

## Combating loneliness

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Reaching out to people in small ways helps them feel less neglected and isolated.

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In the book *Serious Men* by award-winning author Manu Joseph, a senior scientist tells his junior colleague: “Man is not searching the Universe for Aliens, he is searching the Universe for Man, it is called loneliness”; that is, we are fighting hard and earnestly to combat loneliness.

If you visit an old age home or a mental hospital, you will encounter faces that will be looking curiously at you, as though entreating you to talk to them. Sadly, in youth, we do not realise this and often dismiss an old person's pleading eyes as being a result of dementia and old age. If we allow ourselves a few minutes of reflection we will, even in our youth, recognise that we have also felt this same sense of longing when we look towards someone whose attention we want or are seeking. In youth, it may perhaps be a person, for an old person it is just to feel that he belongs.

My mother is old, almost 80, and time and again she asks me to sit beside her. I often mistake this for fear she is experiencing, yet now I have begun to see this as a need for companionship. Can I give her the time?

I am reminded of a story that puts this in perspective:

A young lieutenant was once rushing down the corridor of a hospital, looking to find his father, who he was told, was dying. As he crossed a room he heard the drone of an elderly gentleman, who was saying, “Son, come quickly!” The young man went into the room and saw an old man breathing heavily. The youngster, pulled a chair close to the bed, sat on it and held the old man's hand. The old man squeezed the youngster's hand, opened his eyes and tearfully said, “Thank you for coming.” Shortly thereafter, he passed on. The lieutenant left the room silently and was met in the hall way by the matron, who thanked him for coming to see his father. The young man said, “He was not my father, but he was a father to someone and he was alone and dying. I only did what was I could to alleviate his loneliness.”

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