


# The Experience of Loneliness and Social Isolation Among Older Adults

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# Aging Trends

- The population of individuals 65+ in the United States is 16.0%
- For adults aged 60+ years, 45.4% are men and 54.6% are women
- 12.7% of adults 60+ report “any disability”



# Social Isolation

- **Definition:** Quantifiable lack of relationships or infrequent social contact (objective measure)
- Higher levels of social isolation increase the likelihood of loneliness
- Decreased social isolation does not automatically reduce feelings of loneliness

# Loneliness

- **Definition:** A subjective experience arising from a mismatch between the number of quality relationships one desires versus the number of perceived quality relationships one has
- Loneliness thresholds vary from person to person.

- **Types of Loneliness**

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

(Campaign to End Loneliness, n.d)

# Solitude

- Definition: “A state of aloneness by choice that does not involve feeling lonely.”
- The luxury of choosing to be **alone**. - Vivek Murthy, US Surgeon General

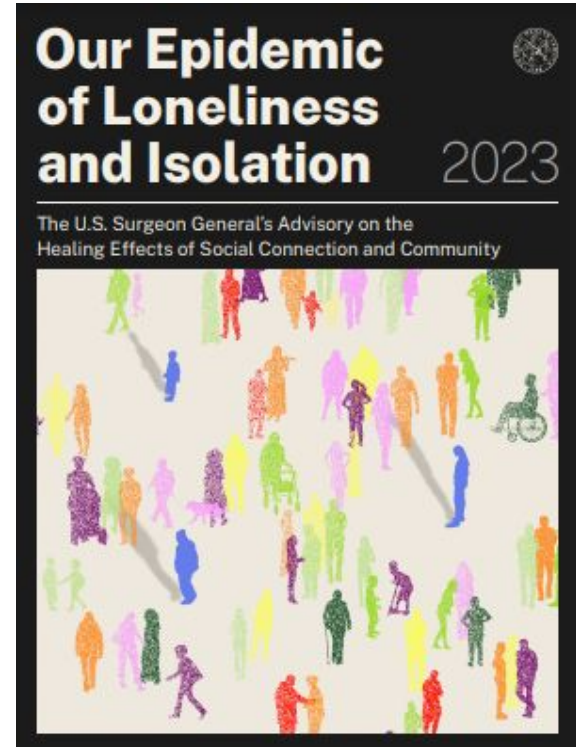
(Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Social Isolation, 2023)

# Historical Context

- Loneliness and social isolation have risen over the past four decades.

## Causes include:

- Increased life expectancy
- The Age of Chronic Diseases
- Technology/social media use
- Financial independence
- Geographic distance in family groups



# Current Trends in Loneliness



- 44% of adults aged 66+ report feeling lonely
- 16% of older adults (55+) report feeling left out
- Men are more likely to report feeling lonely than women
- Adults with physical health issues are approximately 50% more likely to be lonely than those with strong physical health
- Individuals with lower incomes are lonelier than those with higher incomes.
- Underrepresented racial groups are more likely to be lonely

(The Loneliness Epidemic Persists: A PostPandemic Look at the State of Loneliness among U.S. Adults, 2021)

# Factors that Can Shape Social Connection

## Individual Level

- Chronic Disease
- Mental Health
- Physical Health
- Personality
- Race
- Gender
- Socioeconomic Status
- Life Stage
- Geographic Location

# Health Outcomes

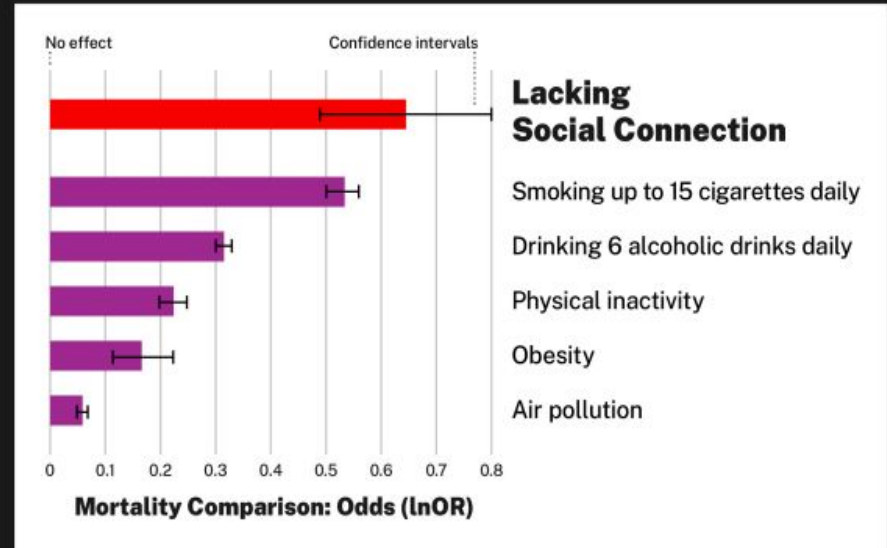
## Physical and Mental

- Increased Mortality Rates
- Cardiovascular Disease
- Hypertension
- Stroke
- Diabetes
- Infectious Disease
- Cognitive Function
- Depression and Anxiety
- Suicidality and Self-Harm

# Outcomes of Social Disconnection



## 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:** Holt-Lunstad 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.

# How do We Solve this Social Issue?

- Invest time in nurturing your relationships.
- Minimize distraction during conversation to increase the quality of the time you spend with others.
- Seek out opportunities to serve and support others by participating in community service.
- Practice gratitude.
- Make time for civic engagement.
- Actively engage with people of different backgrounds and experiences.
- Reduce practices that lead to feelings of disconnection from others.
- Be open with your health care provider about significant social changes in your life.
- Reflect the core values of connection in how you approach others in conversation and through the actions you take.

(Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Social Isolation, 2023)

# Reflective Questions

- Key questions to ask yourself when considering your interactions with others:
  - How might kindness change this situation?
  - What would it look like to treat others with respect?
  - How can I be of service?
  - How can I reflect my concern for and commitment to others?

# Recommended Reading: Books

Cacioppo, J.T. & W. Patrick. (2008). *Loneliness: human nature and the need for social connection*. W.W. Norton & Company.

Hari, J. (2018). *Lost connections: uncovering the real causes of depression- and unexpected solutions*. Bloomsbury.

Klinenberg, E. (2003) *Heat wave: a Social autopsy of disaster in Chicago*. University of Chicago Press.

Klinenberg, E. (2012). *Going solo: the extraordinary rise and surprising appeal of living alone*. The Penguin Press.

Mettes, S. (2021). *The Loneliness epidemic: why so many of us feel alone- and how leaders can respond*. Brazos Press.

Murthy, V. (2020). *Together: the healing power of human connection in a sometimes lonely world*. Harper Wave.

White, E. (2010). *Lonely: learning to live with solitude*. Harper Perennial.

Yang, K. (2019). *Loneliness: A social problem*. Routledge.

# References

Campaign to End Loneliness. (n.d) *Facts and statistics about loneliness.*

<https://www.campaigntoendloneliness.org/facts-and-statistics/>, accessed on January 15, 2024

Cigna Corporation. *The Loneliness Epidemic Persists: A PostPandemic Look at the State of Loneliness among U.S. Adults.* 2021

U.S. Census Bureau, "ACS Population 60 Years and Over in the United States," American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates Subject Tables, Table S0102, 2020,  
<https://data.census.gov/all?q=older%20adults%20in%20the%20US%202020> , accessed on January 15, 2024

U.S. Surgeon General's Office. (2023). *Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Social Isolation.*  
<https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/surgeon-general-social-connection-advisory.pdf>