

Highlights from the U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory on Loneliness



U.S. Surgeon General Dr. Vivek H. Murthy produced the advisory, “Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation,” this year, which labels loneliness as a significant health concern for individuals and society. A Surgeon General’s Advisory calls the American people’s attention to an urgent public health issue and provides recommendations for how it should be addressed.

In Murthy’s introductory letter to the advisory, he tells of embarking on a cross-country listening tour, where people told him they felt isolated, invisible, and insignificant. He said it was a lightbulb moment and that social disconnection was far more common than he realized.

“In the scientific literature, I found confirmation of what I was hearing,” he said. “In recent years, about one in two

adults in America reported experiencing loneliness. 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...”

One area the advisory highlighted was technology overuse, which can displace in-person engagement, monopolize attention, reduce the quality of interactions, and even diminish self-esteem. Technology overuse can, in turn, lead to greater loneliness, fear of missing out, conflict, and reduced social connection. In a U.S.-based study, participants who reported using social media for more than two hours a day had approximately double the odds of reporting increased perceptions of social isolation compared to those who used social media for less than 30 minutes per day.

Murthy said the profound effects of loneliness can be felt by anyone and are best helped by a strong community.

Consider these tips from the advisory about what you can do if you feel lonely or socially isolated.

* **Participate in community groups.** Try to participate in at least two community groups per week, such as religious, sports, civic, or other groups. This provides opportunities for socializing, meeting new people, and feeling connected to a group.

* **Reduce distractions.** Put your phone away, particularly when having a meal or an important conversation. Make time with your family and others a priority by focusing on them in the moment.

* **Invest in relationships.** Spend consistent and frequent time with others. Make sure the time is high-quality by decreasing distractions.

* **Don't go it alone.** If you're struggling, look for help from others. Family members, friends, counselors, and healthcare providers can help you. You can also call 988 or text HOME to 74174 during an emergency to connect to a professional 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

* **Core values of connection.** Take time to reflect on how you approach others in your actions and conversation. Consider how kindness could change a situation or the importance of treating others with respect.

Loneliness is a complex issue, and the causes are varied. Take action by trying the tips listed above or learning more from the Surgeon General's advisory. He has also written a book, *Together: The Healing Power of Human Connection in a Sometimes Lonely World*.