

Coping with Feeling Left Out

Objective

To identify ways to cope with feeling socially excluded or rejected.

What to Know

It can be painful to feel excluded or rejected. When you feel left out by friends, you may feel lonely, distressed, or insecure – and even doubt your own worth.

Wanting to be included and part of a group is normal. Though it is not healthy to change yourself to fit in, or pretend to be someone you are not, trying to convince yourself you will be okay without social acceptance can be harmful to your wellbeing.

Social exclusion hurts, but there are a few things you can do to cope. Here are some ways to manage feeling left out by friends.

Avoid catastrophizing. Catastrophizing refers to exaggerating the negative parts of a painful experience. When you feel left out, avoid focusing on the “what ifs” and “whys.” It is easy to spiral into thinking, “they just don’t like me,” or, “I’m not good enough,” but these thoughts are unproductive. Instead, consider that your friends may not be purposefully rejecting you. Avoid making assumptions about their motives.

Take a social media break. Social media can make you feel like you are being left out from all the fun other people are having. When you take a break, you may find that being present in your current reality brings more fulfillment than scrolling through others’ lives.

Distract yourself. Instead of focusing about what you did wrong or if your friends still like you, reframe the experience into something positive. Do something you enjoy or reach out to other friends or a co-worker and make plans.

Develop new interests. Time alone gives you the opportunity to relax and explore new interests. You might:

- revisit a childhood passion.
- read a juicy novel or watch an action-packed movie.
- attend a class to learn something new.
- treat yourself to a spa day.
- take a road trip to a nearby city.

Developing new interests gives you something to talk about. Perhaps you will even make new friends!

Get creative. Research shows that social rejection fuels creativity. Try journaling, drawing, writing, painting, woodworking, or performing.

Experience your emotions. Suppressing emotions can lead to more negative mental health outcomes than facing and experiencing them. When you are excluded, you may feel rejected,

sad, disappointed, hurt, and many other emotions. It is okay to be upset. Instead of suppressing these emotions, take the time to process what you are feeling. Do any of the following activities.

- **Journal.** Answer these questions: What hurts most about this situation? Does it remind you of a past experience? Have you ever been rejected before?
- **Practice deep breathing or a guided meditation.** Focusing on your breath can help distract you from the external world.
- **Take a walk.** Notice details like the shapes of clouds, singing bird, or blooming flowers.
- **Listen to music.** Music can reduce stress and improve your mood.
- **Try exercise or yoga.** Channel your emotions into a physically challenging activity.
- **Talk to a trusted friend or family member.** Vent and talk through why you feel left out. Clearly express if you want advice, a pep talk, or just a “shoulder to cry on.”

Take yourself out on a date. Spending time alone is linked with greater confidence, increased creativity, higher emotional intelligence, and greater emotional stability. Turn inward and focus on self-care, reflection, and solo fun experiences. Take yourself on a date.

- get dressed up in a nice outfit
- choose a favorite restaurant or try a new one
- bring along a book, journal, or sketchbook if you want to do something while you eat
- celebrate what you love about yourself while you enjoy your meal
- people-watch or strike up a conversation with someone

Create your own plans and invite others. Instead of waiting for others to invite you to social events, make plans and invite them. Also, remember to clearly communicate when you have free time.

Communicate. Sometimes the best way to deal with being left out is to honestly express how you feel. When communicating that you feel excluded, avoid sounding accusatory or attacking. Instead, focus on “I” statements to share your experience without projecting your insecurities. You might say:

- “I felt left out when you and the girls went out to dinner without me.”
- “I’ve been feeling some distance in our friendship lately. I just want to check in to see if you’re OK.”
- “I miss spending time with you. Do you want to get together?”
- “I feel excluded from the family when you do things without me.”
- “We aren’t spending as much time together. Have I done anything to upset or annoy you?”

Meet new friends. Friends who regularly leave you out of their plans may not be the best friends to have. Try redirecting your energy into more fulfilling new relationships. Making new friends may seem intimidating, but there are simple ways to meet new people:

- regularly go to local cafes, restaurants, bars, or concerts
- minimize phone use in public so you can have more conversations with others

- try a friendship app like Nextdoor or Bumble BFF
- practice conversation starters
- join a class or group to learn a new skill

This worksheet will help you cope with feeling socially excluded or rejected.

What to Do

Describe a time you felt socially excluded or rejected. What happened? Who was involved?

What hurt most about this situation? Did it remind you of a past experience? Explain.

What could you have said or done in this situation?

If you frequently feel left out, perhaps it is time to widen your circle of friends. Brainstorm some ideas for meeting new people.

Do some self-reflection. Do you need to work on your social skills? Do you think others find you annoying? Are there some ways you can become more “likable”? Explain.

This activity will help you identify ways to expand your social circle. Referring to the above tips, do at least one activity each week for one month. Note the date and what you did. Identify whether you met new people and the outcome (for example, you made plans with someone, you learned a new skill and joined a club, etc.).

| Date | Activity | Meet new people? Y / N | Outcome |
|------|----------|---------------------------|---------|
| | | | |
| | | | |
| | | | |
| | | | |

At the end of the month, write about your experience. What worked? What did not work so well?

Did this exercise help you cope with feeling socially excluded or rejected? Why or why not?

Reflections on This Exercise

How helpful was this exercise? _____

(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What did you learn from this exercise?
