

Kindness Connections: Overcoming Loneliness through Service

Megan Smith, PhD
Department of Sociology
UNC Charlotte Family Weekend
September 12, 2025





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
- Service is the Antidote to 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
- UC Davis study reports half of freshmen said making friends was more difficult than they expected (2019)
- Over 60% College students reported feeling lonely in the past year and 30% within the past few weeks (2018)
- For those who report feeling lonely (2024)
 - 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 classes
- 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



Health Outcomes 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 (4x more likely) 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 in the future



Is technology use the the culprit??



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



Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation

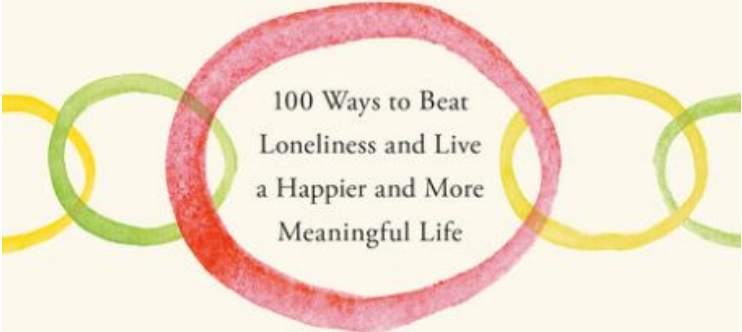


2023

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](#) (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](#) (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 Acts Kindness, Push Through Rejection, Prepare for Conversation,
- Family:
 - Attend Family Gatherings, Be Less Judgemental, Be Vulnerable, Give Yourself a Break,



“Menu for Connection”

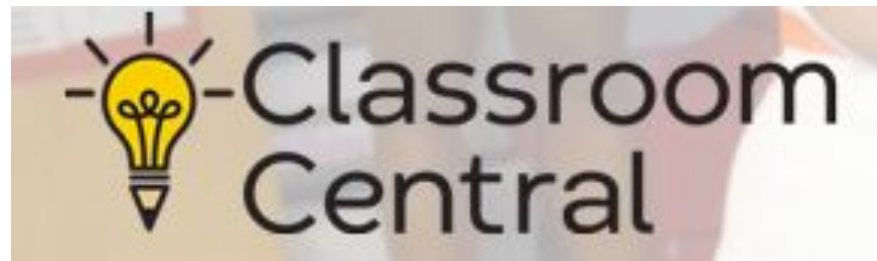
- Friends and Romantic Partners:
 - Curate Your Social Circle, Organize Concrete Plans, Cast a Wider Net, “Space Gatherings”
- Community:
 - Develop a Smaller Community, Serve your Community, Random Acts of Kindness to Friends, Peers, Professors, and Strangers
- Technology:
 - 7 minute gift, Take Notes on Your Phone, Join podcast/social media communities



“Service is the antidote to loneliness”

-Dr. Vivek Murthy, former US Surgeon General

- Loneliness decreases confidence, self worth, and self esteem
 - Service provides purpose, value, and re-directs the unpleasant feelings of loneliness
 - Opportunity to build quality connection with others
 - Look within our own networks- how can you connect with others in 15 minutes a day
 - [Random Acts of Kindness Foundation](#)
 - Remote Volunteering Opportunity: [Classroom Central](#)





Service in the Classroom

Key Takeaways:

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

Q&A
Thank
you!



Megan Smith, PhD
Assistant Teaching Professor
Department of Sociology
megan.smith@charlotte.edu
LinkedIn QR Code Below:



For any photos from
today or this
weekend, please tag
@clt_families
and @clt_CHESS

