



How To Cope If You're Gay and Lonely

"Lonely, ain't it? Yes, but my lonely is mine. Now your lonely is somebody else's. Made by somebody else and handed to you. Ain't that something? A secondhand lonely." — Toni Morrison, Sula

By **Leon Tripplett** - April 14, 2021

Boaz is out there. Elliott Morris is sure of it. He's been looking for him now for some time, by turns patiently and agonizingly. Still, he waits. He's got the patience of Job, fitting for a churchgoing man such as the Chicago native in his evening years.

But it's wearing on him and sometimes the wait, the loud silences, can be downright oppressive and lonely. The biblical character, Boaz, that Morris pines for existed long ago, in antiquity; he's hoping his Boaz can be more contemporary and not just the lore of scripture, but of the flesh-and-blood type.

Michael Mitchell, also a believer and single, knows of the disquiet and frustration that can trounce particularly hard upon older LGBTQ people—many for whom, recent studies suggest, are acutely vulnerable to the sting of isolation and loneliness. The loss of long-ago loves, perhaps some during the height of the AIDS

epidemic, the estrangement of families and close friends because of one's sexual identity and the overall lack of close connections as one ages.

Across the pond, in the Czech Republic, Honza Koumar, "*alone now for many years*", is not so optimistic about his prospects; not surprisingly, perhaps, his favourite philosopher, the German father of pessimism, Arthur Schopenhaur, once articulated a vision of life "*swinging between pain and boredom.*"



Elliott Morris: Looking for Boaz.

But we're all lonelier now, aren't we? Didn't Corona untether us from each other and secluded us in our private domiciles, our anguished indignities of life, left to be the purview of blue-light screens, meeting virtually, if at all? Hasn't the burgeoning digital world driven a metaphorical wedge between our face-to-face, in-person and flesh, communion to likes and swipes? We're the most connected species in human history, to be sure, yet somehow, inexorably, the loneliest.

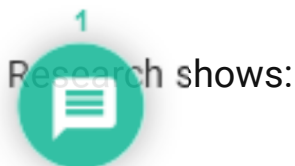
No matter. With the world slowly opening up and vaccinations at a fever pitch, the promise of glad-handing once again looks promising, if daunting, a sort of emotional whiplash seems expectant.

But for men who love men and communities of colour in particular, whose struggles for acceptance and visibility has been acutely pronounced, loneliness seems to have predated the pandemic, isolation and ostracization twin companions.

"It's hard to connect with people if you're gay," says Koumar, a teacher and IT instructor. He says his experience has been the same all over Europe in his search for companionship and connection. He cites the familiar fixtures in gay spaces such as the ubiquitous club and bar scene and bathhouses that tend to dot the landscape. As he's aged, sex is less a priority for want of something more nuanced and real.

"Your prospects are more limited if you're gay," he insists. *"Being gay and lonely is different than being straight and lonely; friendships and relationships become more limited."*

That seeming apocalyptic observation seems to be borne out in all the major health indices tracking the social lives of queer men: Gay men are more single and unpartnered than their straight peers, even more so than gay women; for men of colour, the numbers drop ever more precipitously. This disconnection that gay men feel is not easy to unpack, and the culprits of the gay and lonely epidemic are deeply rooted.



- Gay people are a lot more likely to commit suicide than straight people.
- Gay men have fewer close friends than straight people or gay women.
- Gay men are much more likely to be depressed than straight men.

Being gay and lonely, and being alone, are not the same animal, according to Michael Hobbes, who penned the now famous and immersive piece *Together Alone*. "But there's a difference between being alone and being lonely," said Hobbes. *"Being alone is an objective, measurable phenomenon: You don't have very many social contacts. Being lonely, on the other hand, is subjective: You feel alone, even when you're with other people...."*



Honza Koumar: Not holding his breath.

Adam Blum of the Gay Therapy Centre in California has written that the stinging isolation gay men face can be traced to childhood, the storied pains and struggles so many gay people faced in the suffocating world of the closet and an inhospitable world intolerant to same-gender-loving men.

Even so, with the passage of marriage equality in the West and a penetrable and seismic shift in values and opinions of gay culture,


many men still find themselves, well, alone together.

Gay men do not show up at the Gay Therapy Centre, saying, *"I feel bad about myself because I have been marginalised as a gay person growing up in my family and community."* They come in saying, *"I'm lonely"* or *"I'm having relationship problems."* Until they have done some exploration, they don't link their current issues with their childhood experiences. Validating this fairly universal experience of **growing up gay** is an important first step in the healing process.

Mitchell has been single now for so long he says he stopped counting. His outsized personality and easy charm and affability masks, he says, an uncomfortable truth: *"Many people think I'm married and in a relationship, they're surprised to learn that I'm not."* He wants somebody in his life and looks forward to the day when he can grow older with someone. He's hopeful, unlike Koumar in the Czech Republic, who's not holding his breath.

"I'm sceptical. I'll find that I'll find what I'm looking for," he says with some resignation. *"You don't fall in love so easily as you age. You know that you can get hurt. You want to protect yourself."*

Therapists who work with men in the gay community know the isolation gay men report can be perilous for the sake of one's mental hygiene and wellness. Health experts tick off the litany of consequences that can exacerbate health conditions, including anxiety, depression, dementia, Alzheimer's disease, high blood pressure, and heart disease.

 Morris, with his Boaz in the mirror, knows these consequences firsthand. His work with the elderly LGBTQ population has given him a front-row seat of sorts inside the quiet desperation that can afflict older gay men. Working with the Howard Brown Health Center in Chicago, where he assists seniors with health benefits, talks about the

shortage of spaces for men of colour to congregate, complicated by Corona.



Michael Mitchell: Living in hope.

"Black people tend to be very touchy-feely. We respond to the personal touch," he said. He worked with an elderly gay man who died alone, in his twilight years, unnoticed. His own protracted aloneness gives him, he says, a certain proximate empathy to those he serves.

"I've had some very lonely moments. It's been tough." The pandemic seemed only to exacerbate that sense of loneliness. "I had to grab my faith."

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For gay men wanting connection and more meaningful and textured relationships, intimate or casual, the healing process seems to cut a road through past painful childhood experiences, where one may have begun the process, out of mere survival and protection, to disconnect from the wider world and, worst, oneself.

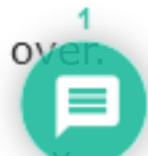
It's been long suggested by the professional therapy community that queer people don't grow up as ourselves, instead of playing versions of ourselves—sacrificing authenticity to minimise humiliation and prejudice. Clinicians extol the virtue and hard emotional work of unpacking which parts of self are real and which we have created to protect ourselves.

Some examples of what you can do to forge those necessary connections, so many gay men clamour for, and that has eluded too many of us for years:

- Make new friends and strengthen old ones
- Get into a hobby you're passionate about
- Change narrative of what a fulfilling life would look like
- Get involved in support groups where you might be likely to meet other people
- Talk about your isolation and loneliness

For Morris, he's not allowing his present aloneness to quake him into internal seclusion; he's been beating back heady trials and tribulations now for decades, in long-term recovery from substance use and now giving back in AIDS Service Organisations, he's learned a thing or two about speaking and standing in truth.

"I'm going to continue to celebrate myself; I'm not a victim, a defect." While he awaits Boaz, he knows the biblical story all too well. Ruth, Boaz's paramour, loved herself where she was and eventually won him



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- *Ephraim Lewis: The Brief Life and Tragic Death of a Soul Singer*.

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