

# CHRONIC LONELINESS--AND WHAT YOU CAN DO ABOUT IT

## Part One:

### ARE YOU LONELY? LET'S FIND OUT

We all feel lonely from time to time. How could we not, when we each mourn the loss of those we loved so dearly, and to whom we were so strongly connected? Most of us lose our grandparents when we are in our twenties or thirties, and then our parents, uncles and aunts when we are in our fifties or sixties. And contemporary life is full of the loss of others to whom we were once closely bonded: childhood friends who are no longer in our lives, adult friends and associates who have moved away or whose lives have changed significantly, and friends who have died. And sometimes we are just feeling lonely thinking about how we never had that perfect best friend or close sibling, or because of any number of disappointments that make their way into our lives.

But this garden-variety loneliness has little to do with chronic loneliness, just as feeling sad has little to do with being clinically depressed. Chronic loneliness involves a level and longevity of disconnection that leaves its victims unsupported, un-soothed, and exposed to both significantly increased morbidity and foreshortened life expectancies. The question becomes, how can you tell when the line has been crossed and you are slipping from everyday loneliness into chronic loneliness? Well, there is a way to know, thanks to the development of a remarkably valid and reliable set of questions that probe just this question, known as the UCLA Loneliness Scale -- 3.<sup>1</sup>

If you are prepared to take a hard look at just where you stand on the spectrum of loneliness, the exploratory questions from the UCLA Scale are presented and discussed below. I suggest you wait to answer the questions until you can be entirely alone in a quiet setting where you can feel as relaxed as possible. In addition, I urge you to proceed very slowly through the questions, taking as much time as you need on each and every one, carefully thinking through recent interactions with the important others in your life. There is a full copy of the questionnaire at the end of this document, which you can copy or print out.

The Scale is made up of twenty questions, and for each one, you must select between "Never," "Rarely," "Sometimes," and "Often." Make your selection by circling the number (1, 2, 3, or 4) that appears alongside each question.

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<sup>1</sup> See Russell, D, Peplau, L. A., & Ferguson, L.L. (1978). Developing a Measure of Loneliness. *Journal of Personality Assessment*, 42, 290-294. Russell, D, Peplau, L. A., & Cutrona, C. E. (1980). The Revised UCLA Loneliness Scale: Concurrent and Discriminate Validity Evidence. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 39, 472-480. McKenna, K. Y. A. S., & Gleason, M. E. J. (2002). Relationship Formation on the Internet: What's the big Attraction? *Journal of Social Issues*, 58, 9-31.

Finally, let me say that this test—if you are completely honest in your answering—can be distressing for some who take it. You should feel perfectly free to stop if at any time the exercise triggers significant sadness – and it might. Also, if you happen to be in counseling with a mental health professional, it might be constructive to mention this potential exercise (or the results, if you have already taken the test) to your clinician; perhaps it will provide material for your work together.

All this being said, here are the questions:

(Please note that the chart below is reproduced under the dropdown menu heading "Chronic Loneliness- The Worksheet 1: UCLA LONELINESS SCALE – V3" so that you can easily copy and print it for your uses.)

Statement	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often
1. How often do you feel that you are “in tune” with the people around you?	1	2	3	4
2. How often do you feel that you lack companionship?	1	2	3	4
3. How often do you feel that there is no one you can turn to?	1	2	3	4
4. How often do you feel alone?	1	2	3	4
5. How often do you feel part of a group of friends?	1	2	3	4
6. How often do you feel that you have a lot in common with the people around you?	1	2	3	4
7. How often do you feel that you are no longer close to anyone?	1	2	3	4
8. How often do you feel that your interests and ideas are not shared by those around you?	1	2	3	4
9. How often do you feel outgoing and friendly?	1	2	3	4
10. How often do you feel close to people?	1	2	3	4
11. How often do you feel left out?	1	2	3	4
12. How often do you feel that your relationships with others are not meaningful?	1	2	3	4
13. How often do you feel that no one really knows				

you well?	1	2	3	4
14. How often do you feel isolated from others?	1	2	3	4
15. How often do you feel you can find companionship when you want it?	1	2	3	4
16. How often do you feel that there are people who really understand you?	1	2	3	4
17. How often do you feel shy?	1	2	3	4
18. How often do you feel that people are around you, but not with you?	1	2	3	4
19. How often do you feel that there are people you can talk to?	1	2	3	4
20. How often do you feel that there are people you can turn to?	1	2	3	4

Alright, now let's talk about totaling your score. It's a bit more complicated than just adding up the numbers, because the following questions are reverse scored: 1, 5, 6, 9, 10, 15, 16, 19, and 20. So, for these nine questions, if you circled "1," on a separate sheet of paper, give yourself a "4," if you circled "2," give yourself a "3," if you circled "3," give yourself a "2," and if you circle "4," give yourself a "1." Total the new scores. Add to this the total of your circled scores on the other holes.

Just to make certain this is clear, *after* making the "reverse score" changes on the nine questions listed above, (indicated below by an asterisk) the loneliest person on the planet would have the following scores on questions 1 through 20, in order: \*4, 4, 4, 4, \*4, \*4, 4, 4, \*4, \*4, 4, 4, 4, 4, \*4, \*4, 4, 4, \*4 and \*4. So, this fictional loneliest person would have a total score of 80, while a person who considers himself to be a genius of connective skills, would have a score of 20. Your score, my score—everybody's score-- falls somewhere in between, because the questions are designed to probe the different levels of confidence each of us has in our connective capacities, and few among us—if any—live their life utterly confident that they are always in tune with everyone they know, that they never lack companionship or feel alone, that they are always outgoing and friendly, and so on.

## **CHRONIC LONELINESS-- AND WHAT TO DO ABOUT IT**

### **Part Two:**

#### **IF YOU LEARNED FROM THE UCLA LONELINESS SCALE IN PART ONE THAT YOU DO FEEL LONELY, LET'S FIND OUT MORE DETAILS ABOUT WHY YOU FEEL THAT WAY**

I want to begin with three important provisos:

First, what I am going to present to you here is not my work, but my report to you of the brilliant and groundbreaking work of Amy Banks, M.D., instructor of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School and director of advanced training at the Jean Baker Miller Training Institute at the Wellesley Centers for Women (the "Institute"). Dr. Banks, and the Institute, specialize in therapy for people who suffer from chronic disconnection, or loneliness. For the past half century, the Institute has specialized in providing relational counseling to clients who find themselves unable to form and maintain meaningful and rewarding connections with others.

Second, as mentioned earlier, the sensation of loneliness exists on a broad continuum. At one extreme, even the most popular individuals from time to time experience the sensation of disconnection and loneliness. At the other extreme, we find people who are chronically lonely, either because they live isolated lives, or because they exhibit a radical inability to make successful and rewarding connections with others. But regardless of where any of us comes out on the continuum of loneliness, there is always room for improving our connective skills. The relational therapy concepts presented below will provide you with just that opportunity.

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The first step is to introduce to you yet another brief questionnaire, the "Relational Assessment Chart" that Dr. Banks sets forth and analyzes in neurological detail in her recent book. Fortunately, you don't need to become a student of relational therapy in order to learn a great deal about the depth and assuredness of the relationships that make up the interpersonal

network of your life. So, let's take a brief look at the four sub-categories we'll be using to explore the details of your relationships.

Relational theory suggests that when we are involved with another person in a secure, rewarding relationship, our brain secretes biochemical signals that cause us to feel calm, accepted, resonant, and energized in their presence. These constitute the four categories the questionnaire explores by asking you to respond to a number of questions per category. Your answers will be on a scale of 1 through 5, where:

- 1 = None or Never
- 2 = Rarely or Minimal
- 3 = Sometimes
- 4 = More Often than Not, or Medium High
- 5 = Usually, or Very High

(Please note that the questions below are reproduced with a worksheet under the dropdown menu heading "Chronic Loneliness- The Worksheet 2: RELATIONAL ASSESSMENT CHART)

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### **QUESTIONS ABOUT HOW CALM YOU FEEL**

1. I trust this person with my feelings.
2. This person trusts me with his or her feelings.
3. I feel safe being in conflict with this person.
4. This person treats me with respect.
5. In this relationship I feel calm.
6. I can count on this person to help me out in an emergency.

### **QUESTIONS ABOUT HOW ACCEPTED YOU FEEL**

(Note: There are two questions that overlap with the Calm category)

5. In this relationship I feel calm.
6. I can count on this person to help me out in an emergency.
7. In this relationship it's safe to acknowledge our differences.
8. When I am with this person, I feel a sense of belonging.
9. Despite our different roles, we treat each other as equals.
10. I feel valued in this relationship.
11. There is give and take in this relationship.

### **QUESTIONS ABOUT HOW RESONANT YOU FEEL WITH OTHER PEOPLE**

12. This person is able to sense how I feel.
13. I am able to sense how this person feels.
14. With this person I have more clarity about who I am.
15. I feel that we “get” each other.
16. I am able to see that my feelings impact this person.

### **QUESTIONS ABOUT HOW ENERGIZED YOU FEEL IN THE PRESENCE OF OTHERS**

17. This relationship helps me be more productive in my life.
18. I enjoy the time I spend with this person.
19. Laughter is a part of this relationship.
20. In this relationship I feel more energetic.

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### **HOW TO ANSWER THE QUESTIONS FOR YOUR KEY RELATIONSHIPS**

Please take a look at the questionnaire under the tab, "Chronic Loneliness -- The Worksheet. You will find down the left side of the page the twenty questions listed above. On the right side of the page are columns, one for each of the five relationships you will score. Print or copy out the questionnaire, and then write the name of each person being scored at the top of each empty column.

While you can score any relationship you have with another adult, try starting with the five people with whom you currently spend the most time. (Don't worry if your number of currently significant relationships is fewer than five; work with what you have.) These might be friends and family, but they also might be colleagues. Once again, try to start with the five relationships that are the most present ones in your life. We are, after all, performing a relational assessment of your active connective network.

So, when you have some time alone and are in the right frame of mind to allow yourself to calmly both *think and feel* your way through answering the twenty questions, complete the assessment.

### **REVIEWING THE OUTCOME OF YOUR RELATIONAL ASSESSMENTS**

#### **Who Makes You Feel Safe and Nurtured, and Who Doesn't?**

Time for a little math. Please add the numbers down your columns and write the sums in the bottom row labeled “Safety Group Score.” Once you have done this, you will see a rank ordering of which relationships make you feel the safest and most nurtured. Having performed many hundreds of these assessments, Dr. Banks opines that a high safety point begins with a total of 75. So, consider yourself quite relationally competent if you have several columns that total this amount or more.

Moderate safety scores of 60 through 74 are common. We cannot turn to everyone we have an important relationship with, and share an emotionally loaded personal quandary or complex emotion. For example, you may have included a work associate you see every day, but don’t feel particularly close to.

Your responses will show you the strong points and the weak points of each of the relationships you analyzed. (I will make suggestions later about how you can approach the problem areas you may have in one or more of the relationships.) Once again, if you are seeing a mental health professional, think about sharing what you have learned and discussing any patterns you have discerned that occur *across* your relationships. Now, let’s take a look at your general relationship patterns.

### **How Are You Doing Overall With Your Network of Connections?**

Dr. Banks’ ingenious relational assessment scheme, besides telling you quite a bit about how you are doing in each of your relationships, also shows you how you are doing *across* your relationships. It provides a snapshot of your relational skills. Here is how the assessment chart works for each of the four categories.

#### **1. How Much *Calm* Do You Derive from Your Relationships?**

There were seven questions designed to elicit whether you derive a sense of calm from your relationships. Assuming you answered for five relationships, the maximum you could have scored (if all your answers were 5’s) would be  $7 \times 5 \times 5 = 175$ . If you had a score in this category of 135 or higher, you have a set of principal relationships that should be giving you comfort and support as you deal with the stress of modern life. If your score is between 100 and 134, you probably experience some degree of anxiety about your support network, and it would be a good idea for you to address this issue. The nearer your score is to 100, and certainly if it is below 100, you presumably often feel unsafe in your relationships, and it is likely that you experience an unmediated, and therefore unhealthy, level of stress in your everyday life.

#### **2. How *Accepted* Do You Feel in the Network of Relationships in Which You Live?**

There were also seven questions aimed at understanding whether you experience life as an “insider” who is accepted as a full-fledged member of the friendships and social groupings you participate in, or instead, if you often feel like an “outsider.” Assuming you answered these for five relationships, the maximum you could have scored (if all your answers were 5’s) would be  $7 \times 5 \times 5 = 175$ . If you had a score in this category of 135 or higher, you presumably feel included and sheltered among those you associate with. If your score falls between 100 and 134, you may at times have a sensation of disconnection and exclusion, and the closer your score is to 100, the more dangerous this becomes to both your psychological and physical health. Constantly feeling like an outsider is one of the two principal pathways to chronic loneliness, and has been documented to be as deleterious to your health as morbid obesity or multi-pack-a-day cigarette smoking, so you need to pay attention and seek help.

### **3. How Competent Do You Feel About *Discerning* Other Peoples’ Intentions and Feelings Towards you?**

There were five questions meant to discover your capacity to intuit what others feel about you and to sense their intentions with respect to including and valuing your involvement in their lives. This capacity is called the “mirroring system,” and it has been an important part of animal awareness long before the development of human beings. You see it, for instance, when a feral animal looks you straight in the eyes, attempting to determine what you intend to do next. When we deal with other people, of course, our mirroring system is meant to discern far more subtle intentions, and not merely whether we are being perceived as prey. The maximum score in this category, assuming you have assessed five relationships, is  $5 \times 5 \times 5$ , or 125. If your total is at least 95, you have a well-functioning mirroring system, and you presumably feel at ease among the significant others in your life, confident about how they feel about you. You feel like your friends “get you,” and that they also are confident about what your intentions are towards them. If your score nears 70, you likely find the intentions and motives of other people more confusing and sometimes difficult to fathom, and at times misread how others actually feel about you. Those with a poorly functioning capacity to mirror often misinterpret what others expect from them, or whether others are, or are not, attracted to them.

### **4. How Invigorated and Positively *Energized* Do You Feel In The Presence of Significant Others in Your life?**

The final four questions in the relational assessment exercise are intended to delve into whether your important relationships fill you with energy and enthusiasm or leave you feeling drained and listless. In this category, for those who have assessed five connections, the maximum score is  $4 \times 5 \times 5 = 100$ , and any score above 75 indicates that your key relationships are hooked firmly into your biochemical feel-good chemistry. Scores below 75 indicate that even when you are around those you analyzed, your interactions with them at times leave you feeling indolent

and unstimulated. Individuals with this relational malfunction are prone to turn to substance abuse, overeating, compulsive shopping, and similar addictions to get the biochemical high they are missing from their relationships.

## **CHRONIC LONELINESS-- AND WHAT TO DO ABOUT IT**

### **Part Three:**

#### **NOW THAT WE KNOW YOU FEEL LONELY, AND WHICH OF YOUR RELATIONSHIPS MAKE YOU FEEL THAT WAY, LET'S WORK ON THE PROBLEM**

The relational assessment model tells us that in order for any of us to improve our connections with others in our interpersonal network, we would do well to pay attention to the four elements that lie at the heart of successful relationships. We need to learn to feel *calmer* when we are with others, we need to feel more fully *accepted* by those around us, we need to relate more compassionately with others, and we need to figure out how to form associations with people who make us feel more *energized* and *heartened*.

#### **FINDING CALM SPACE**

When we don't feel calm in a relationship, we become tense and irritable when we are in that person's presence. We find it essentially impossible to relax. We don't feel safe. Our body reacts to the rebuff we sense and we become upset on a physiological level: our breathing, our digestion, our level of muscular tension, and our brain wave patterns are all altered in response. At times we find ourselves becoming defensive or angry--often too quickly and without a reasonable, precipitating cause. Difficult relationships make life feel harsher and more discordant and, in response, some of us withdraw and cut back in general from relying on relationships to provide the safe space where we can find nurturing and regeneration.

If you look back over your relational assessment chart, you will be able to assess how calm you feel in the presence of each of your relationships. If one or several relationships scored particularly low in this aspect of relational qualities, then they need to be addressed so as to decrease the stress they are producing in your life. And you may even want to decide if a relationship is worth continuing at all, all factors considered. Just as it makes sense to amputate a limb if it will save a patient's life, there are times when you may need to end a relationship to

achieve the calm space you need to maintain your mental health. Calm relational space is to mental health what deep rem sleep is to physical health.

Of course, there is a middle ground between allowing a difficult relationship to continue unabated and jettisoning it entirely. You can also elect to subtly reduce your exposure to the worst elements of unrewarding but inescapable relationships by decreasing the time spent with the people involved, while increasing the time spent with your other, more rewarding relationships. If circumstances won't allow you to limit the actual time spent with a given tension-inducing relationship, you can use conversational management techniques to improve the tone and tenor of your interactions. One obvious technique is to avoid hot-button topics that are likely to increase emotional conflict. T'ai Chi is the slow-motion martial art that teaches people how to avoid directly blocking an incoming punch or kick in favor of stepping back or turning out of the path of the blow. Conversational T'ai Chi borrows from this logic. When you are dealing with a difficult but unavoidable relationship, you can avoid directly countering incoming aggressive remarks by verbally stepping aside. For example, rather than arguing with an aggressive remark, try responding with something benign like "I hear what you are saying," or "I see your point of view," and leave it at that.

Another useful technique for dealing with stressful but unavoidable relationships, is to spend more time thinking about the people in your life who *do* bring you calm. Dr. Banks stresses the importance of using "positive relational moments" (PRM's) for their remarkable ability to relax the body and calm the spirit. The concept is simple, but effective. Select one (or several) of the relationships that scored fours and fives on the questions about how calm you feel in the presence of the close contacts in your life. Then select one (or a few) past moment(s) in each such relationship where joyful connection flowed openly and palpably between the two of you. These PRM memories constitute a kind of body-mind "memory-pill" you can "pop" when you feel a wave of stress and tension breaking over you in the presence of someone who causes you stress, but you can't avoid. We know from a host of empirical studies that when you concentrate, even briefly, on a PRM, there are calming effects throughout your physiology—your breathing slows and deepens, your brain waves change in frequency and amplification, and the muscles in your shoulders and neck relax. So, try practicing and employing this simple technique as an antidote to stressful interactions; you'll get better and better at it the more you practice it.

There are many other techniques for dealing with the fallout of the unhealthy relationships that you can't avoid, including steps as simple as finding physical space or enjoyable activities to help you "unwind." Meditation, yoga, neurofeedback therapy, relaxation CD's, and massage therapy are among the many techniques you can tap into for unwinding and regenerating.

Amid the pandemic, we no can no longer enjoy community gatherings or relaxed interactions with those we are not living with. Interactions happen faster, and are accomplished with ever more hurried, superficial conversational patterns. You might consciously think about trying to make more significant, longer eye contact both with people in your close circle, and

with strangers with whom you briefly interact, while still keeping a safe distance. Listen more closely to what people have to say, and refrain from pre-planning your response while they are still speaking. Try asking follow-up or clarification questions; people love being heard, and they will reward you with more warmth, and therefore more calm. One technique for promoting deeper conversations, is to avoid conversational drift. For example, if someone tells you they saw a good film, instead of responding “Oh, I saw a good one too,” reply with “Really, tell me about the film and why you liked it so much.”

Consider the possibility and power of setting out on a personal campaign to surprise both acquaintances and strangers with small, unprovoked acts of kindness and generosity of spirit. It costs nothing to elicit a smile from the person at the cash register, and then to thank them for sharing their beautiful smile with you. The emotional and physical rewards are immeasurable.

If, when you look back at your relational assessment chart, you see that all or many of your principal relationships are producing more stress than calm, then perhaps you need to consider whether the problem lies in *your* relational skills. It’s one thing to not trust people who aren’t trustworthy with your feelings—that makes perfectly good sense. But it’s quite another thing to discover that you are not trusting of others *in general*. We know that those who were abused or seriously neglected in their formative years can manifest this generalized inability to derive a feeling of calm from their relationships. So, if your relational assessment chart tells you that you are not achieving this with any of the relationships you analyzed, it may be time for you to deal therapeutically with the underlying faulty construction (or traumatic destruction) of your relational pathways of connection. Professional clinical help is a good idea if you are ready to explore why your interactions with others consistently produce anxiety and tension, instead of a decent measure of calm and relaxation.

### **FEELING MORE ACCEPTED**

Now for some science.

The dorsal anterior cingulate cortex (DACC) is a small, but important strip of brain tissue in your prefrontal cortex. Evolutionarily it is recently developed, as it is present only in humans, other primates, and the cetaceans: whales, dolphins and porpoises. All of these mammalian species are herd animals that survive by living in small, family-based groupings. Our DACC is activated when we receive sensory nerve information of pain from anywhere on our body. It interprets the cause of the pain signal, situates your body in space, and assigns control of your reaction to the pain to other areas of the brain. What is particularly fascinating is the recent discovery of an astonishing secondary use for the DACC-- it is also activated by one other mode of neuronal input: when we are socially excluded. The research on the implications of this-- “Social Pain Overlap Theory,” as it is called-- suggests that this shared neural pathway evidences how critically important it was for the survival of early humans (and other mammals with complex social relations) to stay close to one another in their small-scale groupings. In other words,

separation and exclusion were such important factors in human evolution, that the sensation of disconnection ended up being transmitted by the same sensory pathway otherwise reserved for the interpretation and processing of physical pain. If you think that this line of thinking exaggerates the evolutionary importance of the human need for connection and acceptance, ask yourself which hurts more: a broken arm, or a broken heart.

Look back at your relational assessment chart and determine if the pain you're feeling comes to you as a function of one or two unsuccessful relationships, or if it is a generalized sensation. It is important to deal with what lies at the heart of each of the relationships that plays a role in your feeling of disconnection, and it is especially critical if you feel disconnected across most or all of the relationships you have analyzed.

### **REFINING RESONANCE SKILLS**

Reading other people's intentions, behaviors and feelings—mirroring—allows us to resonate with them without directly focusing on the task of doing so. This is an important relational skill, and without it you may experience others as puzzling, or you may misinterpret how angry or aggressive they are toward you—or how attracted to, or loving of you—they intend to be. Again, think of the mirroring we have all observed when we have come upon feral animals. They operate without words and thought processes, relying solely on their sense of mirroring to interpret your body language as to whether you are planning to attack them—or not.

We humans, in contrast, by adding worded thought to the somatic mirroring of earlier species, bring entirely new levels of subtlety to mirroring. We can actually *feel* what it is like to be the other, and therefore we become capable of empathizing with them. Mirroring in our everyday lives allows us to see in others what we ourselves experience in life. We understand without words, for example, that they too experience love and connection with their families and friends. But while mirroring is in part inherent, it is also something children learn as they mature. Small children must be taught by their parents that other children experience the same needs and emotions that they do; that's what all the lessons about sharing toys and being considerate of the feelings of another child is all about.

Human mirroring is incredibly complex compared to our evolutionary forerunners, in that it occurs with all six of the basic human emotions: happiness, sadness, anger, fear, disgust and surprise. Many studies have documented the nearly universal capacity each of us has to recognize these emotions in the facial expressions of strangers. However, we vary widely in the degree of subtlety we each bring to the task.

Those among us who are most skillful at mirroring do not merely recognize the feeling of the basic emotion the other person is experiencing: they distinguish the subtle sub-emotions of each of the basic emotions. Take for example what someone particularly skilled at mirroring might sense when confronting the anger of another person; she can detect whether she is looking at displeasure, or frustration, or irritation, or annoyance, or disappointment, or

impatience, or aggravation, or exasperation, or dissatisfaction, or indignation, or resentment, or crossness, or infuriation, or wrath, or anger, or ire, or fury, or rage. These are not synonyms for the word “anger.” Each of these terms describes a different sub-emotion of “anger,” and correctly interpreting (mirroring) whether a person you have wronged is merely upset with you—or whether he feels rageful toward you—could make all the difference in the world in determining what your appropriate next step should be.

Just as we have unpacked anger, each of the other human emotions can be broken down into many sub-emotions. Getting them “right” by skillful mirroring is just as important. In our culture most men seem considerably weaker at mirroring skills than are most women. Perhaps this is because women tend to speak far more often about their and others’ feelings and emotions. It’s like color words, another sphere where women seem to far outdo men. If you are limited to describing a sunset as “pink,” you are verbally hampered as compared to someone who might look at the same sky and call it cerise, or carnation, or salmon, or claret, or rosy, or roseate, or reddish, or cherry, or garnet, or scarlet, or ruby, or fuchsia, or crimson, or magenta, or cranberry, or maroon, or burgundy.

So, how do all of us—and perhaps men in particular—go about improving the mirroring aspect of our connective skills? Here are a few techniques to work with:

Being with others physically—when possible—is important, because only then can you practice and refine your mirroring skills. Today’s electronic communication devices are helpful in keeping us in touch, but they do not advance our mirroring skills. So, think about upgrading the level of interpersonal interaction whenever you can: don’t text when you can talk. Don’t talk when you can FaceTime. And don’t FaceTime when you can get together. The more of your interactions that at least involve seeing each other, the more information you’ll have to work with, and the more helpful your mirroring can be in interpreting what is being expressed. The more conscious you are of the mirroring you and others do unconsciously, the more refinement you can build into your mirroring capacities.

Yet another suggestion: in the right conversational circumstances, think about openly checking in to determine if what you were reading and sensing about the other person’s emotions and intentions—is accurate. When we set out to improve our skills in our studies or in a sport, we openly ask our teachers and more experienced co-practitioners, “Did I do that right?” So, dare to take the opportunity to do this with respect to mirroring, when circumstances allow. Think about asking, “If I’m not mistaken, earlier you seemed really upset when you talked about X. How are you doing about that; are you all right?” Or, “I was wondering how it made you feel when so-and-so said such-and-such?”

## **INCREASING THE *ENERGY* YOU DERIVE FROM YOUR CONNECTIONS WITH OTHERS**

We are all Pavlov's dogs. Just as the famous Russian physiologist used rewards to condition dogs to learn various actions, so we humans are biochemically rewarded when we undertake activities that sustain our individual survival and the survival of our species. This same biochemical reward system is present in other animals as well, and it drives each of us to undertake life-sustaining actions, such as tracking down potable water, locating nourishing food, connecting with others of our species, and procreating and raising the next generation.

Recent research has pinpointed how this biochemical reward system actually operates. Our brains release "feel-good," neurochemical substances (principally, dopamine, serotonin and the endogenous opioids) when we accomplish any of the above listed life and species-sustaining activities. But there is only one such undertaking "taught to us" by this biochemical reward system that is relevant for our discussion: the fact that we are biochemically rewarded when we successfully connect with one another. And nowhere is this more visible than in human parenting.

Raising a human baby is all about cooing, cuddling, stroking, kissing, hugging, nurturing, training, educating, and caring in every way for a child who is entirely dependent on us for well over a decade. The many years of loving care we give our children have a powerful neuro-physiological effect on their brains. We now know that human parenting biochemically forms the neural pathways of connection that children will later use when they set about making their first friends. The tenderness of the nurturing process trains a child to revel in deep and secure connections with others and to crave their soothing touch. This both equips and motivates our children to set out in life to connect with others. This training process is entirely comparable to how the adults in other species train their offspring to fly, forage or hunt. Recent studies have documented how those thousands upon thousands of parental kisses and hugs, all that nurturing and soothing, serve to create and reinforce a biochemical linkage to the feel-good chemicals that are emitted in the child's brain. This linkage of soothing connection to the pleasurable rush of serotonin, dopamine, and the endogenous opioids, is as important to children's future mental health as it is to their physical survival. Birds learn to fly or they perish; humans learn to connect or they perish. We are literally addicted to friendship and love.

So, when you look back at the four questions in your relational assessment chart that prodded you to think about which individuals in your life give you this feeling of being energized through your internal biochemical reward system—and which don't—you will learn who you should endeavor to spend more time with, and who you should endeavor to avoid (to the extent possible). And if you find that you gave very few fours and fives to your relationships in this category, it should be clear that you need to work on improving and deepening the connections with others that you currently have, as well as setting out to create new relationships that are designed from the beginning to provide you with your fair share of excitement and enthusiasm.

A word of caution. As discussed above, a lovingly raised child has been taught to seek the pleasures of his feel-good dopamine and endogenous opioid reward system by spending time with those who energize and stimulate him. But we were not all lovingly raised, and even

for those of us who were, we may have experienced harsh and traumatizing factors in in our lives that may have broken this linkage. The challenge for many of us is to reconnect the dopamine reward system to healthy relationships, as opposed to seeking feel-good, energizing moments from drugs, alcohol, high-risk activities, overeating, compulsive shopping, gambling, pornography, over-working, over-exercising and the like. It goes without saying that efforts to improve this aspect of our connective skills run into significant social barriers: we live in a society, where almost 30% of us live alone, and we are immersed in massively funded corporate advertising campaigns that call out to us to indulge in these substitute spheres of stimulation.

A few final words for those whose scores on the final four questions of the relational assessment chart were particularly low across all, or nearly all, of your assessed relationships. It is possible to have been so unlovingly parented, or so profoundly abused during childhood, or so significantly traumatized by failed relationships, that your feel-good dopamine reward system is not at all, or only barely, attached to successful connections with others. If this is true for you, professional clinical help provides a chance of recovery and reattachment. Relational therapy and trauma therapy techniques have advanced spectacularly in recent years, and I strongly recommend professional counseling for individuals deeply troubled by flawed and unfulfilling relationships. If you discovered, or confirmed through the relationship assessment process, that a great deal of your emotional energy comes not from your relationships with others, but from substituting replacement stimulation activities, then now is the time for professional intervention if you are to avoid the perils of a potential descent into chronic loneliness.