



Americans are lonely, and it's killing us

Affliction linked to host of physical problems

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USA TODAY

America has a new epidemic with debilitating and even deadly consequences. The problem is loneliness, and U.S. Surgeon General Dr. Vivek Murthy is hoping to generate awareness and offer remedies before it claims more lives.

"Most of us probably think of loneliness as just a bad feeling," he told USA TODAY. "It turns out that loneliness has far greater implications for our health." It's associated with an increased risk of heart disease, dementia, stroke and premature death.

One in 2 adults in the U.S. is living with measurable levels of loneliness – more than have diabetes, Murthy said.

Data from the University of Michigan showed 34% of 50- to 80-yearolds described feelings of loneliness in January 2023, compared with 27% in October 2018. A Harvard survey conducted in 2020 found that 39% of people reported feeling serious loneliness, and 61% of adults ages 18 to 25.

As researchers track record levels of self-reported loneliness, public health leaders are banding together to address the epidemic.

"The world is becoming lonelier and there's some very, very worrisome consequences," said Dr. Jeremy Nobel, a Harvard professor whose foundation launched an initiative called Project Unlonely.

"It won't just make you miserable, but loneliness will kill you," he said. "That's why it's a crisis."

Loneliness occurs when the connections a person needs in life are greater than the connections they have, Murthy said. Not everyone feels loneliness the same way or for the same reason – which is why it's so complicated to address.

Nobel argues that there are three types of loneliness: psychological, social and existential.

Psychological loneliness feels like not having anyone to confide in or trust. Societal loneliness is feeling systemically excluded because of a

characteristic, such as gender, race or disability. Existential or spiritual loneliness is feeling disconnected from oneself.

Loneliness can worsen as a result of trauma, illness and the effects of aging. Populations that report a high prevalence of loneliness include people with poor physical and mental health, disabilities or financial insecurity as well as those who live alone, are single parents or are older.

The impact of technology

Loneliness also can be exacerbated by technology taking the place of human interaction, which helps explain why young people report the highest rates.

COVID-19 prompted a boom in delivery services and Zoom meetings. As a result, there are fewer opportunities for Americans to interact in person, Murthy said. People are also more likely to change jobs or move due to the rise in remote work, which can disrupt meaningful connections.

Research shows feeling lonely is more common among heavy users of social media. Although “likes” and “followers” may feel momentarily good, they don’t foster genuine connectedness, Murthy said.

The Harvard study found that about half of young adults reported that no one in the past few weeks had “taken more than just a few minutes” to ask how they were doing in a way that made them feel like the person “genuinely cared.”

“You can be surrounded by lots of people and you can have lots of followers or connections on social media, but not necessarily feel like you’ve got somebody who knows you or shows up for you in a crisis,” he said.

How loneliness can affect health

There’s another reason experts are homing in on loneliness as a growing problem: It can harm a person’s mental and physical health, a potentially lethal combination.

Tackling this massive problem would mean addressing the greatest preventable risk factor for depression, anxiety, addiction, suicidality and self-harm, Nobel said.

The U.S. Surgeon General’s advisory report found that loneliness increases the risk of premature death by 26% and isolation by 29%. Living in loneliness is equivalent to smoking up to 15 cigarettes a day, Murthy said.

Feeling lonely increases a person's risk of heart disease by 29% and the risk of stroke by 32%, according to the American Heart Association.

Researchers are still learning why loneliness causes negative health outcomes, but they have a few hypotheses.

Loneliness could trigger stress hormones that cause inflammation and dysregulate bodily functions, said Lindsay Kobayashi, public health professor at the University of Michigan. Feeling lonely could cause people to adopt unhealthy behaviors such as poor diet, smoking and substance use.

Lonely people also may be less motivated to seek preventive care, adhere to medication and care of themselves, Nobel said.

Experts say recognition and awareness are important first steps to escaping loneliness. If you're feeling lonely, know that you're not alone.

"It doesn't mean that you're broken or something is fundamentally wrong with you," Murthy said.

On an individual level, Murthy suggests taking 15 minutes a day to reach out to someone you care about or look for ways to serve others. When you're with someone else, make the time count by giving them your full attention and putting devices away. Institutions, including schools, companies and health care systems, can adopt strategies to head off loneliness at the pass. Doctors can screen for loneliness, like depression and anxiety, Nobel said.

Tackling the nation's loneliness epidemic will require that all sectors of society work together, Murthy said.

"We can't take on a lot of these challenges alone. We need to be together. We need to be connected," he said. "That's what strengthening the social fabric in our lives and communities is all about."

If you or someone you know needs mental health resources and support, please call or text the 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline or visit [988lifeline.org](https://www.988lifeline.org) for 24/7 access to free, confidential services.



Solution: Social connectedness

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