

I know Your Loneliness

By Helen Ries

I can see the little picture poking out from under your pillow. It is dog-eared and crumpled but the smiling faces of our mother and father still beam up from the glossy paper. You have been sleeping with this picture by your side for over a year now.

I know you are full of grief and loneliness. I can feel that.

Our parents were everything to you. Our father was your buddy, you would enjoy each other's bad jokes with a beer on the patio or a bike ride along the river. Our mother was your confidant, your support on a bad day and she was always ready with a hug. With both of them you travelled far and wide and enjoyed a lot of good times. They were your best friends. Now they are both gone and I can feel how lonely you are.



Helen's brother Paul with their parents in 2011.

Grief compounds your loneliness but it didn't start when our parents passed away, it has always been there in different ways throughout your life.

I have seen your loneliness at social gatherings, when everyone is talking quickly or making jokes that you don't understand. I see how after a little while of trying

to keep up, you shrink into the background and disappear, patiently waiting to go home.

I know that although you have worked in the same place for over 20 years, you still eat lunch at your desk alone. And when someone invites you for coffee it makes your day.

I know that you have just tolerated people so you had their company. You didn't really like them but someone is better than no one.

I also know that you feel lonely when someone is with you but they are wrapped up in their own thoughts, their phone or what is happening past your shoulder. They think you don't notice but I know you do.

Now, I see that you are working hard at getting me to fill our parent's shoes, getting me to spend a lot of time with you, to be your best friend but I am sorry I can't do that for you. With the greatest love, compassion and understanding, I do a lot for you. I am your sister, your friend, your caregiver, your financial manager, your chef, your chauffeur, your personal shopper and so much more. I can't do what my parents did, be your one and only, your best friend. And I don't think you really want that anyway.



Helen and Paul with their father in 1972.

But this is what we can do.

We can keep building your community, we can invite people you like to spend time with you, to do things you are interested in doing. Let's think about all the people you know and like, and let's invite them into your life. We can even see if there are people that you don't know but that I know and they have expressed an

interest in spending time with you. We can build them into your community too.

Let's throw a potluck or a birthday party and invite people into our home and into your life. It will be hard at first, we are not used to opening our home and our hearts so wide. And people will come and go, but that is just how life is. We will understand and embrace it.

Let's remember a few questions and easier topics, then let's see if you can use them at some of those parties to build relationships with the people around you. You don't have to be the guy in the corner, but it will take a bit of practice.

Let's remember to always say thank you to people who make you feel good and included. Let's remember their special days and if we can, help them when they need it.

We can cut down on the people we pay to be a part of your life and see if there is anything happening in our neighbourhood that you can join instead. Let's cancel your private singing lessons and you can join the local choir. Let's augment your one-to-one painting classes with a community painting circle. We might have to try a few different things, it might be difficult, not everyone is understanding but we will find places and activities where you belong, are happy and included.

I know you sometimes forget, so let's plan times to talk on the phone with your friends or to see what they are doing on Facebook. Let's see if you can get together with them for a coffee, a beer or a night out a little more often.

We will build this all into a plan and make it a rhythm for your life. You can have many best friends. It won't be easy but nothing in life comes easily and we can do it together.

Being lonely is not particular to you or something about you.

Many, many people are lonely in the world today. I think you will relieve loneliness in others by including them in your community; you can inspire others to build up their own networks, and enjoy the benefits of all kinds of different friends whose company you enjoy.

Grief will take time to get over but loneliness we can begin stamping out right away.