


# Solo No More: Tackling the Truth About Loneliness and Finding Connection

Megan Smith, PhD  
Department of Sociology  
University of North Carolina Charlotte  
S.T.E.P.'s Developmental Academy  
May 19, 2025



# Agenda

- Understand the distinction between loneliness, social isolation and solitude and their impacts on health
- Recognize the signs and symptoms
- Explore practical strategies to develop and maintain meaningful social connections
- Familiarize yourself with community resources and simple actions to combat loneliness

# Welcome and Introduction

- Who am I and why am I talking about loneliness?
- Please introduce yourself!
  - Name
  - Provide the story behind your name
  - Share one thing you enjoy doing alone and one thing you enjoy doing with others

# Defining Terms

- **Loneliness** is the mismatch between the number of quality relationships one believes one possesses versus the number of quality relationships one would like to have.
  - Loneliness (or social disconnection) is subjective and dynamic.
  - The absence of loneliness does not equate with feeling socially connected.
  - Loneliness is a continuum or gradient.
  - In a society, variations in social and individual thresholds of loneliness exist.
- **Social Isolation** is objective measure of how many people one actually sees in a certain period of time. Those in isolation are not necessarily lonely
- **Solitude** is the luxury of feeling socially connected, but self selecting to spend time alone.

# Types of Loneliness

- Social
- Emotional
- Existential
- Transient
- Situational
- Chronic

# Trends of Loneliness

- As many as 50% of U.S. adults report feeling lonely
- 43% of adults aged 60+ report feeling lonely
- Gen Z reports rates of 61%
- 24% of Gen Z reports feeling lonely within the past week
- For those who report feeling lonely
  - 57% do not share their true self with others
  - 45% do not know how to form relationships with others
  - 44% are too tired to reach out consistently
  - 60% claim that mental health gets in the way of connecting

# Trends of Loneliness: A Visual

Adults' mental health ratings

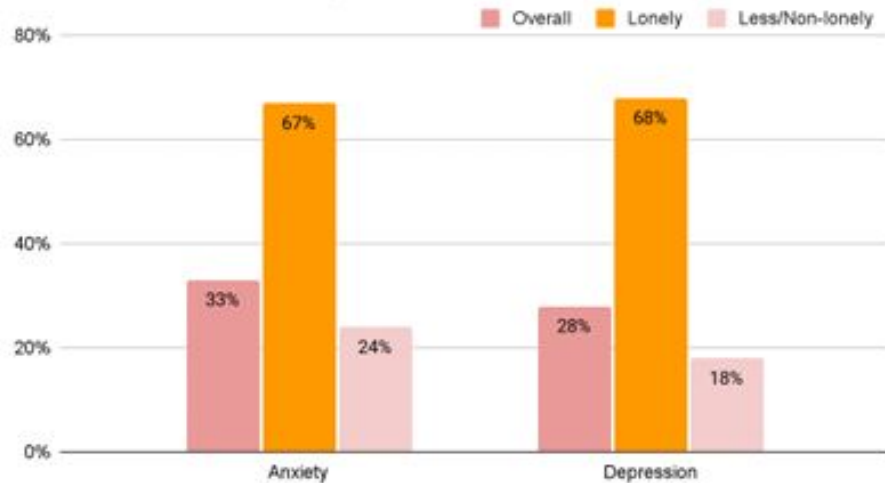


Figure 2. Percentages of adults, overall and based on levels of loneliness, who reported anxiety or depression. We measured anxiety and depression using the [GAD-2](#) and [PHQ-2](#) measures, respectively, and the order of items for each was randomized. For the loneliness comparisons, lonely adults said “frequently” or “almost all of the time/all of the time” to feeling lonely in the past 30 days, and less/non-lonely are those who said “never” or “occasionally.” This applies to all subsequent figures with these comparisons.

(Making Caring Common, 2024)

# Who is Gen Z?

- Gen Z includes folx born between 1997-2012; most **diverse** generation
  - Forty eight percent of the Gen Z population is non white.
  - About 59% are pursuing a college degree.
  - Those living with a college educated parent is 43%.
  - Most likely to live in cities, less likely to dropout of high school and less workforce experience than previous generations
- Gen Z self report loneliness multiple days within the most recent week at from 24%
- *Gen Z is the loneliest generation...Why?*



# Signs and Symptoms of Loneliness

How do we know if people are lonely?

- Abnormal anxiety and increase of demanding and/or critical behavior
- Decreased confidence and self esteem
- Missed work days
- Disengagement in a variety of contexts (e.g., relationships, hobbies)
- Changes in appetite and sleep patterns
- Difficulting concentrating
- Not attending events one is invited to even though there are no other plans
- Insomnia



# Social Causes of Loneliness

- Unmet essential needs (e.g., food, shelter, safety)
- Mental Health challenges
- Lack of strong social connections or support systems
- Experiences of discrimination based on identity or status
- Extended time spent using technology or digital media
- Fewer face-to-face shared experiences and meaningful memories
- Living in isolation or without companionship
- Navigating multiple life transitions during this period
- Reduced participation in civic or community groups
- Declining attendance in religious or spiritual gatherings

(Putnam, 2001; Foundation for Social Connection Action Network, 2025)

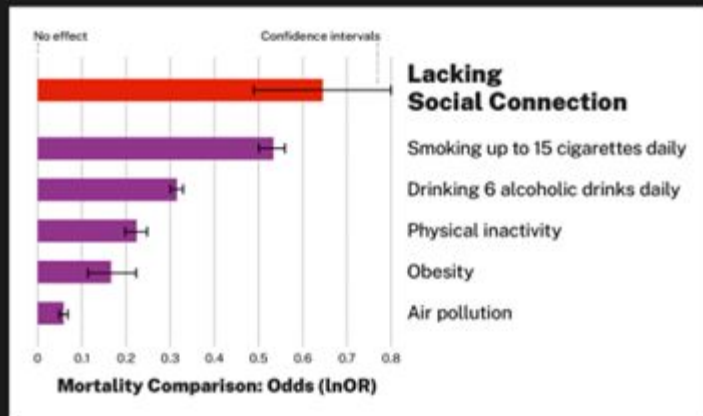
# Outcomes of Loneliness

Poor Physical and  
Mental Health  
Outcomes

“Akin to smoking 15  
cigarettes a day”

- Physical Health Outcomes:
  - Sleep disturbances, difficulty self regulating (CNS), weakened immune system
  - What's ahead: Higher likelihood of chronic heart disease, stroke, hypertension, diabetes, cancer
- Mental Health Outcomes:
  - Increased risk of depression and anxiety (#1 symptom), increased risk of suicidality, and self harm, increased likelihood of substance abuse
  - What's ahead: Cognitive decline , increased risk of Alzheimer's and other types of dementia

# Lacking social connection is as dangerous as smoking up to 15 cigarettes a day.



Comparison groups: Complex measures of social integration: high v. low; not smoking v. smoking = 15 cigarettes daily; alcohol abstinence v. drinking = 6 alcoholic drinks daily; physical activity v. inactivity; low BMI v. high BMI; low air pollution v. high air pollution.

Source: Hall-Lundstad J, Robles TF, Sbarra DA. Advancing Social Connection as a Public Health Priority in the United States. *American Psychology*. 2017;72(6):517-530. doi:10.1037/amp0000103. This graph is a visual approximation.



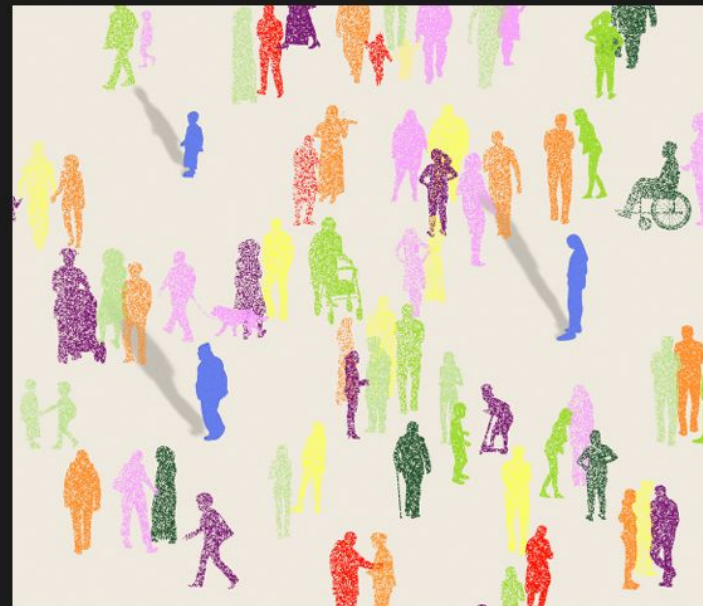
Office of the  
U.S. Surgeon General

# Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation



2023

The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory on the  
Healing Effects of Social Connection and Community



# What Can We Do to Reduce Loneliness?

Individual actions make a difference!  
Try these practical steps in the future days and weeks.  
Consistency is key!

- Limit distractions during conversations to enhance the quality of your time with others.
- Seek out ways to serve and support those around you.
- Be attentive, encouraging, and express gratitude regularly.
- Avoid habits that contribute to disconnection or isolation.





Service to Others

“Service is the  
antidote to  
loneliness”  
-Dr. Vivek Murthy

# Promising Pages

Remote Volunteering  
Service Project



**PROMISING PAGES®**

The Charlotte Area Book Bank

[Promising Pages](#)



# Key Takeaways:

- You are not alone if you feel lonely.
- And loneliness does not have to last forever.



Megan Smith, PhD  
Department of Sociology  
UNC Charlotte  
[ssmit392@charlotte.edu](mailto:ssmit392@charlotte.edu)

Q&A  
Thank you for  
your engagement!