Together We Can Help Remedy the ‘Loneliness Epidemic’

“Loneliness has been found to be associated with a reduction of life span... similar to that caused by smoking 15 cigarettes a day, and it’s greater than the impact on life span of obesity.” Former U.S. Surgeon General Vivik Murthy

Loneliness has always been a sad reality of life, not to mention a popular topic for poets and songwriters. Emily Dickinson once described it as “the horror not to be surveyed.” Singer Roy Orbison called it “the worst thing in the world.”

Today, loneliness has become the focus of serious scientific study. Surveys show that more than 40 percent of American adults report being lonely. That rate has doubled since the 1980s, even though we now live in the most technologically connected period in human history.

Loneliness, scientists warn, is a growing public health “epidemic” that threatens physical as well as mental health. It affects people of all ages and social and economic backgrounds.

**Baked into the Genes**

People evolved to be social creatures. Building relationships helped early humans to find enough food and protect themselves from predators.

“Over thousands of years, the value of social connection has become baked into our nervous system,” wrote former U.S. Surgeon General Vivik Murthy.

That’s why loneliness isn’t just responsible for a miserable mood. It actually raises the levels of stress hormones and inflammation in our body and cuts down on the antibodies we use to fight infection. That increases our risk for high blood pressure, heart disease, cancer, arthritis, Type 2 diabetes, anxiety, dementia, and even early death.

One recent analysis involving more than 300,000 people found that those with strong social connections were half as likely to die before their time as those without.

**Alone vs. Lonely**

The term loneliness is often used interchangeably with social isolation. But the two aren’t exactly the same. Isolation is an objective measure based on how many social contacts you have. Isolation is about
being alone. Loneliness, on the other hand is a subjective feeling that you don’t have enough meaningful connections in your life. It’s about feeling alone.

You can be lonely without being socially isolated, and vice versa. The number of friends and relatives you have isn’t as important as the quality of your social connections.

Still, both loneliness and social isolation have been shown to harm a person’s health.

“There is robust evidence that social isolation and loneliness significantly increase risk for premature mortality,” said a speaker at the annual convention of the American Psychological Association last summer. “With an increasing aging population, the effect on public health is only anticipated to increase.”

This has scary implications for both public health and health-care costs. A 2014 study found that lonely people are more likely to visit the doctor. It helps to satisfy their need for interaction and stimulation.

The bottom line: Lonely people are unhealthy, dying, and costing our society more.

Why So Lonesome?

We tend to think of loneliness as a problem of old age. But studies have shown that it peaks in adolescence and young adulthood, and again among the “oldest old.”

Many factors contribute to the problem.

According to census data, about a quarter of the U.S. population lives alone. More people are staying single, divorcing, and having fewer children. Fewer people are volunteering or attending church. We also move more often, so we’re more likely to live apart from family.

Technology also might share some of the blame. Many of us spend our workday chained to a computer instead of connecting with co-workers. Social media like Facebook and Twitter remind us daily of how many “friends” we have – or don’t have.

Some experts believe people may get lonelier with age because the impacts of loneliness are cumulative. Older people also go through a number of life transitions that affect their social relationships. Among them are retirement, widowhood, “empty nests,” giving up the car keys, and age-related health problems, like loss of mobility and hearing.

Confronting the Challenge

What can we do about the loneliness epidemic? There can be a huge stigma to admitting that we’re lonely. So reach out. You can ease the loneliness and isolation of others in our community by simply being there. Laugh with them, reminisce, and let them know you care about them. This can happen through your own personal initiative, or you can get involved in a volunteer program.

One such opportunity is the Senior Companion Program at Rocky Mountain Development Council in Helena. It pairs volunteers 55 or older with adults in the community who have trouble with the simple tasks of day-to-day living. You can learn more at www.rmdc.net/senior-companion
We also can look across the pond to the United Kingdom for strategies to combat loneliness. Britain is well ahead of us in addressing the issue.

In 2011, the U.K. launched a Campaign to End Loneliness that involves numerous social-service agencies and nonprofit organizations, all working to raise people’s awareness of loneliness. In 2016, lawmakers formed a Commission on Loneliness. And last month, Prime Minister Theresa May appointed a “minister for loneliness” based on a recommendation of that commission.

It’s time that we, too, recognize that loneliness is a public health issue. It’s not a choice.

Loneliness should be everybody’s business.

More Information

Connect2Affect, A Social Isolation Platform: This website, developed by AARP, includes tips for how to get more connected. Although the site is aimed at seniors, the tips can work for everyone. https://connect2affect.org/

Campaign to End Loneliness: This UK website has lots of resources that can be adapted for use anywhere. www.campaigntoendloneliness.org