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Topic: Alone or Choices

## Regina Alone

Loneliness was a wispy gray cloud that surrounded Regina as she sat, alone, on a bench outside the courtroom, waiting for her temporary custody hearing. Addiction, like suicide, can be solitary and lonely. She had no family or friends to accompany her to court. Her family had been burned too many times to help her now, and her only friend was her dealer. The only support that she had was the social worker who had gotten an emergency custody order to place her two children in foster care the day before. Regina sat quietly, with her hand over her mouth. Years of methamphetamine use had rotted most of her teeth and left the ones that were left black and jagged. She covered her mouth in a protective gesture; a habit developed out of embarrassment. She never smiled without covering her mouth.

As human beings we thrive with intimate connections to others; family, friends, and community. Regina's only intimate connection was an abusive husband who decorated her cheek with bruises like multicolored mosaics and removed all of the doors in the apartment so that she couldn't hide. But somewhere, in her drug induced and lonely fog, she wanted to be touched; wanted someone to remove her hand from her face and place it in her lap.

Regina loved her children but she never could remember exactly where she had left them and when she was supposed to pick them up. She would forget to feed them when she was high. They were often left alone. A beginning of intergenerational loneliness, passed on from mother to child. And yet they were a positive connection, tenuous at best, to life.

On that first day in Court Regina didn't look like she wanted to live. You could hear it in her tone of voice, see it in the slope of her shoulders, the downward focus of her eyes. She was utterly alone. Perhaps if she had been competent enough to form a plan, to go into the kitchen, find the knob and turn on the gas, it would have been different. Lucky for Regina, someone called child protective services.

Robert Hall, in his book "This Land of Strangers," notes that "The truth is, relationships are the most valuable and value-creating resource of any society. They are our lifelines to survive, grow, and thrive." Former Surgeon General Vivek Murthy has summarized that "the most common pathology that he has experienced as a doctor is not heart disease or diabetes; it is loneliness."

It has often been said that you can be alone but not lonely. That may be true for some, but it's a fine line; tricky to avoid stepping over. Alone turns into lonely almost without you noticing. Regina will tell you that connections with others, even when ordered by the Court in the form of therapy and support groups, saved her life. Along with a dentist who repaired her mouth, with brand new dentures, for free.