, there is a space. In that space lies our freedom and our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our happiness.” – Victor Frankl

Our emotion regulation habits are important contributors to the experience of loneliness. For example, as noted above, continually allowing our minds to wander and follow distractions is bad for our mental health. When our minds wander, they often wander to negative self-talk. When we’re already feeling a little depressed, our thinking patterns can become distorted—in ways that make us more likely to experience loneliness and other symptoms of poor mental health. Additionally, the tendency to suppress emotions and experience a high frequency of negative emotions (labeled as the personality trait of neuroticism) are highly related to loneliness. ([Gulber et al., 2020](#)). A few ways to improve emotion regulation skills include:

- **Practice Mindfulness Meditation:** [Research has found](#) that mindfulness meditation can reduce the experience of loneliness and increase social contact.
- **Practice Loving-Kindness Meditation (LKM).** LKM is another type of meditation that can enhance the experience of social connection. Learn more about this practice in the [LKM Activity Guide](#).
- **Use Evidence-Based Self-Help Resources.** “[Bibliotherapy](#)” (reading and engaging in workbook activities) and web-based programs can be effective at reducing mild to moderate symptoms of poor mental health. Approaches based on cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) or acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT) are the most reliable. One high-quality, tested workbook is Steven Hayes’ [Get Out of Your Head and Into Your Life: The New Acceptance and Commitment Therapy](#). Worksheets also are available, including the [Retraining Unhelpful Thoughts Activity Guide](#) and [Taming Negative Emotions](#) worksheet.



STRATEGY 5: TALK TO A MENTAL HEALTH PROFESSIONAL

“Just because no one else can heal or do your inner work for you doesn’t mean you can, should, or need to do it alone.” –Lisa Olivera

If your experience of loneliness is accompanied by depression that you’ve been experiencing for over two weeks, strongly consider reaching out to a mental health professional for help. Mental Health America offers a free depression assessment [on its website](#) that you can use to check in with yourself. Most employers offer an employee assistance program that offers a certain number of free behavioral health sessions, and Lawyer Assistance Programs are available in every state for lawyers experiencing mental health or substance use concerns.

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Other Resources

- Anwar, Y. (2018). [Could lack of sleep make you lonelier?](#) Greater Good Magazine.
- Ash, O. & Huang, P. (2021). Loneliness in COVID-19, life, and the law. Health Matrix: Journal of Law-Medicine, Forthcoming. [U of Colorado Law Legal Studies Research Paper No. 21-9](#).
- Latson, J. (2018). [A cure for disconnection](#). Psychology Today.
- Murthy, V. (2020). [Together: The healing power of human connection in a sometimes lonely world](#).
- Seppala, E. (2020). [Eight ways to ease the pain of loneliness](#). Greater Good Magazine.
- Suttie, J. (2020). [How loneliness hurts us and what to do about it](#). Greater Good Magazine.
- Suttie, J. (2020). [How to keep connecting with strangers during the pandemic](#). Greater Good Magazine.

Author

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Olivia Ash, JD, MS, is founder of Liv Balanced, LLC, a lifestyle well-being website focused on embracing the beauty of living. Liv received her BS in Exercise Science and MS in Physical Education, then spent a decade advising employers on wellness program management. Olivia is an Indiana-licensed attorney serving as Associate General Counsel for an Indianapolis-based company. Liv's research on loneliness and the legal profession is forthcoming in Health Matrix: Journal of Law-Medicine. Liv holds an Indiana state teaching license and serves as Adjunct Faculty at the Indiana University School of Health and Human Sciences. She recharges by hiking, cycling, and painting abstract art. Website: livebalanced.net. Email: liv@livbalanced.net.