

What I Learned About Loneliness After A Divorce In My 50s by: Carolina Gonzalez

At one of the loneliest points in my life, I joined a friend and her daughter for a week's break in Cabo San Lucas, Mexico.

"You said you were lonely," she said when she called to invite me.
"Come spend time with us."

Earlier that year, I'd experienced the triple whammy of dislocation, loss and rejection: I moved to a new city, separated from my husband, and my youngest child left for university. It tumbled me deep into a well of loneliness that I couldn't climb out of.

The minute the plane touched down in the clear sunlight of Mexico, I knew it was a mistake. My mental state was as disrupted as the train line that had taken me to the airport, as grey as the leaden sky over Gatwick the day we left.

I lay awake all night, impervious to the charms of the pretty casita we were staying in. At dawn I stumbled to the beachside restaurant in search of a cup of tea and to plan my escape. The sand was pristine and white, the sea azure; swathes of bougainvillea framed the view and the smell of gardenias filled the air. I felt as if the air were being sucked out of my lungs. The restaurant was completely deserted except for one other woman sitting alone. Her eyes flicked towards me, red, as if she'd been crying. I turned away and took a seat as far away from her as I could.



We must have sat there for 15 minutes, the two of us, silently, apart, alone. I barely registered the roll of the waves above the whoosh of negative voices in my head. Then just beyond the breakers, there was a tiny ripple and a huge whale breached the sea not 30 metres from where we were sitting. Magnificent, powerful, majestic, awesome – and then it was gone.

"Was that real?" I turned to the woman, breathlessly seeking confirmation.

She nodded. "It must have been there all the time and we didn't know. Well, I guess no one can take *that* image away from us."

Once you start losing things, it's easy to imagine that you'll get used to losing the rest. Maybe that's why we think older people learn to deal with loneliness more quickly than the young – because they've already lost homes, friends, wives, husbands, even their minds. We think they have less to look forward to.

Studies suggest that children and adults feel equally strong emotions but adults have had a lifetime to learn to regulate the experience and expression of those emotions. They have had more time to learn which strategies work for them, and in what context. Yet the actual feelings are the same, no matter your age. There is always grief at the loss of those things that tie you to who you think you are – your beloved dog, your best friend who moves away to a new school, your children, your spouse. That grief is yours to bear alone.



The Red Cross says that there are over 9 million people who feel lonely in the UK – a fifth of the population. Sixty-three percent of

widowers, and 51% of the same age group who are divorced or separated, say they feel lonely. In statistical terms, there is a loneliness 'epidemic'. A disease that increases the risk of mortality by 26%, loneliness is also responsible for a 64% increase in the likelihood of developing clinical depression, and is predictive of suicide.

Loneliness can strike at different times in life and it can strike any one of us. You don't even need to be alone to feel lonely. Some of the loneliest times can be when you are in a crowd of people and wish you weren't, or in a double bed with someone, knowing you are no longer loved.

I had seen a therapist when I was considering moving out of my marital home, unwilling to turn off the life support on our relationship because I couldn't face the idea of living alone.

"But you are lonelier now than you will be on your own," my therapist kept assuring me.

Being alone is a mind game that you have to play with yourself. It requires tenacity and strength to believe that you are not going to disappear, that people will remember you, that someone will come looking for you before your face is eaten by cats. That's why I keep a dog; needy and companionable, she reminds me that I am loved.

On my own, after a time, I learned that the things that rooted me and tied me to that life before could be pruned back so that healthy new shoots could grow. I learned that being alone could be creatively fulfilling. I learned how to get back in touch with myself; about the joy of shutting the curtains and locking the latch and knowing that no one could come into my space unless I invited them. I had my own super secret clubhouse. But loneliness should never be confused with the desire to be alone. When my children were small, I would fantasise about a whole day on my own. Sometimes I would lock myself in the toilet just to read the next chapter in my book. Being alone was a guilty pleasure, a moment to replenish myself because I had so many little people asking questions, touching me, wanting too much.



It can also be hard for other people to understand that you can feel loneliness and grief for things that you've never actually had: the never-born children, the relationship that never was, the missed opportunities, the life you wanted but weren't brave or lucky enough to have. The lack of these things is real and hurts a lot.

We are programmed to send and receive; to make bonds. There is a reason society uses ostracism and withdrawal as the penalty for wrongdoing. No one flourishes in solitary confinement.

And the whale? I tried to research what type I'd seen but got distracted by an academic argument about a certain species called the '52 hertz whale', dubbed the 'loneliest animal in the world'. This whale sings its unique song at a higher frequency than its peers – 52 hertz, equivalent to the second lowest note on a tuba, they say. They see no

irony in using an orchestral group metaphor to describe this solitary creature. It sings but is never heard by fellow whales, they say. Other scientists claim that 52 can be heard, that the other whales aren't deaf. No one has considered whether the other whales simply aren't listening or whether 52 just wants time on its own.

I'll never know if the whale that I saw in Mexico was the mythical 52. I didn't hear it sing and even if it had, I wouldn't have understood its song. But I did see it; it was there, and then it was gone. After that I had a small connection with this other lonely, sad woman, although we didn't drink tea together as we might have done in the movie version of that moment. We spoke and then we both went about our day. Yet I felt refreshed by seeing something bigger than myself and my life and by having shared that moment with someone else. It was a turning point. Maybe it snapped me back to myself. On the way back to my room, I noticed how carefully someone had trimmed the grass. I breathed in the scent of the gardenias. It was beautiful. At the casita, my friend was awake; we ordered coffee and talked about this and that and the whale, and we laughed.



Below are some suggestions of techniques used by women I know to curb the loneliness in their lives after a traumatic event, including the death of a spouse.

1. Get up and get out

Regardless of weather, mood or anything else, get up and go outside. Being outside shakes your brain and gets you through that particular moment when it all feels too much. Don't try to get past or get over the 'bigger issue', just celebrate the fact that you got through that one moment. It is a war and you have to win a series of tiny victories. Celebrate each of them.

2. Life moves forward, so move with it

This is hard. Life moves in one direction and if you don't keep in step you'll be moving backwards and that's not going to help. One step every day. Just one is all you need.

3. Accept that others won't understand

They don't and they won't so get over it and accept the fact that no one has a clue how sad and lonely you are. It's okay to be lonely. People who have a similar experience may have some useful ideas but this is your journey, not theirs.



4. Volunteer

Reach out to others to help them. It will make you feel a new and powerful connection.

5. Be grateful

This is actually the single most important thing you can do to feel less lonely. Give thanks for your home, your job, your friends, your family and your health.

Then, just wait. After a certain period of time, you won't feel lonely all the time.

We found this article very useful on MSN Lifestyle by: **Carolina Gonzalez**

Below is the link.

<https://www.msn.com/en-gb/lifestyle/relationships/what-i-learned-about-loneliness-after-a-divorce-in-my-50s/ar-BBSCkBx?ocid=spartanntp>