

Are Neighbors the Key to Solving the Loneliness Epidemic?

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From left: Janet Bilden, Marie Samson and Georgia Seibert chat during a community event for older adults in San Francisco on Thursday. The state and city are leading a campaign urging people to meet their neighbors through their “Meet 6 Neighbors Challenge,” part of an effort to combat loneliness and the health harms that come with it. Santiago Mejia/S.F. Chronicle

For an hour on Thursday afternoon, inside the spacious St. John of God Church in San Francisco’s Inner Sunset District, Georgia Seibert and about 30 other older adults — mostly from the neighborhood — did tai chi, arm circles and stepping to the beat of the music in unison as part of a group exercise class.

Afterward, Seibert and a dozen others sat in groups of three to get to know each other, picking questions out of a hat as an icebreaker. Seibert’s group drew, “Share something about yourself people might be surprised to know.”

Seibert, 84, shared that she was a ballet dancer in Beverly Hills when she was 18.

The event was part of the “Meet Six Neighbors” initiative, led by a statewide program called Neighbor-to-Neighbor, which began during the COVID pandemic to help Californians tackle social isolation and strengthen community bonds. This fall, the state partnered with the city of San Francisco to launch the Meet Six Neighbors campaign locally, challenging residents to forge social connections with six people who live nearby.



An exercise with older adults is part of a campaign sponsored by the state and city to combat loneliness and the health harms that come with it. Santiago Mejia/S.F. Chronicle

The campaign stems from a study, published in 2024, that found that performing small acts of kindness — such as checking in on a neighbor, or helping them mow their lawn or get groceries — can improve feelings of well-being and reduce stress, loneliness and isolation.

The study was conducted in the U.S., the U.K. and Australia at the height of COVID shutdowns in 2020, but its findings remain relevant today, as they build on the growing body of evidence that social connection is just as important for one’s health and well-being as better-known interventions like exercise and nutrition.

Doctors, researchers and policymakers are increasingly recognizing this and emphasizing the importance of social connection. Former U.S. Surgeon General Dr. Vivek Murthy in 2023 declared loneliness an epidemic.

“It’s so widespread,” said Dr. Carla Perissinotto, a UCSF geriatrician who studies loneliness in older adults and led a 2012 study that found it is linked to significantly higher risk of early death. “That’s why we’re talking about it at the population health level. We need population-level initiatives.”



Louise Juul, left, and Joginder Singh chat during an event that's part of the "Meet 6 Neighbors Challenge." Santiago Mejia/S.F. Chronicle

Perissinotto's work and other research have found that loneliness is associated with higher likelihood of cardiovascular disease, dementia, poor diabetes control, infection, frailty and other health problems. One 2017 study found that lacking social connection is nearly as harmful for one's health as smoking 15 cigarettes a day.

"Conversely, if we're socially connected, we see the inverse happen — it can be protective," she said. "That's what's exciting."

Researchers are now trying to figure out exactly how much social connection is the "right" amount, and what duration of such actions impacts health the most.

"That's kind of what the next steps are," Perissinotto said.

While loneliness is often discussed in the context of older adults, many of whom become isolated after losing a spouse or living far away from their adult children, studies show the highest rates of loneliness are among young adults. The Meet Six Neighbors challenge is for people of all ages.



Conversation prompts for small groups are chosen at random. Santiago Mejia/S.F. Chronicle

"We live in a time where people are very disconnected from each other and are not joining civic groups like they did in generations past, and people are living alone longer," said Josh Fryday, director of the California Office of Service and Community Engagement, which started the Neighbor-to-Neighbor program and issues grants to San Francisco and other cities to do the Six Neighbors campaign. "What we're trying to do is figure out ways to get people connected in their communities."

The most recent state grant to San Francisco was \$500,000, Fryday said. It helped fund ads on Muni buses and social media, block parties, workshops, swap meets and other gatherings.

Most people want to connect with their neighbors but aren't sure where to start, said Kate Kuckro, co-executive director of Community Living Campaign, the San Francisco nonprofit that organized the Thursday group exercise class and coordinates other community-building events for seniors at several neighborhoods across the city.

"So if you can help people get past that hurdle, the magic happens on its own."



Joginder Singh, second from left, chats with new acquaintances at the Thursday event. Santiago Mejia/S.F. Chronicle

Indeed, Seibert has met friends through the group exercise classes at the church. She gestured toward Janet Bilden, who also lives in the area. They met months ago when Bilden started coming to the classes.

"We text each other," Seibert said, and they'll walk home together from the church.

Seibert hadn't considered herself especially social. But as she got older, she started making more of an effort to socialize because her adult children live farther away and her parents have passed away.

"All your regular social connections are gone," she said. "I still think I'd like to call my mother and she's not available. I don't have any children under 56. And they think you're boring!"