

Making connections can be the cure for loneliness

By Teddi Nicolaus

If you're feeling lonely, you're not alone. Studies show more than half of us report feeling that way some time or other.

The pandemic added to the rise of loneliness, but studies show we were feeling pretty lonely even before then. Experts point to a range of reasons for our lonesomeness, including using social media as a replacement for human interaction. People also are less engaged in community involvement and spend long hours working at their jobs. We also live in a society that celebrates self-reliance and independence.

But spending more time alone can be harmful to our health. In recent years, growing concerns about the health impact of loneliness and social isolation have prompted numerous calls-to-action, including a U.S. surgeon general advisory calling loneliness a public health problem.

Loneliness is linked to a greater risk of

cardiovascular disease, dementia, stroke, depression, anxiety and premature death. The health effects of being socially disconnected are similar to smoking up to 15 cigarettes a day, the surgeon general warned.

People who feel lonely may also have trouble fighting off viruses, which makes them more at risk for some infectious diseases.

Symptoms of loneliness take many forms, including difficulty concentrating, headaches, body aches, anger, fatigue and feeling disconnected from others.

Loneliness is not the same as being alone, says Jeremy

Nobel, MD, MPH, author and founder of the Foundation for Art and Healing, a nonprofit that addresses public health concerns such as loneliness through creative expression.

"Loneliness is the lack of social connection that you feel you need, and it's 100% subjective," he says. "You can be lonely in a crowd if you don't feel you're connecting authentically. It's how you feel about the social connections you have."

There are three kinds of loneliness, says Nobel, who also serves on the faculty of Harvard Medical School and the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health. Psychological loneliness, such as longing for a connection to another person, is the kind most of us think of first.

But there's also the loneliness of exclusion, which is a sense of not fitting in or not belonging, either due to race, class, gender, disability or something else that makes you feel set apart, even though you might have plenty of friends.

The third kind of loneliness, called "existential" loneliness, is



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associated with a craving for deeper meaning or purpose in life. That's what's driving a lot of loneliness in young adults today, Nobel says.

Loneliness may impact some groups more than others, such as low-income people, young adults, people living alone, immigrants and seniors. It might come as a surprise to learn that older Americans are not the loneliest group.

"The loneliest demographic in the U.S. — and worldwide — is 18- to 28-year-olds," Nobel says. "A lot of that loneliness is a kind of spiritual or existential loneliness where they simply don't know where they fit in, or what is their purpose in life."

Our brains are wired to seek out strong social connections with others. Early humans who formed strong social bonds were more likely to survive and thrive. Psychologists say this trait remains a fundamental human need. Like hunger or thirst, loneliness is a natural biological signal.

Besides working to connect with others, don't overlook the potential power of taking good care of yourself through exercise, a healthy diet, sufficient sleep, sunshine and meditation.

At the end of the day, keep in mind that loneliness isn't a disease. It's not something to be embarrassed about and isn't permanent.

"It's a biological signal that we need to connect with other people," Nobel says. "Just as thirst is a signal that you need hydration to survive, loneliness is a signal that you need human connection to survive."

If your loneliness becomes too much to bear and you feel overwhelmed or in despair, reach out to your health care provider for helpful strategies and support.

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Tips to chase away the loneliness

Lend a hand: Volunteering to help others can be just as beneficial for you as it is for those you help. Serving the community can help foster a sense of connection with others and also improve your own mood and social well-being.

Find a tribe: Explore what you enjoy and go find it in your community, such as playing games, spending time in nature or engaging in pickleball, music, poetry, cooking or a book club. Focus on what you like and you'll find others who do too.

Share your authentic self: "What really connects people is being able to share authentic thoughts and feelings with other people," Nobel says.

Know who you're likely to connect well with, and who you feel comfortable being vulnerable with and sharing things about yourself. Then make an extra effort to share who you really are.

