The Loneliness Loop: How We Lose—and Can Rebuild—Connection in Campus Life

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Agenda

- Establishing a Shared Language
- The Story in Numbers
- The Many Faces of Loneliness
- Loneliness in Disguise
- What's Driving Disconnection?
- How Loneliness Shows Up in the Body
- Listening to Employees' Challenges
- Strategies for Reducing Loneliness

Welcome and Introduction

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

Establishing a Shared Language

- **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.

The Story in Numbers

- 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

The Many Faces of Loneliness

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

Loneliness in Disguise

- 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

The Many Faces of Loneliness

- Physical Health Outcomes:
  - Sleep disturbances, difficulty self regulating (CNS), weakened immune system
  - 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
  - Cognitive decline, increased risk of Alzheimer's and other types of dementia

Is technology use the the culprit??

Activity:
What can you do without engaging in technology?

Excluded:

Gaming

Sports Betting

Watching videos

Online dating time

E-Commerce

Health Apps

Answering emails

Posting on Socials

Working/Coding

Online shopping

Chatbots/A.I.

Texting

What's Driving Disconnection?

- 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
- Prolonged technology or digital media usage
- Fewer face-to-face shared experiences and meaningful memories
- Living alone or without companionship
- Reduced participation in civic or community groups
- Declining attendance in religious or spiritual gatherings

Listening to Employees' Challenges

- Devaluation of faculty and staff voice
- Lack of community within offices and the wider university
- Administrative overload
- Hiring and/or promotion freezes
- Declining enrollments & decreased student retention
- Ever Evolving pedagogical practices including technological advancements
- Declining mental health and wellness
- Shifting student needs requires shifts in staff and faculty work
- Cancellation or lack of research grant funding
- State policy changes/ reduction in budgets/funding cuts
- Emotional labor and burnout

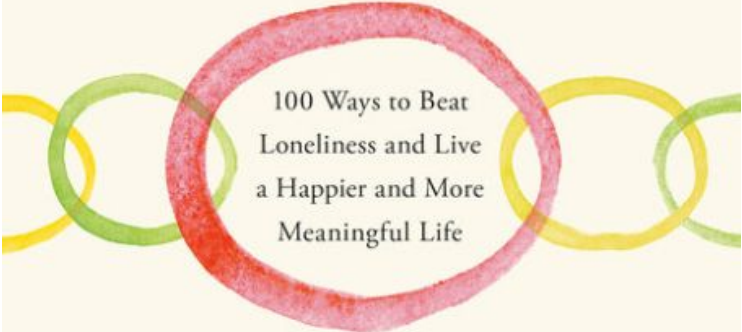# Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation

2023

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

the joy of connections

100 Ways to Beat Loneliness and Live a Happier and More Meaningful Life

Dr. Ruth K. Westheimer

with Allison Gilbert *and* Pierre Lehu

The Loneliness Calendar

August: National Friendship Day (1st Sunday in August)

September: Locate an Old Friend Day (9/20/25)

October: World's Teacher Day (10/5/25)

November: National Gratitude Month

December: [International Volunteer Day](link) (12/5/25)

January: #NationalNothingDay (1/16/26)

February: National Random Acts of Kindness Day (2/17/26)

March: World Compliment Day (3/1/26)

April: Earth Day (4/22/26)

May: [Digital Wellness Day](link) (5/1/26)

June: Intergenerational Day (6/1/26)

July: Social Wellness Month

"Menu for Connection"

- Self:
  - Make Peace with Yourself, Evaluate Your Routine, Invest in Your Health, Bring a Prop, Get a Pet, Practice Small Kindness, Push Through Rejection, Prepare for Conversation, Travel Wisely
- Family:
  - Attend Family Gatherings, Be Less Judgemental, Be Vulnerable, Say Their Name Outloud, Give Yourself a Break, Seek New Family

"Menu for Connection"

- Friends and Lovers:
  - Curate Your Social Circle, Organize Concrete Plans, Cast a Wider Net
- Community:
  - Develop a Smaller Community, Be a Mentor, Commit to Meaningful Busyness, Go to the Office!, Go to Conferences
- Technology:
  - 7 minute gift, Take Notes on Your Phone, Join podcast/social media communities

Creating Change That Counts

- Develop a strategic plan for university/ college connectedness and social skills
  - Provide regular opportunities and spaces for students to develop social skills and strengthen relationships
  - Enhance connectedness through:
    - Promoting quality support from faculty and school staff
    - Peer-led programs
    - Partner with on and off campus service oriented non-profit organizations

Creating Change That Counts

- Build social connection into curricula and talk openly about the consequences of social connection on physical and mental health, key risk and protective factors, and strategies for increasing social connection.
- Implement socially based student techniques such as cooperative learning projects.
- Create a supportive school environment that fosters belonging through classroom. management, mentoring, and peer support groups that allow students to lean on one another and learn.

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Q&A
Thank you!