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Feeling lonely? Meet the people who suffered extreme isolation – then found happiness

Steve talks in a way that makes you want him to keep talking. His warm humour immediately puts you at ease, which makes it difficult to process what he is describing: a period in his late 20s, about two decades ago, when loneliness felt so engulfing he could barely speak. He craved the company of friends, but when they visited, he gave them cold cups of tea to make them leave. “I’d be at home
5 absolutely desperate to see somebody, but then all I wanted was for them to get out. I’d try to get rid of them as soon as I could by not talking to them, being rude, the cold-cup-of-tea tactic – all the while knowing that was not the thing that I wanted,” he says.

This is how scientists identify lonely monkeys – they don’t look for the monkey pottering around contentedly¹ by himself; they look for the monkey that hesitantly approaches the crowd then steps
10 back, that makes overtures² to groom another, then timidly pulls away.

We are living through an epidemic of loneliness. [...]

But what we don’t hear much about is what happens to the people who recover. Is loneliness a life sentence, or is it possible for some to break through it and come out the other side?

Steve wasn’t always lonely. His early 20s were spent socialising, dancing and DJing on the underground
15 party scene in Leeds, with friends, music and drugs everywhere. “It was the late 80s to early 90s, the social scene was changing with dance music, it was fantastic – a whole new world opening up to me, a working-class lad from a small town,” he remembers. But his friends, he says, “weren’t dirt poor like me”; they went off to spend six months in India and came back to build careers and families, while Steve ended up in a squat³, surrounded by criminality, and everything spun out of control. “I was
20 always careful not to go too far down the drugs path, but a lot of people around me did. People were sectioned⁴, died of overdoses; others just disappeared altogether.” One day an old friend “from the real world” came to visit and, shocked by what he saw, gave Steve £300 to get his own place. “I think he probably saved my life,” he says, quietly.

The first two weeks in that bedsit⁵ were bliss, but it did not last. He quickly grew isolated, paranoid and
25 agoraphobic⁶, unable even to pick up the phone to tell the landlord his toilet was broken. Antidepressants didn’t help, but after 18 months he was diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder

¹ tilfredst

² makes overtures: gør tilnærmelser

³ ulovligt besat ejendom

⁴ tvangsindlagt

⁵ etværelses lejlighed

⁶ led af angst for åbne pladser

resulting from his time in the squat, and a course of cognitive behavioural therapy⁷ enabled him to leave the flat for occasional temp work⁸. He was surviving, but not living: “I did well at all the jobs, but I had no chance with the people. I was in a state close to panic whenever I had to talk to others. I felt I’d
30 lost touch with my old friends, even the ones who were always a lifeline, because they had so much else to do. I managed to get all my worries down to just one: loneliness. I felt hopeless and resigned myself to⁹ living the rest of my life this way.”

But after three or four years of serving visitors cold tea and not turning up to friends’ weddings, something shifted. He tried to achieve one small thing every day – even just getting out of the house to
35 buy a pint of milk. “I read lots of self-help pages on the internet with glib¹⁰ metaphors, likening your life to a tree, but there came a point where I just said, well, I’m not a tree, and this is absolutely no use to anybody,” he says. “I thought, soon the invitations are going to stop coming, and the only way I am going to become the social person I used to be is to actually be social.”

He made a life-changing decision: he would say yes to everything. “It was horrible to start with, especially the garden parties for their kids’ birthdays – I’d think, what am I gonna do? Look at the state
40 of me – I’m a socially incapable freak. I was terrified. But I’d force myself to go. I was the weird guy sitting in the corner making eye contact with nobody. But I stuck with it because I knew that nothing would change without it. It was a slow and painful process, but each time it got a little bit easier,” he says. Within a couple of years, Steve felt human again.

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⁷ *cognitive behavioural therapy*: terapiform, hvor man arbejder med at indlære nye tankemønstre

⁸ *temp work*: vikararbejde

⁹ *resigned myself to*: affandt mig med

¹⁰ overfladiske