



Broadcast Transcript

Broadcast: The Path Out of Loneliness – Part 1

Guest(s): Dr. Mark Mayfield

Air Date: January 17, 2022

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Dr. James Dobson: Well, hello everyone. I'm James Dobson and you're listening to Family Talk, a listener supported ministry. In fact, thank you so much for being part of that support for James Dobson Family Institute.

Roger Marsh: According to an October 2020 study from the Harvard Graduate School of Education, 36% of Americans report feeling lonely often or all the time. Maybe you identify as one of those people. Do you often feel the deep ache of loneliness? The longing to be seen, heard, understood, and above all, loved? I'm Roger Marsh and our guest today on Family Talk can personally relate. Dr. Mark Mayfield is a licensed professional counselor and founder and CEO of Mayfield Counseling Centers. He recently released a comforting book called *The Path Out of Loneliness*. Today, Dr. Mayfield is joining our host, Dr. Tim Clinton, to discuss his new book and reveal how you can truly find your way out of loneliness, no matter how bad it may seem.

Dr. Tim Clinton: I have as my guest today, my friend and colleague, Dr. Mark Mayfield. Let me tell you a little bit about him. Mark is a former pastor, licensed professional counselor and board certified counselor. He's also founder and CEO of Mayfield Counseling Centers. He has more than 14 years of professional counseling experience, treating and addressing anxiety, depression, PTSD, substance abuse, domestic violence, self-injury and suicide. He's passionate about the integration of faith in mental health and especially equipping pastors and leaders to be frontline mental and emotional health caregivers. He's a member of the American Association of Christian Counselors, and he's been featured on prominent national media outlets.

Dr. Mayfield is on a list of mental health professionals that was invited to the White House in December 2019, and has had periodic calls with the White House to discuss mental health in America. He lives with this family near Colorado Springs, Colorado, which is where he is today in our JDFI, our James Dobson Family Institute studio, with our crew. I'm of course, in my studio in Lynchburg, Virginia, at the AACC World Headquarters. Mark it's great to have you join us today.

Dr. Mark Mayfield: Yeah. Thank you.

Dr. Tim Clinton: Mark, happy new year, 2022, it's so great to see you and let's celebrate. We got past 2021. Thank the Lord.

Dr. Mark Mayfield: My wife and I were just talking the other day. We can't believe it's been two years since COVID entered. I mean, it seems like it was yesterday and now here we are in 2022. It just blows my mind.

Dr. Tim Clinton: Yeah. Congratulations, Mark, on your new book, *The Path Out of Loneliness*. We're going to talk about that subject today. I'll tell you what, it's a very sobering topic. What I was really shocked by, Mark, was the epidemic of loneliness that's in our culture. I think what caught my attention, one in three older Americans now live alone. Two in five Americans report that they sometimes or always feel their social relationships are not meaningful. To me, that's sad because we need each other more now than ever. One in five say they feel lonely or they're socially isolated. In other words, there are millions of people out there right now who would check the box and say this, that they feel lonely often or always are feeling lonely, Mark. I stepped back and I thought about that and I thought, "You know what? They're right." When I think a lot of the people in my everyday life, there's a lot of loneliness.

Dr. Mark Mayfield: Like you said at the beginning, it's a sobering fact. I think many of us, I don't know about you but I'll speak for myself, that when I start having that feeling rise up in me of nobody gets me, nobody sees me, that loneliness pit of my stomach type of stuff, my go-to is get busier or try to avoid it or numb it out. And so I think what happened with these last two years is we didn't have the escape or the way avoid that feeling, because this has been happening long before COVID hit. But I think we were confronted with it face to face once COVID hit, because everything that we used to do to avoid or to numb out was no longer there. Now we're isolated, we're separated from those that we love, and there's nothing we can do to escape that. So I think we could look at it from two different ways. Either it's a really bad thing that this is what's happened, or it's a good thing because now we can actually do something about it.

Dr. Tim Clinton: Well, I know we have a lot to talk about, but Mark, another interesting piece I found was, most agree that young adults have been hit the hardest by the pandemic, as it relates to loneliness. I saw one piece coming out of Harvard, 61% of those ages, 18 to 25, 61% have reported a higher level of loneliness. And they've coupled this high level of loneliness with strong symptoms on anxiety and depression and so much more. You even talk, Mark, about suicidality. I remember a quote by Mother Theresa and it really has resonated in my heart and mind. She wrote these words, "The most terrible poverty is loneliness and the feeling of being unloved." Mark, what's happening with our kids?

Dr. Mark Mayfield: One, it's the social media piece, the screen time that we hide behind, we see such an increase. I think the last statistic that I saw was that our teens are spending between nine and 11 hours a day on their devices. Nine and 11 hours a day on our devices, and somebody that is really just into neuroscience, the part of our brain that lights up for emotional regulation, emotional recognition,

this EQ stuff that we talk about, it does not get exercised the way that we need it to if we're behind our screens. And so, it's the use it or lose it principle in my mind, and a lot of kids are not ever able to engage in meaningful conversations, maybe difficult conversations, good conversations with people face to face so that they can pick up on, okay, the way I engage that person hurt their feelings because of how they responded.

They're hiding behind their phones, they're hiding behind their devices, and so there's not any of that reciprocal, relational interactions. And so that part of their brain is actually in a lot of ways, if we want to use medical terms, it's atrophying, and so when they are dealing with some things on their own, they don't know how to process that, they don't know how to ask for help, they don't know how to engage. I'm really concerned and I'll make a pretty fatalistic statement, but I'm pretty concerned that we're going to be releasing the most emotionally inept generation in history, into the world here in the next four or five years as they become 18, 19, 20, 21 year olds, and it's scary.

Dr. Tim Clinton: Mark, it doesn't really make sense though. You would think that we're closer together now more than ever because of technology, but technology seems to be the engine that's taking this connection, this connectivity piece that's so important to everyday life, away from us. And so as they get up there, we think they're up in their room. Kids typically in their teenage years start drifting up in their room, they start listening to their peers more than they do their parents. But Mark, they're up on the social media, you're right, they're consuming this like crazy hours, every day, living in it, but they're getting bombarded with all kinds of innuendo, messaging and even bullying and all other kinds of insanity. And that's the scary piece, it's robbing us, it's not giving us life.

Dr. Mark Mayfield: No, and our mutual friend, Janet Parshall talks about this idea that tech is neutral, it's how we use it. But I think a lot of times we as parents and as a society think that our kids are going to be responsible with it and they've not been taught how to use it. And we're not engaging, we're not pursuing, we're not chasing after their hearts the way that we have in the past. It's become such a big distraction since 2007 and I think that's where we can pinpoint some of the spikes in loneliness, is really when the iPhone came out and again, not blaming a device, it's how we use it. But we see that across the board, not just young people, I mean, how many times have you been at the restaurant and you're looking around and everybody's on their phone and they're on date night but they're on Facebook, Pinterest, Instagram.

Dr. Tim Clinton: We're all guilty of that.

Dr. Mark Mayfield: Oh sure.

Dr. Tim Clinton: In a lot of ways, this stuff, it's eating us up. Mark, let's talk about the impact of loneliness. The research out there on what loneliness does to a person is very sobering. It impacts us, not just physically and emotionally and mentally, it also is impacting us spiritually, isn't it?

Dr. Mark Mayfield: It is. I'm glad you brought that up because I think we oftentimes silo those things, mind, body, spirit. And we need to understand that they're integrated. And so if one is lacking, the other one's going to lack as well. I think it goes back to what we're just talking about, we don't know how to connect deeply with people. And one way that God calls us to be in connection and relationships, I mean, that's how He designed us. We see that throughout Scripture, but if we're not finding meaningful, connecting, nonjudgmental, engaging, challenging, loving relationships in our churches, it does translate over to how we see God. The way God designed it is that we're supposed to be connected reciprocally as relational beings with safe people so that we can be drawn closer to Him.

It's not an either or, it's a both and, and so when we don't have those close relationships here on Earth, Satan uses that as a tool to disconnect us from the Heavenly Father as well. And so that loneliness almost feels like a big chasm when we get to that point, it's almost like a dark abyss when we think of it that way, not to be fatalistic. It can be really scary for people that go, okay, I'm looking around. I don't have anybody that I can connect with. I think one study shows that 54% of people felt like no one knew them well, and 36% didn't feel like they had anybody to turn to. Now couple that with maybe a need that they had and they came to church and the church missed it, we're fallible individuals, but the church missed it or whatever. That just enforces and reinforces that now they're transposing that onto God, which obviously is not fair and that's a whole other theological conversation, but it makes sense why we're continuing down this path.

Dr. Tim Clinton: You know, COVID really, I think, spun us out. We had a loneliness epidemic probably prior to COVID, the social distancing, that social isolation from the lockdowns and all that, the shutting down of events and churches, schools. Mark, I think about people living in retirement homes and convalescent homes and more. Remember how couldn't even go to see mom or dad, the whole thing?

Dr. Mark Mayfield: I signed this contract for this book right before COVID hit, but it was right before my dad almost passed away. He had a botched prostate cancer surgery that ended up going septic and he died on the table and they brought him back and all this kind of stuff, and he got out of the ICU after five or seven days into a hospital room and that kind of stuff. But then when COVID hit, I don't have research to back this up, but just my observation, we could have gotten him home probably six weeks earlier than he did if we were allowed to have gone to see him during that time. But he was in a rehab center by himself, we could only FaceTime him and he was just miserable, but there's something about our presence and our connection that I believe would've sped up his recovery.

And I saw that, again, I talk about that in the book, that I was watching people in the ICU and people that were actually dying, didn't have anybody to show up to sit by their bedside. Now I wish I could have correlation, I wish I had evidence based research behind that, but just my observation, there's something

powerful about our presence. And when we don't have that, it's amazing to see, as I talk about in the book, these pre disease pathways that start with our advanced cortisol levels of stress that deteriorate our immune system that lead to other diseases. And if you look at the CDC, what I call relational diseases, so heart, Alzheimer's, kidney, flu, all that kind of stuff, went up 15.9% from 2019 to 2020. What if it was because we were isolated? What if it was because we were separated? We didn't have the God given formula for connection and for engagement to bring our health up.

Dr. Tim Clinton: That big battle of getting kids back into school and then the masking issue of kids in school and what a stir it created, because I think people realize, I mean, it's going to have an impact. It's going to have an effect on their future.

Dr. Mark Mayfield: Yes.

Dr. Tim Clinton: And how they do or how don't do relationships. Mark, I received a phone call in the middle of the pandemic, a little bit of a story, but a lady I was helping and her mother was in a home. They called her and said that was deteriorating and this lady called me crying, saying to me, "I can't even get to my mom. I can't even talk to my mom." And she just cried on the phone and cried and you know what happened, Mark? Her mom died. And she called me just weeping and saying, "Tim, she was my best friend. I don't have anybody. I don't have anybody to talk to."

And see, Mark, I think that's what we're talking about. Loneliness is horrible. God wired us, you talk about it in the book, He hardwired us for connection, for a relationship with Him and with others. You don't have to go very far in the Bible, Mark, to realize there's a Scripture that says it's not good that man be one. Alone. It's not good that man be alone. And I've often thought about that particular passage, Mark, it's like, wait a second, all of creation, God's given Adam dominion over all the animals and everything and He makes a statement, "Creation. It is good." But then He qualifies it and says this, "But it's not good," what? "That what man be alone." Mark, how do you interpret that? What does that mean to you? I thought he had God in the garden. You hear what I'm saying?

Dr. Mark Mayfield: Yeah.

Dr. Tim Clinton: There's something about human relationships, right?

Dr. Mark Mayfield: Well, there is. And I think we look at Genesis and sometimes, I know, just growing up in the church and we passed over in some ways that passage of Scripture that says, "Let us make man in our image." And we see the relationship of the Trinity, and there's Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and there's always been Father, Son and Holy Spirit, even before Jesus came to this Earth.

Dr. Tim Clinton: So, it's like, God is social.

Dr. Mark Mayfield: Yes. So social.

Dr. Tim Clinton: The creation of angels reflects the social nature of God. I think the creation of man reflects the social nature of God. And He puts the same impetus in the heart of man and says, "It's not good that man be alone." So there's something about human relationships, our horizontal relationship, that ultimately directs us back and lets us know what it means to be in a meaningful relationship, ultimately with our creator God. And so when you see that peace, now you understand it's not good that man be alone. And by the way, nothing more beautiful in all the world than to be in a relationship with someone who's supposed to love you and they love you, and nothing more painful in all the world than to be in a relationship with someone who's supposed to love you and they don't see you. They don't value you. They don't love you, Mark, that's pain, isn't it?

Dr. Mark Mayfield: And that's, I think, my definition of loneliness is the state of being unseen or unnoticed relationally, mentally, emotionally, spiritually, and physically. And it's a lack of purpose, a lack of meaning, but really it's a lack of identity and relationship. And I think a lot of times people are avoiding the conversation around loneliness because they feel like, "I've got all these people around me." But we can be lonely in a crowd, right?

Dr. Tim Clinton: Yes, so you can have a lot of people around you and be very lonely. You can be very outgoing, funny-

Dr. Mark Mayfield: Yes.

Dr. Tim Clinton: -gregarious and be very alone. As a matter of fact, a lot of people who are really funny, tend to be very alone, don't they?

Dr. Mark Mayfield: Right.

Dr. Tim Clinton: You know what else I put down, Mark? You can be very busy and be very alone.

Dr. Mark Mayfield: Oh, that's my story. I mean, my identity after my own struggle with suicidal and my depression, my anxiety, I just figured, "You know what, I'm going to find my value in my doing." And so many years, I just push forward to do this and do that. I got my degrees because I felt like that's where God was calling me, but I also look back on it going, I just stayed busy because I didn't want to slow down to really deal with what was going on inside of me and it wasn't until my master's degree where I'm like, "Oh, crud, I've got to deal with this. I've got to look in the mirror and go, 'Okay, I've got to deal with my loneliness.' I've got to deal with my insecurities that go along with that." And that was a very good, but very painful time at the same time.

Dr. Tim Clinton: Mark, when you don't feel valued or seen or loved, it takes you to a different place. It really does. And I want to go back to the impact of loneliness in a

person's life. I saw this piece by Julianne Holt-Lunstad, she's a professor of psychology and neuroscience at BYU, at Brigham Young University and they're colleagues, but in their research, here's what they found. The heightened risk of mortality from loneliness equals that, and I was stunned, listen to this, equals that of smoking 15 cigarettes a day, or being an alcoholic, or it even exceeds the health risk associated with obesity. Mark, do you believe that's true?

Dr. Mark Mayfield: Oh, absolutely. That goes right in line with the research I found about the increased cardiovascular disease of those that are lonely. The increased rate of cardiovascular disease and those that are lonely, it would correlate to what you just said, and it's so shocking. I think this is why I'm so glad that we're talking about this, not just on a local church level, but on a national level too, is because we have to understand that this far outweighs just that I'm not seen, or I'm not valued, I'm not loved. It has a direct negative impact on our health.

Dr. Tim Clinton: Yeah. Mark, recently the United States Surgeon General, Murthy, issued a very rare mental health advisory, and it was related to our kids. I talked about depression skyrocketing, and more. Some say that his advisory was equal to a tsunami warning, like this massive thing's going to hit. And Mark, I think there is something to this and I'm really, really concerned. Maybe a lot of parents aren't picking up on it, but our kids are getting lost and loneliness is starting to define this generation.

Dr. Mark Mayfield: It is. I think it's one thing to make those statements, it's another thing to go, what are we going to do about it? What's the solution? And one of the biggest solutions that I can think of is how, as grandparents, parents, aunts, uncles, key adults, what are we doing to really slow down in our own lives to make sure that we spend time and make time for our kids to be seen? I personally don't let my 13 year old go to her room and close her door. If she wants to do stuff on the device, it's out in the family room with us, and then we have conversations around it. We do things together. We create opportunities. I can't tell you how many times that I've been asked, "Okay, Mark, what's the formula for fixing this?"

I'm like, "Guys, there's not a formula. It's not a two plus two equals four solution." I wish it was. But it's what is necessary for your family culture? What are things in your family culture right now that are not conducive to relational connectiveness? What things need to change? And you need to take stock of that and reevaluate. Again, not with judgment, not with shame that you've been doing it wrong, there's always time for change, but do you have a family culture around your devices? Do they go away? Do they get turned off at a certain time? Do you have dinner around the table? I know Dr. Dobson talked about that for many years, the family dinner table is the most important place for family conversations to be seen, to be known, to be valued and loved.

We don't do that anymore as often as we should. How often are we going for walks and doing things together? And I think so my challenge to families that are listening is take a step back, take stock of your family culture. What things

need to change? Because if we keep going down this path, we are on the cusp of disaster.

Dr. Tim Clinton: Mark, we're battling time and obviously tomorrow on the broadcast, I want to talk about hope and help and encouragement. How do we break out of this pattern? Because you've got a great plan for bringing connection and connectivity back. We need each other again, more, not less. And so I can't wait for our discussion tomorrow, but Mark, I want to stay with this piece real quick. What are some red flags, some of those key telltale signs that say, "Hey, listen, I've got a problem," or, "I'm worried about my son or daughter." I believe this one, mom, dad, you know whether or not you're close with your son and or daughter, all you got to do say their name. I can say my son's name, Zach, right now, Zach. And I think about Zach for a moment. I know whether or not we're close right now. My daughter, Megan. Megan, I know whether or not we're close right now. God wires something into us and Mark, there's some bells going off. If there are red flags popping up then we know something needs to be done. What are those signs, Mark, real quick?

Dr. Mark Mayfield: Well, I think it's paying attention to what's going on in our kids' eyes. I think if we don't spend time looking at them in the eyes, we're not going to know much, but our eyes tell a story. We can see sadness in the eyes. We can see disconnect in the eyes. We can see those types of things. But if our kids are also avoiding normal things, they don't want to be in the presence of mom and dad because of something, or grades are deteriorating, their sleep is off, they're eating differently. There's things that will show us that something is off or they go straight to the room when they get home, or they're not hanging out with their friends like they used to or whatever that might be.

The things that they have enjoyed in the past, they're not enjoying anymore, I think are definitely warning signs, but I'm a big proponent that if you have any doubt that something's going on, go call for help. Whether it be a pastor or a Christian counselor, find somebody to just reality test with and you might be wrong, and that's okay if you're wrong. But if you're right, now you've got some extra support.

Dr. Tim Clinton: In whole counseling field, Mark, you know this better than anybody, simply taking a step, picking up a phone and making a phone call, sending a text, asking someone just for help often begins the trajectory for a whole new life. Mark, would you take a moment and just set up tomorrow a little bit about, Tim, this is the important thing I've learned. You personally, you told your own story about what it was like in the throes of darkness and pain and Mark, that there is hope.

Dr. Mark Mayfield: Yeah, I think the biggest thing that I look forward to talking to you about next is this idea that we have some steps, there is a path out of loneliness. We want things to be easy and there's no promise in Scripture that life's going to be easy. There's promise that life will be good, but there's intentional steps that we have to take to work through those things to get to the good and so there is hope in

this. And I think one of the biggest things is that we have to start with ourselves, and so I'm going to challenge listeners to really go, here are some steps you need to take to begin this process of moving out of loneliness, but it's got to start with you first.

Dr. Tim Clinton: Yeah. Mark, on behalf of Dr. Dobson, his wife, Shirley, their family, the entire team at Family Talk, we salute you. And thank you for joining us today. What a meaningful discussion. What a difficult, challenging topic for such a time as this. This brand new book, *The Path Out of Loneliness*, finding and fostering connection to God, ourselves and to one another. Dr. Mark Mayfield, thank you for joining us.

Dr. Mark Mayfield: Thank you.

Roger Marsh: Well, I don't know about you, but I cannot wait to hear these two counselors and colleagues discuss some more causes of loneliness and the path out of loneliness, coming up on tomorrow's broadcast. You're listening to Dr. James Dobson's Family Talk, and you just heard the first half of Dr. Tim Clinton's conversation with author and counselor, Dr. Mark Mayfield. To learn more about Dr. Mayfield and his book, *The Path Out of Loneliness*, visit our broadcast page at drjamesdobson.org/broadcast. When you're there, you can also listen to any part of today's program that you might have missed. Again, that's drjamesdobson.org. Or, feel free to give us a call at (877) 732-6825. Thanks for joining us today and be sure to listen in again tomorrow to hear the conclusion of Dr. Tim Clinton's conversation with Dr. Mark Mayfield. That's coming up next time right here on Dr. James Dobson's Family Talk.

Announcer: This has been a presentation of the Dr. James Dobson Family Institute.