

How to Feel Less Alone



Marcia E. Brubeck, JD,
MSW, LCSW
674 Prospect Avenue
Hartford, CT 06105

860-231-1997
MarciaBrubeck.com

As a therapist, I find that my biggest single job is help people connect with themselves and each other. Sometimes what's needed is for them to become more aware of their feelings—what they like and don't like, what they want and don't want. In some cases, people feel isolated, alone, marooned with their problems and somehow different from everyone else.

From my armchair, of course, I can see that it's not so. If there's one thing I have learned in my line of work, it's how very similar people are. We all have more in common than not. Therapists like me work overtime to show people how their worries and fears reflect life stage issues and natural human responses to various situations.

If you feel lonely and generally invisible, it can help to reorient yourself in relation to the wider world. Read the newspaper. In the United States you can listen to "All Things Considered" on National Public Radio. Or watch CNN for the latest news. Locating your problems in the context of the twenty-first century can feel a lot like lying on your back at night in a field, looking up at the stars in the immensity of the sky.

You can also take stock of your connections with other people throughout the day. Do you and other family members join forces to eat dinner, do yard work, clean house, or go food shopping? Do you stay in touch with far-off relatives and close friends during the week by phone and email? If you can focus on the simple activities that form part of your daily routine, you will see how the small shared experiences can strengthen the bonds with people you care about.

How about your life at work? I know a woman with a job in a busy high tech office. She has a not very big area with a desk, a computer terminal, and some files, but she manages to find space, visible to all passersby, where she can

celebrate every holiday of the year. For Easter she has eggs, flowers, and rabbits. For Halloween she has witches, spooks, pumpkins, and candy.

When one of her coworkers displayed a talent for salsa dancing, she threw a late afternoon party, with snacks, and everyone came by to dance. Her festive spirit helped employees at this company, which was undergoing a merger, to enjoy the moment and relieve the stress of the daily grind.

Nowadays, but not in my youth (the 1950s and 1960s), it is breathtakingly simple to visit other countries without leaving your desk. Google Earth lets you zoom in on just about any address anywhere. If you are curious about the Seven Wonders of the World, or about how the landscape looks on the other side of our planet, explore Tito Dupret's World Heritage Tour. These are just two dazzling sites of many.

I enjoy surfing the Web, but I believe the computer's greatest contribution so far has been to build a global community. Now people all over the world can converse, share pictures and videos, demand international cooperation, exchange information, and remind politicians and elected officials that Little Brother is watching Big Brother to make sure he behaves himself.

Chat rooms, list serves, blogs, and sites that share videos and podcasts all enrich our lives. They not only connect us with like-minded others, thereby reminding us that we are not alone, but also give us more ways of enjoying the spectacular range of human wisdom and creativity.

As an example, just consider the universal appeal of "Free Hugs," a short video posted on YouTube that was made in Sydney, Australia, by Juan Mann (pronounced "one man"). Officials in Sydney say there's no record of interference from a ranger, but you can judge for yourself. Enjoy! Can you think of a better way of building a sense of community?

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