

Community Institute for Psychotherapy

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2024-2025 News & Notes



2024 November News and Notes

Looking into Loneliness

By Robin Joy Berenson, PhD, LMFT

In his Advisory issued last spring, U.S. Surgeon General Dr. Vivek Murthy explained, “Our epidemic of loneliness and isolation has been an underappreciated public health crisis that has harmed individual and societal health. . . . The physical health consequences of poor or insufficient connection include a 29% increased risk of heart disease, a 32% increased risk of stroke, and a 50% increased risk of developing dementia for older adults. Additionally, lacking social connection increases risk of premature death by more than 60%.”

At the same time, Dr. Murthy notes, “Our relationships are a source of healing and well-being hiding in plain sight – one that can help us live healthier, more fulfilled, and more productive lives.” 2

The profound effect of loneliness on physical health may be understood in part, explains Professor Steve Cole, a medicine and genomics researcher at the University of California, Los Angeles, by the impact loneliness has on our immune system. “[R]esearch shows that people experiencing chronic loneliness undergo a shift in the molecular programming of their immune cells: instead of being primed to fight viruses, their bodies prepare to fight bacterial infection. . . . Long term, this leads to higher levels of inflammation, which in turn contributes to cancer, heart attacks, Alzheimer’s, and Depression. ‘Loneliness, oddly enough, is one of the most threatening states we confront,’ Cole explains.” 3

According to Dr. Jeremy Nobel, author of *Project UnLonely*, “There are three types of loneliness. The psychological type is what we know best – the ‘do you have someone to talk to about your problems?’ type. . . . Systematic exclusion is the second, whether that be due to race, gender, disability or something else. The third is spiritual loneliness –

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the ‘does my life have meaning, does it have consequences?’ type – it’s the feeling that we’re alone in a big world.”

In addressing this problem, Nobel suggests, “We need to perceive loneliness for what it is, an emotional signal. When we feel thirsty, it’s a sign to drink water. When we feel lonely, it’s a sign that we need social engagement or support. We wouldn’t feel embarrassed about feeling thirsty.” 4

Other studies have made a distinction between loneliness and social isolation. The latter, it turns out, is even more devastating than loneliness. According to one study published in the journal *Nature Human Behavior*, “People who experienced social isolation had a 32% higher risk of dying early from any cause compared with those who weren’t socially isolated. Participants who reported feeling lonely were 14% more likely to die early than those who did not.

“Social isolation, as defined by the study, occurs when someone has an objective lack of contact with other people and can involve having a limited network or living alone.”

“Loneliness, on the other hand, refers to the subjective distress people feel if there’s a discrepancy between the quality of social relationships they actually have and what they want.” 5

Impact on Communities

The Surgeon General’s Advisory states, “Social connection is beneficial for individual health and also improves the resilience of our communities. . . . Communities where residents are more connected with one another fare better on several measures of population health, community safety, community resilience when natural disasters strike, prosperity, and civic engagement.”

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Accordingly, the Surgeon General’s Advisory lays out a framework for the United States to establish a National Strategy to Advance Social Connection based on six foundational pillars [excerpted here]:

“Strengthen Social Infrastructure: Connections are not just influenced by individual interactions, but by the physical elements of a community (parks, libraries, playgrounds) and the programs and policies in place.

“Enact Pro-Connection Public Policies: National, state, local, and tribal governments play a role in establishing policies like accessible public transportation or paid family leave that can support and enable more connection among a community or a family.

“Mobilize the Health Sector: Health care providers are well-positioned to assess patients for risk of loneliness and intervene.

“Reform Digital Environments: We must critically evaluate our relationship with technology and ensure that how we interact digitally does not detract from meaningful and healing connection with others.

“Deepen Our Knowledge: A more robust research agenda ...must be established to further our understanding of the causes and consequences of social disconnection, populations at risk, and the effectiveness of efforts to boost connection.

“Cultivate a Culture of Connection: The informal practices of everyday life ... significantly influence the relationships we have in our lives. We cannot be successful without a culture of connection.”

¹ <https://www.who.int/teams/social-determinants-of-health/demographic-change-and-healthy-ageing/social-isolation-and-loneliness>

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- 2 <https://www.hhs.gov/about/news/2023/05/03/new-surgeon-general-advisory-raises-alarm-about-devastating-impact-epidemic-loneliness-isolation-united-states.html>
- 3 <https://www.sciencefocus.com/the-human-body/you-are-not-alone-2>
- 4 <https://www.sciencefocus.com/future-technology/can-tech-solve-loneliness>
- 5 <https://www.cnn.com/2023/06/19/health/loneliness-social-isolation-early-death-risk-wellness/index.html>