

Health Perspective

I'm not alone in feeling lonely. There are ways to fight loneliness.

By Steven Petrow
Contributing columnist
December 4, 2021

I am lonely.

Okay, not all the time. I do have good friends, and a loving family. Heck, I even have a puppy. But I'm divorced, and several close friends — including a beloved ex — have died in recent years, and I'm feeling those losses deeply these days. And Zoom connections, still a part of my life, are just not as soul-filling as face-to-face ones. To be honest, it makes me feel vulnerable, or that something is wrong with me, to acknowledge this loneliness. There's a stigma, like, "What's the matter with him?" or as a physician wrote earlier this year, "Culturally loneliness can be seen as a sign of weakness or self-pity."

But am I alone in feeling this way? Hardly.

"Covid made more people lonely and made lonely people lonelier," Harvard psychologist Richard Weissbourd says. He blames increased social isolation and pandemic-related anxiety, grief and depression, which often fuel each other. But the depth and prevalence of our loneliness is not new.

Between 2018 and 2019, loneliness in the United States surged seven percentage points, according to a Cigna [study](#). That translated to 61 percent of Americans, or 3 in 5 adults, who described themselves as lonely. And that was before the pandemic. In this second isolated year, researchers fear the problem may be getting worse. Even in "normal times," Weissbourd says, the rate of loneliness "is a deep societal failure."

Case in point: A few months ago I gave a talk on Meetup, the social media site, about [loneliness and social isolation](#), a subject I learned a lot about in researching a book about aging. I was dumbstruck when nearly 2,500 people joined the one-hour conversation in the middle of a workday. The hundreds of questions asked had a few common themes, including how to make new friends in a

time when socializing has become dangerous for some people, and how to find meaning in life after retirement and, most basically, how to connect with others. It was painfully clear how deeply people crave connection.

The audience represented all generations, from boomers to Gen Z. Loneliness is clearly an equal-opportunity affliction.

Julianne Holt-Lunstad, a professor of psychology and neuroscience at Brigham Young University, studies loneliness. She said that her data shows that younger people are at high risk, as are those living alone, or who have financial insecurity or existing mental and physical health issues. Retirement and mobility issues may lead to isolation, which is often a proxy for loneliness. Other recent research has identified immigrants and LGBTQ people as being at high risk for loneliness. Add all that together and that's a lot of us.

It's pretty self-evident that loneliness is not good for mental health. Researchers have linked it to higher rates of depression, anxiety and suicide. But only recently, says Holt-Lunstad, have we better understood the potential impact on our physical health, which includes a 29 percent increased risk of heart disease and a 32 percent increased risk of stroke. It carries a significantly increased risk of premature death from all causes — a risk that may rival those of smoking, obesity and physical inactivity.

I used to think that being alone was synonymous with loneliness. Turns out there's a big difference between the two, which U.S. Surgeon General Vivek H. Murthy, author of "Together: The Healing Power of Human Connection in a Sometimes Lonely World," says has to do with how you experience that aloneness.

"Loneliness," he's wrote "is a subjective feeling that the human connections we need in our life are

greater than the human connections we have. . . . You could be surrounded by just one or two people and feel perfectly content if you have strong relationships with them.” For instance, two years ago I went on a meditation retreat with 25 others, but I spoke with no one, curiously feeling connected to the group anyway and successfully finding a connection with myself. When I’ve gone hiking with my dog, I rarely feel lonely as I listen to birdsong and watch the great monarchs flutter and flutter. Holt-Lunstad’s research also supports this distinction: “Someone may be lonely but not isolated or they may be isolated but not lonely.”

On the other hand, I have felt extremely lonely when I was not alone at all. There’s probably no more crushing loneliness than that experienced in a faltering relationship, which I realized during the end of my marriage. As Holt-Lunstad pointed out, those alone by choice were at lesser risk of severe loneliness during the pandemic than say, widows and widowers, who had no choice in the matter. Holt-Lunstad, whose current research is focused on interventions for loneliness, has some practical suggestions, all based on recent studies: First, try mindful meditation. (There are a large number of apps — some free, some paid — that can be useful for beginners. [Headspace](#), [10 Percent](#), and [Deepak Chopra’s app](#) are among those I’ve used.) Second, try expressing gratitude, or giving thanks to others.

During the pandemic, Holt-Lunstad [conducted a study](#) that found that performing small acts of kindness for neighbors over four weeks was associated with a significant reduction in loneliness. It almost didn’t matter what someone did: took out the neighbor’s recycling, baked some muffins or offered to walk their dog. Anything that increased a sense of connection worked.

Jeremy Nobel, a Harvard physician and the founder and president of the [UnLonely Project](#), provided a third suggestion: Focus on “authentic connection,” which he says requires more than just breathing the same air as others (which we can’t even do these days without precautions). He said that forging real connection with others — dropping the facade, showing vulnerability and sharing one’s true feelings — starts with being connected with yourself, knowing what matters to you and what you care about. That’s easier said than done, which is why he promotes the arts to help people, at any level of talent, to find, shape and share their

personal stories. Nobel has found that art “allows us to express ourselves in ways that unhide us and reveal who we are.”

That resonates with me. I’m a mentor in a hospital writing program where I’m matched with individuals who’ve been diagnosed with cancer. The “space” that we create allows for real connections, which probably would not happen otherwise.

A young woman I worked with in this program put it like this: “My journey into creative expression has all created a richer sense of who I am and what I value. It’s also allowed me to shape the events of my past in a way that feels empowering instead of stifling.”

For those who think that writing on social media might serve the same purpose, Nobel said he believes it often “deepens loneliness.” I’ve found that I’ll see Instagram photos of friends on vacation, at a party I wasn’t invited to, and just like that any sense of aloneness morphs into loneliness. Nobel said we need to find a better way of using social media.

“Share awkward or unflattering aspects of yourself . . . that might resonate with others and invite compassion and empathy [instead] of continuous spooling self-proclamations of success,” he says.

But where to start? Nobel says he hopes “we’ll remember that it’s okay to say, ‘I’m lonely.’” It’s the perfect antidote, I’ve found, to loneliness.

This article is a reprint of the original ©Washington Post article, 2021, and is meant for private use only by the Foundation for Art & Healing.



Jeremy Nobel, MD, MPH
Founder & President

