

Loneliness More Hazardous to Your Health Than Obesity or Smoking

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STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- › An estimated 42.6 million Americans over the age of 45 suffer from chronic loneliness, and census data reveal more than 25% of the U.S. population lives alone
- › Loneliness is associated with higher blood pressure and higher risk of diseases such as heart disease, stroke, dementia, depression and lower survival rates for breast cancer patients
- › Two meta-analyses reveal loneliness is more hazardous to your health than obesity, raising your risk of early death by as much as 50%, and compares to the risk of smoking 15 cigarettes per day

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Loneliness doesn't just affect your mind; it can also cause a number of health problems. For example, previous research¹ shows feeling lonely can raise your blood pressure up to 14 points, with greater increases the longer loneliness persists. With that, the risk for heart disease and dementia also increases.²

Researchers concluded social isolation and loneliness may have more severe consequences than obesity and smoking. Other research reveals the brain-related changes associated with feelings of loneliness start to take place after as little as 24 hours of isolation.³

Loneliness More Hazardous to Your Health Than Obesity

Negative emotions will invariably impact your physical well-being, and feeling lonely is no different. According to two meta analyses^{4,5} presented at the 2017 Annual Convention of the American Psychological Association, loneliness and social isolation – which are similar but not identical – pose greater threats to public health than obesity, raising your risk for premature death by as much as 50%. As reported by Medical News Today:⁶

"While loneliness and social isolation are often used interchangeably, there are notable differences between the two. Social isolation is defined as a lack of contact with other individuals, while loneliness is the feeling that one is emotionally disconnected from others.

In essence, a person can be in the presence of others and still feel lonely. According to a 2016 Harris Poll⁷ of more than 2,000 adults in the U.S., around 72 percent reported having felt lonely at some point in their lives. Of these adults, around 31 percent reported feeling lonely at least once a week."

The first analysis, which looked at 148 studies involving more than 300,000 adults, found social isolation increased the risk of premature death by 50%. The second,^{8,9} which evaluated 70 studies that included more than 3.4 million individuals, found social isolation, loneliness and living alone correlated with a 29%, 26% and 32% increased risk of mortality respectively.

Overall, this is comparable to the risk of premature death associated with obesity and other well-established risk factors for mortality, including the risks associated with smoking 15 cigarettes a day.¹⁰

Other Health Risks Associated With Loneliness

According to the American Osteopathic Association,¹¹ which commissioned the Harris Poll cited above, loneliness plays a role in many chronic health conditions, including

pain, drug or alcohol abuse and depression. Recent studies have linked loneliness to an increased risk for Alzheimer's disease,¹² heart attack and stroke,¹³ and lower survival rates for breast cancer patients.¹⁴ Studies have also shown that people who are lonely are more likely to experience:

- Higher levels of stress^{15,16}
- Poor sleep¹⁷
- Increased inflammation¹⁸
- Reduced immune function¹⁹

Epidemic of Loneliness and Social Isolation Looms Large

According to a 2010 study²⁰ on loneliness conducted by the AARP, an estimated 42.6 million Americans over the age of 45 suffer from chronic loneliness, and census data reveal more than 25% of the U.S. population live alone. Why is loneliness becoming an increasingly prevalent experience? According to researchers, common reasons include:

- Long work hours
- Use of social media surpassing face-to-face interaction
- Frequent travel for work
- Living far from family
- Delaying and/or forgoing marriage

Commenting on the Harris Poll on loneliness, Dr. Jennifer Caudle, assistant professor of family medicine at Rowan University School of Osteopathic Medicine noted:²¹

"Loneliness is an invisible epidemic masked by our online personas, which are rarely representative of our real emotions. It's important for patients to understand how their mental and emotional well-being directly affects the body ... Face-to-face communication is critical for emotional and mental health."

Seeking out meaningful human interactions makes patients happier and, ultimately, healthier overall."

In light of a growing population of seniors and the rising prevalence of social isolation in general, Julianne Holt-Lunstad, Ph.D., a professor of psychology who led the two meta-analyses, suggests we need to tackle loneliness both on an individual basis and as a society. To do this, she suggests devoting resources to:

- Social skills training for school-aged children
- Training doctors to incorporate social connectedness evaluations into their medical screening
- Seniors are also advised to prepare for the social implications of retirement, as many adults have few if any social networks outside of the workplace

The Mind-Body Connection

It truly is amazing how your mindset can influence your physical health. It's a powerful force that can either bolster or undermine your physical and mental health. One reason for this has to do with epigenetics, which centers on the notion that environmental factors such as stress and diet influence your genetic expression. It is the expression of your genes – not the genes themselves – that dictates whether you develop certain diseases or age prematurely.

Your epigenome is readily influenced by physical and emotional stresses – how you respond to everything that happens in your environment, from final exams to childhood abuse. So, if you are chronically lonely, this negative emotion will influence the expression of your genes and thus impact your risk of developing disease.

This also explains why, as Dawson Church cites in his book "The Genie in Your Genes: Epigenetic Medicine and the New Biology of Intention," heart surgery patients who have a strong social support network and spiritual practice have one-seventh the mortality rate of those who don't!

Strategies to Address Loneliness

If you struggle with loneliness, you're certainly not alone. The question is what to do about it. Following are a number of suggestions and strategies pulled from a variety of sources that can help address loneliness:^{22,23,24}

Join a club — Proactive approaches to meeting others include joining a club and planning get-togethers with family, friends or neighbors, Meetup.com is an online source where you can locate a vast array of local clubs and get-togethers. Many communities also have community gardens where you can benefit from the outdoors while mingling with your neighbors.

Learn a new skill — Consider enrolling in a class or taking an educational course.

Create rituals of connection — As described by Baya Voce in the TEDx Talk above, rituals are a powerful means for reducing loneliness. Examples include having weekly talk sessions with your girlfriends and/or making meal time a special time to connect with your family without rushing.

Consider a digital cleanse — If your digital life has overtaken face-to-face interactions, consider taking a break from social media while taking proactive steps to meet people in person. Research shows Facebook may be more harmful than helpful to your emotional well-being, raising your risk of depression — especially if your contacts' posts elicit envy.

In one study,²⁵ Facebook users who took a one-week break from the site reported significantly higher levels of life satisfaction and a significantly improved emotional life.

Make good use of digital media — For others, a phone call or text message can be a much-needed lifeline. As noted by Will Wright in his TEDx Talk, "digitizing empathy" can be a powerful way to help each other. Examples of this include sending encouraging text messages to people who are struggling with loneliness, offering

support and help to live healthier lives and follow through on healthy lifestyle changes.

In the U.K., seniors can call the Silver Line,^{26,27} a help line for older people where they can speak to a live person for as long as they wish. The help line is open 24 hours a day, year-round. The service receives an average of 10,000 calls per week.

Exercise with others – Joining a gym or signing up with a fitness-directed club or team sport will create opportunities to meet people while improving your physical fitness at the same time.

Shop local – Routinely frequenting local shops, coffee shops or farmers markets will help you develop a sense of community and encourage the formation of relationships.

Talk to strangers – Talking to strangers in the store, in your neighborhood or on your daily commute is often a challenge, but can have many valuable benefits, including alleviating loneliness (your own and others'). Talking to strangers builds bridges between ordinary people who may not otherwise forge a connection.

People of the opposite gender, different walks of life or different cultures hold a key to opening up to new ideas or making connections with old ones. In [this short video](#), reporter for The Atlantic, Dr. James Hamblin, demonstrates techniques for learning how to talk with strangers.

Volunteer – Volunteering is another way to increase your social interactions and pave the way for new relationships.

Adopt a companion pet – A dog or cat can provide unconditional love and comfort, and studies show that owning a pet can help protect against loneliness, depression and anxiety. The bond that forms between a person and a companion pet can be incredibly fulfilling and serves, in many ways, as an important and rewarding relationship. The research on this is really quite profound.

For instance, having a dog as a companion could add years to your life,²⁸ as studies have shown that owning a dog played a significant role on survival rates in heart attack victims. Studies have also revealed that people on Medicaid or Medicare who own a pet make fewer visits to the doctor.²⁹ The unconditional acceptance and love a dog gives to their owner positively impacts their owner's emotional health in ways such as:

- Boosting self-confidence and self-esteem
- Helping to meet new friends and promoting communication between elderly residents and neighbors
- Helping you cope with illness, loss and depression
- Reducing stress levels
- Providing a source of touch and affiliation

If you're looking for a furry friend, check out your local animal shelter. Most are filled with cats and dogs looking for someone to love. Petfinder.com³⁰ is another excellent resource for finding a pet companion.

Move and/or change jobs — While the most drastic of all options, it may be part of the answer for some. To make it worthwhile, be sure to identify the environment or culture that would fit your personality best and consider proximity to longtime friends and family.

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