
Letter from the Surgeon General



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When I first took office as Surgeon General in 2014, I didn't view loneliness as a public health concern. But that was before I embarked on a cross-country listening tour, where I heard stories from my fellow Americans that surprised me.

People began to tell me they felt isolated, invisible, and insignificant. Even when they couldn't put their finger on the word "lonely," time and time again, people of all ages and socioeconomic backgrounds, from every corner of the country, would tell me, "I have to shoulder all of life's burdens by myself," or "if I disappear tomorrow, no one will even notice."

It was a lightbulb moment for me: social disconnection was far more common than I had realized.

In the scientific literature, I found confirmation of what I was hearing. In recent years, about one-in-two adults in America reported experiencing loneliness.¹⁻³ And that was before the COVID-19 pandemic cut off so many of us from friends, loved ones, and support systems, exacerbating loneliness and isolation.

Loneliness is far more than just a bad feeling—it harms both individual and societal health. It is associated with a greater risk of cardiovascular disease, dementia, stroke, depression, anxiety, and premature death. The mortality impact of being socially disconnected is similar to that caused by smoking up to 15 cigarettes a day,⁴ and even greater than that associated with obesity and physical inactivity. And the harmful consequences of a society that lacks social connection can be felt in our schools, workplaces, and civic organizations, where performance, productivity, and engagement are diminished.

Given the profound consequences of loneliness and isolation, we have an opportunity, and an obligation, to make the same investments in addressing social connection that we have made in addressing tobacco use, obesity, and the addiction crisis. This Surgeon General's Advisory shows us how to build more connected lives and a more connected society.

If we fail to do so, we will pay an ever-increasing price in the form of our individual and collective health and well-being. And we will continue to splinter and divide until we can no longer stand as a community or a country. Instead of coming together to take on the great challenges before us, we will further retreat to our corners—angry, sick, and alone.

We are called to build a movement to mend the social fabric of our nation. It will take all of us—individuals and families, schools and workplaces, health care and public health systems, technology companies, governments, faith organizations, and communities—working together to destigmatize loneliness and change our cultural and policy response to it. It will require reimagining the structures, policies, and programs that shape a community to best support the development of healthy relationships.

Each of us can start now, in our own lives, by strengthening our connections and relationships. Our individual relationships are an untapped resource—a source of healing hiding in plain sight. They can help us live healthier, more productive, and more fulfilled lives. Answer that phone call from a friend. Make time to share a meal. Listen without the distraction of your phone. Perform an act of service. Express yourself authentically. The keys to human connection are simple, but extraordinarily powerful.

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Loneliness and isolation represent profound threats to our health and well-being. But we have the power to respond. By taking small steps every day to strengthen our relationships, and by supporting community efforts to rebuild social connection, we can rise to meet this moment together. We can build lives and communities that are healthier and happier. And we can ensure our country and the world are better poised than ever to take on the challenges that lay ahead.

Our future depends on what we do today.



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About the Advisory

LEARN MORE

Visit our website for more information and resources about social connection:
[SurgeonGeneral.gov/Connection](https://www.surgeongeneral.gov/connection)



A Surgeon General's Advisory is a public statement that calls the American people's attention to an urgent public health issue and provides recommendations for how it should be addressed. Advisories are reserved for significant public health challenges that require the nation's immediate awareness and action.

This advisory calls attention to the importance of social connection for individual health as well as on community-wide metrics of health and well-being, and conversely the significant consequences when social connection is lacking. While social connection is often considered an individual challenge, this advisory explores and explains the cultural, community, and societal dynamics that drive connection and disconnection. It also offers recommendations for increasing and strengthening social connection through a whole-of-society approach. The advisory presents a framework for a national strategy with specific recommendations for the institutions that shape our day-to-day lives: governments, health care systems and insurers, public health departments, research institutions, philanthropy, schools, workplaces, community-based organizations, technology companies, and the media.

This advisory draws upon decades of research from the scientific disciplines of sociology, psychology, neuroscience, political science, economics, and public health, among others. This document is not an exhaustive review of the literature. Rather, the advisory was developed through a substantial review of the available evidence, primarily found via electronic searches of research articles published in English and resources suggested by a wide range of subject matter experts, with priority given to meta-analyses and systematic literature reviews. The recommendations in the advisory draw upon the scientific literature and previously published recommendations from the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the American Heart Association, and the World Health Organization.

The findings and recommendations in the advisory are also informed by consultations with subject matter experts from academia, health care, education, government, and other sectors of society, including more than 50 identified experts who reviewed and provided individual detailed feedback on an early draft that has informed this advisory.

For additional background and to read other Surgeon General's Advisories, visit **[SurgeonGeneral.gov](https://www.surgeongeneral.gov)**

Introduction: Why Social Connection Matters

Our relationships and interactions with family, friends, colleagues, and neighbors are just some of what create social connection. Our connection with others and our community is also informed by our neighborhoods, digital environments, schools, and workplaces. Social connection—the structure, function, and quality of our relationships with others—is a critical and underappreciated contributor to individual and population health, community safety, resilience, and prosperity.^{6,17,32-36} However, far too many Americans lack social connection in one or more ways, compromising these benefits and leading to poor health and other negative outcomes.

People may lack social connection in a variety of ways, though it is often illustrated in scientific research by measuring loneliness and social isolation. Social isolation and loneliness are related, but they are not the same. Social isolation is objectively having few social relationships, social roles, group memberships, and infrequent social interaction.^{19,21} On the other hand, loneliness is a subjective internal state. It's the distressing experience that results from perceived isolation or unmet need between an individual's preferred and actual experience.^{9,10,19}

The lack of social connection poses a significant risk for individual health and longevity. Loneliness and social isolation increase the risk for premature death by 26% and 29% respectively.³⁷ More broadly, lacking social connection can increase the risk for premature death as much as smoking up to 15 cigarettes a day.⁴ In addition, poor or insufficient social connection is associated with increased risk of disease, including a 29% increased risk of heart disease and a 32% increased risk of stroke.³⁸ Furthermore, it is associated with increased risk for anxiety, depression,³⁹ and dementia.^{40,41} Additionally, the lack of social connection may increase susceptibility to viruses and respiratory illness.⁴²

KEY DATA

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The lack of social connection can have significant economic costs to individuals, communities, and society. Social isolation among older adults alone accounts for an estimated \$6.7 billion in excess Medicare spending annually, largely due to increased hospital and nursing facility spending.⁴³ Moreover, beyond direct health care spending, loneliness and isolation are associated with lower academic achievement^{44,45} and worse performance at work.⁴⁶⁻⁴⁸ In the U.S., stress-related absenteeism attributed to loneliness costs employers an estimated \$154 billion annually.⁴⁶ The impact of social connection not only affects individuals, but also the communities they live in. Social connection is an important social determinant of health, and more broadly, of community well-being, including (but not limited to) population health, community resilience when natural hazards strike, community safety, economic prosperity, and representative government.^{13,15,17,34-36,49,50}

What drives these profound health and well-being outcomes? Social connection is a fundamental human need, as essential to survival as food, water, and shelter. Throughout history, our ability to rely on one another has been crucial to survival. Now, even in modern times, we human beings are biologically wired for social connection. Our brains have adapted to expect proximity to others.^{51,52} Our distant ancestors relied on others to help them meet their basic needs. Living in isolation, or outside the group, means having to fulfill the many difficult demands of survival on one's own. This requires far more effort and reduces one's chances of survival.⁵² Despite current advancements that now allow us to live without engaging with others (e.g., food delivery, automation, remote entertainment), our biological need to connect remains.

The health and societal impacts of social isolation and loneliness are a critical public health concern in light of mounting evidence that millions of Americans lack adequate social connection in one or more ways. A 2022 study found that when people were asked how close they felt to others emotionally, only 39% of adults in the U.S. said that they felt very connected to others.⁵³ An important indicator of this declining social connection is an increase in the proportion of Americans experiencing loneliness. Recent surveys have found that approximately half of U.S. adults report experiencing loneliness, with some of the highest rates among young adults.¹⁻³ These estimates and multiple other studies indicate that loneliness and isolation are more widespread than many of the other major health issues of our day, including smoking (12.5% of U.S. adults),⁵⁴ diabetes (14.7%),⁵⁵ and obesity (41.9%),⁵⁶ and with comparable levels of risk to health and premature death. Despite such high prevalence, less than 20% of individuals who often or always feel lonely or isolated recognize it as a major problem.⁵⁷

KEY DATA

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Together, this represents an urgent public health concern. Every level of increase in social connection corresponds with a risk reduction across many health conditions. Further, social connection can be a proactive approach to living a fulfilled and happy life, enhancing life satisfaction, educational attainment, and performance in the workplace, as well as contributing to more-connected communities that are healthier, safer, and more prosperous.

Unsurprisingly, social connection is generally not something we can do alone and not something that is accessible equitably. That is partially because we need others to connect with, but also because our society—including our schools, workplaces, neighborhoods, public policies, and digital environments—plays a role in either facilitating or hindering social connection.^{10,32} Moreover, it is critical to carefully consider equity in any approach to addressing social connection, as access and barriers to social opportunities are often not the same for everyone and often reinforce longstanding and historical inequities.

This advisory calls attention to the critical role that social connection plays in individual and societal health and well-being and offers a framework for how we can all contribute to advancing social connection.

What is Social Connection?

Social connection can encompass the interactions, relationships, roles, and sense of connection individuals, communities, or society may experience.^{10,19,20} An individual's level of social connection is not simply determined by the number of close relationships they have. There are many ways we can connect socially, and many ways we can lack social connection. These generally fall under one of three vital components of social connection: structure, function, and quality.

- **Structure**

The number of relationships, variety of relationships (e.g., co-worker, friend, family, neighbor), and the frequency of interactions with others.

- **Function**

The degree to which others can be relied upon for various needs.

- **Quality**

The degree to which relationships and interactions with others are positive, helpful, or satisfying (vs. negative, unhelpful, or unsatisfying).

These three vital components of social connection are each important for health,^{4,32} and may influence health in different ways.²⁰