



# LUKENOTES

SAINT LUKE INSTITUTE INC. • 8901 NEW HAMPSHIRE AVENUE • SILVER SPRING MD 20903  
LUKENOTES is a bi-monthly publication of Saint Luke Institute • Tel. (301)445-7970 • [lukenotes@slu.org](mailto:lukenotes@slu.org) • [www.slu.org](http://www.slu.org)

"Icon of St. Luke" - Copyright© 1985 by Monastery Icons

## Solitude vs. Isolation

Andrew Martin, Psy.D.

Vol. VIII, No. 2

March-April, 2004

**Solitude** has long been a favored topic of poets, authors, mystics, and spiritual writers. The benefits of solitude and being alone to commune with nature or God come easily to mind, in Henry David Thoreau's work *Walden* or in the spiritual writings of contemplatives and desert fathers. In each, the desire to separate oneself from others in order to be reunited with the natural or divine appears both life giving and rejuvenating. Isolation, however, disconnects and is both painful and destructive. It is important to realize what factors can lead to isolation and put people at risk for psychological or behavioral difficulties.

### Factors Leading to Isolation

The topic of loneliness, isolation and aging has been gaining attention in both the scientific and popular media. A New Zealand article noted that phone calls from people over 60 to a gambling hotline had jumped 30% in the past 3 years. An article by the BBC claimed that as many as 83% of British pensioners are now surfing the internet on a daily basis as a way to combat loneliness. Loneliness among the elderly has also been identified as a risk factor for a range of problems, from heart disease to depression and suicide. As one ages, facing the loss of both family and friends, s/he becomes more at risk for these or other problems. Often small, but consistent efforts at reaching out to those at risk of isolation can make a world of difference in preventing withdrawal. However, for some, psychotherapy may be needed to help them address more serious behavioral problems. Contrary to popular stereotypes, elderly clients are able to benefit from both supportive and insight-oriented treatments.

**Culture** often dictates the basic building blocks of our experience: language, expectations around gender roles, what is socially appropriate, and what is or is not permissible to talk about. At no other time are we more at risk for feeling different or isolated than when our environment feels foreign to us. Persons coming to another culture, e.g., missionaries, are easily at risk. Even persons who spend a significant time abroad can be at risk for isolation when they attempt to reengage in a culture from which they have been absent.

More than once I've heard diocesan clients refer to their experience of being a "Lone Ranger" in the parish. Given the high demand for priestly services, it would be easy for someone to **over-work**, compromising what little time and energy he may have for replenishing himself with friends or family. However, this risk is not reserved solely for diocesan clergy. Members of religious communities commonly experience similar stresses that tax their abilities to maintain rejuvenating relationships. Aside from the demands of work, both diocesan clergy and religious often face a reality that is unique to their vocation:

the **blending of professional and personal space**. When this is the case, isolation can become a tempting option to escape the personal and political stresses that are present on a day-to-day basis. In some cases, this can become a cauldron for addictive behavior.

Perhaps the most dangerous risk factor for isolation and loneliness lies in the presence of **mental illness or addictive behaviors**. Mental illness and addictions have far reaching effects on how we manage ourselves, our emotions and needs, and how we conduct ourselves in relationships. If caught early enough, and given the proper attention, it is often possible for suffering individuals to alter destructive patterns, learn new and more adaptive behavioral skills, and attain a greater degree of health and happiness.

Several **emotional, personality, and behavioral problems** can lead to isolation. **Depressed persons** with low self-esteem frequently avoid contact with others for fear of being embarrassed. They frequently feel overwhelmed by the burdens of social gatherings and what may be expected of them. Also, difficulty appropriately dealing with anger towards others may complicate a depressed person's ability to relate effectively with others.

Most of us have experienced **anxiety** at some point in our lives. Those suffering from diagnosable anxiety conditions, those who feel keyed up, easily fatigued, irritable and tense, have difficulty sleeping and paying attention may be quite crippled by their anxiety. Some people experience excessive anxiety around particular events, such as public speaking. Others experience a more pervasive feeling of anxiety that is generalized to a broader area of their life. Anxiety may or may not also be associated with a history of being traumatized. Similar to persons suffering from depression anxious persons may experience the presence of others as burdensome and threatening, choosing isolation as a more comfortable alternative.

Finally, one of the diagnostic criteria for **addictive behaviors** highlights the disruptions that addictions cause in a person's life, especially since addictions often become the primary object in a person's emotional life. The gambler will invest more time and energy in the casino than in relationships while for the alcoholic, the bottle is more important. Internet addicts often prefer the realm of virtual relationships to the real interpersonal world of family, friends, and community. Some addicts become paralyzed, out of shame or fear, and do not ask for help. One of the many consequences of addiction is increased isolation.

Isolation is both debilitating and dangerous. Solitude, however, is essential for human persons to mature and to be intimate with themselves, others and God.

*Andrew Martin, Psy.D.*

***LUKENOTES is a bimonthly publication of Saint Luke Institute. Permission to use these materials must be requested in writing by contacting [Lukenotes@sli.org](mailto:Lukenotes@sli.org).***

Telephone (301) 422-5499 • Fax (301) 422-5519 • [www.sli.org](http://www.sli.org)

Copyright © 2008 Saint Luke Institute, Inc. All rights reserved.