Loneliness in Leadership

What is Loneliness?

Loneliness: Merriam Webster defines loneliness as “cut off from others, sad from being alone.”

I think we can all relate to that. Loneliness comes in many forms. It can be from physical or emotional isolation. It might be self-imposed or possibly the result of hurt feelings or a misunderstanding. Perhaps we are withdrawing from the friends or familiar activities that were once enjoyed, or maybe it is geographically related – possibly that you have relocated away from a familiar community and you haven’t been able to connect yet? No matter how it happens, loneliness can lead to the ideas that “No one cares about me” or “I am doing this all alone.” The reality is that loneliness as a woman, mother, and a leader can be a very difficult season to walk through.

When and Why Might We Feel Lonely as Leaders?

Can you recall a time when you felt lonely as a mother? Perhaps you had challenges nursing your baby, potty training your toddler, dealing with tantrums or enduring countless sleepless nights? As a mother, loneliness can sneak in.

Can you recall a time when you felt lonely as a leader, either IN your leadership or DURING it? Maybe you’ve had to make an unpopular decision or maybe you were alone in your enthusiasm? All leaders can relate to these feelings at some point.

We know the goal of MOPS is to create a community so a mom can grow as a woman, mother and a leader. It is what we are about as MOPS leaders. I bet you can relate to these statements:

• You know you are a MOPS Leader when your child’s first words are Dada, Mama, and MOPS.

• You know you are a MOPS Leader when you set your alarm for midnight to pull the MOPS website for the new theme reveal each year and when you go shopping, you’re always looking for things that can be used for that theme!

• You know you are a MOPS leader when you ask yourself if God is calling everyone new you meet to leadership?

• You know you are a MOPS leader when you have two days each month that are set-aside for nothing else! (Use examples provided or include your own example of “You know you are a MOPS Leader when…”)

At times for a Christian MOPS leader in community, some separation is necessary. The Christian leader has access to everyone, and is in the know. Being a leader can isolate. While we create community for others, it can lead to separation and isolation for ourselves. That’s the
paradox. Have you heard the statement, “Don’t offer to lead if you are not willing to stand alone”? Do you agree or disagree with this? (Short discussion – one or two answers)

What issues or situations can you think of that could cause loneliness? What past experiences can you think of that caused you or someone you know to feel lonely? (Encourage leaders to share some thoughts.)

Confidence vs. Pride

Sometimes we bring loneliness upon ourselves. The longer we serve in a leadership role, the more confidence we have we can actually do the job and do it well. This is a good thing. When we look forward more to the approval of others from doing a job well instead of just doing the job, our pride can get in the way. It can be a lonely place to be looking for the approval of others all the time.

If we are not in the spot light being seen as doing good, do we feel let down? Are we working to earn something? It’s important to ask ourselves these questions from time to time to be sure our motivation is pure.

The True Life of a Leader

- Job focus

A good leader will focus on the good of the team; thinking about tomorrow while the team can focus on today. Maintain a balance of keeping the current leadership team members who were not coming back happy and engaged while trying to recruit leaders for the next year.

A good leader will keep confidences. At times in leadership we are given information others don’t know and can’t know. Has anyone ever had someone question a decision we have had to make as a leader and not be able to share the whole reason behind the decision? It is hard! A leader lives guarded for the health of the team even when we are open. Being the leader means we are being watched and evaluated. Our own insecurities about a decision can lead to our feelings of further isolation.

- Responsibility

A good leader chooses to be responsible for the team. Think of a shepherd. We find the shepherd out in the field with the sheep. He leads and guides the sheep and the sheep follow. I think this is a good illustration for us to consider as a leader. A leader is one who leads the way; who does not lag behind.

When we think about being out front it can be scary. There are unknowns and it requires risk. What makes a good leader is one who seeks God and spends time alone to prepare. When our team knows we are prepared they are willing and ready to follow our direction.

Think about planning a big event. We work hard for to make the event happen and after it is over sometimes leaders experience a low time. This might not surprise some of you because I bet you know exactly what I am talking about.
• **Family**

Sometimes family life can add the burden of loneliness to a leader. For example, leaders married to a non-Christian or single moms, might struggle with finding balance with meeting the needs of home responsibilities the meeting needs of those she serves in leadership.

• **Unknown**

Sometimes things like physical limitations or traumatic events happen. We don’t plan or expect them yet they change our leadership role. Hard situations can make us feel isolated and not know what to do or how to help.

We are constantly connected or can be connected. We are plugged in all the time, no wonder we feel lonely or burned out sometimes. Did you know sociologist have come up with a new term? It is called FOMO- the fear of missing out.

Because we are plugged in all the time and see others having fun we can feel lonely when we think we are missing out on the activities others are doing. The fruits of Solitude give us the opportunity to quiet the internal noise so we better listen to God and give ourselves freedom from the need to be occupied and stimulated. Now that sounds like a great gift to me!

**So… What Can We Do About It?**

We’ve talked about what loneliness is, what it might look like in both our personal and leadership lives and we’ve explored some of the causes, so… now what? We know we’re lonely… what can we do about it?

• **Spiritual Disciplines**

Perhaps we should consider this: our loneliness could be an invitation to a divine appointment. Carve time out of your schedule to be with God. INTENTIONALLY set time aside to be with him. Sometimes our loneliness is a result of our busyness. We are doing good things; ministry and serving our families and neighbors, but God really desires time with us one-on-one and if you haven’t been making time for that, you may be feeling like something is missing.

• **Look for encouraging scripture**

*(Share your favorite verse that helps you during times when you are low – some suggestions are: Luke 12:7; 1 Peter 2:9; Isaiah 41:10; Matthew 11:28)*

Many times in my own loneliness I begin to have thoughts that if I choose to go there it would only lead to more loneliness and isolation. This verse reminds me over and over to get my thinking right and let the Lord lead me out of my current feelings.
Worship

Worship comes in many forms – it’s not limited to singing in church on Sunday morning. What fills you with joy and praise? What makes you sing God’s glory? Is it going for a walk? (Even if you are pushing a stroller.) Is it watching the sunset (perhaps out the nursery window)? Think about what it is for you and seek it out. Do it alone if you can, and if that’s just not possible, invite your children to join you – share it with them.

Unplug

Yes, I said it. Unplug. Turn off the house phone, your cell phone and shut down Facebook and Twitter. Use the time to connect with someone face to face. Stop worrying about the state of your house and invite another mom and her children over. Get out of the house and go to a playground (indoors if it’s not nice outside). Go for a walk, teach your children to skip or collect rocks, just change things up a bit.

Get a new perspective

**Show Soul Surfer video clip**  http://youtu.be/lc0f9IS3whY

Social Media these days is causing all sorts of new psychological phenomena. When you are feeling bummed out because someone on Facebook is posting pictures of her latest “Martha Stewart inspired” redecoration or vacation, keep in mind that you are comparing your every day to her highlight reel. Think about the parts of the picture you don’t see. Recognize that there is probably a huge mess cropped out of the shot of the fancy craft or that she hasn’t talked about the sacrifices they made to save for their trip.

Connect with others

We are often hesitant to share how we are feeling with our teams. We feel we need to maintain the idea we have it all together and we’re a part of the team! Our genuine honesty allows our leaders to know it is OKAY to have a season of loneliness. And it doesn’t mean you need to meet a friend for coffee every day or that anyone has to throw a big party for you to feel connected.

Ask for help!

ASK FOR HELP! Identify new resources. It’s okay to take some things off your plate and let others take on some new responsibilities. As a matter of fact, it might just prove to foster a new relationship or possibly open the door to leadership for a mom who didn’t even know she was capable or called! It’s okay to delegate. Perhaps you can specifically hand off a project to a member of your leadership team and be willing to truly let her take it on!

Seek out wise counsel

If you continue to struggle with feeling lonely, it may become necessary to involve a professional. This might be a spiritual leader or even a certified counselor. For your benefit and those in your leadership circle, it is beneficial to have a crisis plan prepared. A file of local resources can be very helpful. A great place to start in putting together a crisis plan is Group’s Emergency Response Handbook for Small Group Leaders.
(Breakout time. Divide attendees into groups of equal numbers – consider numbering them off and give them time to discuss the following questions. Have everyone come together at the end to share their insights.)

**Break Out Time:**

Read over the questions and spend some time sharing your thoughts about what you just heard. The question is how to respond to this feeling of loneliness. Do we resist it? How do we learn from it? What are the resources for others and us when this season of loneliness comes along? How do we lead during this time?

**Category 1:** (What causes or leads to loneliness?)

During the presentation this statement was made: “Don’t offer to lead if you are not willing to stand alone.” You were challenged to consider if you agree or disagree with this statement and why. What issues might make you stand alone as a leader?

Sometimes as a leader, we are seen as intolerant or “not fun”. Do you have any examples or experiences you would like to share. How did you handle the situation? Would you do anything differently in hindsight or in a similar situation in the future?

Did you think of other situations or reasons that the role as leader has caused the feelings of loneliness to surface? Share your insight.

**Category 2:** (What can we do about it?)

An important aspect of our spiritual discipline is scripture memory. Share a favorite Bible verse that has been meaningful to you during low times.

Do you see solitude as a gift? What types of blessings can come from time spent alone?

As a society who is always connected what are some of the benefits of being disconnected/unplugged? How would you share this important insight with other leaders?

Do you find it difficult or easy to connect with other leaders? If you were going to challenge yourself to make a connection what are some of the first steps you can make?

On a scale from 1 to 10 rate with how you currently delegate responsibilities on your team.
1= I do most of the work myself
10= I assign a task and never look back
Discuss steps you can take to delegate responsibilities.

Close the training time by having the leaders share their insight from the discussion questions.

*Source(s): Jeff Iorg, The Painful Side of Leadership, Moving Forward Even When it Hurts*
*Adele Ahlberg Calhoun, Spiritual Disciplines Handbook Practices That Transform Us*
*Group’s Emergency Response Handbook for Small Group Leaders*