

Our Epidemic of Loneliness

UUFS

September 14, 2025

This month our theme is building belonging. I am honored to be part of this congregation and being here today is where I belong. I'm going to start with a Toastmasters classic and tell a joke. It comes from cartoonist and writer Jonny Sun. "If I could have dinner with anyone dead or alive, I would. I am very lonely."

While it is the funniest answer to that old question I have heard in years, it also speaks truthfully to the heart of a modern problem. Our country, and the whole world, has a big problem with loneliness.

As a species, we are obligate social animals. We require interaction to develop, survive and thrive. A human infant that only has their biological needs met, but no affection, no conversation, and no love might survive, but they would be far from normal. At best, severe emotional, relational and communication problems would result, at worst, a new psychopath has been produced. Orphanages in Russia and Romania that were run on the extreme physical-needs-only model have proven that children need more. In the late 1990s, many children were adopted from these countries to the US. Many of these children have had a mighty struggle in life. One desperate adoptive mother in Minnesota ran out of services, social support, and solutions and dumped a 14 year old boy at the Minneapolis/St Paul airport with a plane ticket back to the town in Russia where he was adopted from at age 6. She was charged with abandonment, but it highlighted the difficult lives many of these children had experienced in adapting to life outside institutions.

What is loneliness versus social isolation? Social isolation is being alone or in very limited contact with other people. We all became experts in social isolation during Covid. Loneliness is the subjective feeling of having fewer or lower quality social connections than a person desires. Loneliness is a feeling. One can be very lonely in a room full of people, it is an emotional response.

Who is feeling lonely? According to public health experts around the world, many of us. In the UK, 1:5 adults report feeling lonely regularly. In the US, 30% of adults report being lonely at least once a week. In Japan, 39% of people feel lonely. In the happiest country in the world, Denmark, 12.4% of people feel lonely. In Germany, 60% feel lonely sometimes. In France, around 46% of the population felt lonely in 2023. The Chinese are also following the trend, with 30% of adults over 55 experiencing loneliness. In Japan and the UK, public health initiatives are taking place to address the mental and physical health consequences of loneliness.

Let's dive deeper with Americans. In one study, 25% of people in the US have no one in the world they feel they can confide in. A study by public television channel WGBH in Boston shows 73% of 16-24 year olds struggle with loneliness, with 40% reporting feeling lonely often or very often. Children are not being left out of the loneliness epidemic, either. 1 in 5 kids under the age of 16 reported feeling lonely.

The role of Covid in world loneliness is undeniable, nearly every age group and country reported a sharp increase in loneliness during the isolation of the pandemic. In the US, the number of people experiencing severe loneliness went from 6% to 21%. What is interesting, is that in most countries the effects are slow to return to prepandemic levels. According to a Mayo clinic study, 40% of older adults feel lonely. Particularly those over 60, who may experience both loneliness and social isolation combined.

Why are we so lonely in a world that is connected by seconds and keystrokes? One theory is that we are overconnected and our brains simply are not wired for today's 10 minute world news cycle. In the US, fewer Americans are married or living with a partner than ever before. There are fewer active social clubs like Elks, Eagles, Masons, Rotary, Lions, and the American Legion. People are not joining social organizations like they once were. In the Sheridan cemetery, there's a huge plot of mostly empty ground that is owned by the local Masonic Lodge. I'm not sure they will ever fill it. Social clubs were once the backbones of American society. I blame television for some of this. It's way easier after a long demanding day at work to do household chores then curl up on the couch with the television or your phone. Churches of nearly all denominations and faiths are experiencing difficulty recruiting younger members.

Remote working also decreases the social interactions people used to have at work. Loneliness at work is a growing problem in the workplace and affects productivity as well as mental health. The number of friends in the workplace it takes to combat loneliness is one.

Social media is a double edged sword. Most Gen X and older Americans find they feel more connected to others by using social media. After my 30th high school class reunion, I connected with a number of classmates. I enjoy keeping up with each others lives very much. For millennials and younger, who cut their teeth on social media, it can be a source of isolation, shame, bullying and other negativity. Recent studies found that 95% of people under 20 are on some form of social media. Yes, it's true Facebook and X(formerly Twitter) are now for old people. Younger people are on Instagram, YouTube, Snapchat and others.

What are the consequences of our lonely planet? People with chronic loneliness may be at risk for a number of diseases. Loneliness is a cardiovascular risk factor just like obesity, smoking, high blood pressure, and sedentary lifestyle. One author has likened chronic loneliness to the equivalent of smoking 15 cigarettes a day (to my knowledge there are no studies possible for that figure). Lonely adults have increased risk of depression, anxiety, addiction, suicide, weight gain, hypertension impaired immune function, heart attack, stroke and dementia. In older folks, hearing and vision deficits are more common and lack of interaction in social situations exacerbates feelings of loneliness for those experiencing loneliness, social awkwardness can lead to embarrassment, shame and avoidance of the very social interactions that combat loneliness.

How do we respond to loneliness in the US?. A recent study by the Pew Charitable Trust broke down what we do to fight loneliness. 50% watch TV, podcasts, or scroll on our phones to distract ourselves 41% go for a walk, 38% reach out to someone, 31% engage with a pet, 26% overeat, 13% use substances like alcohol and drugs. 9% go to therapy and a mere 6% volunteer.

Another Pew Trust study queried where people felt they belonged. People felt they belonged with: family 65% friends 53%, and neighborhoods 22%. I found it interesting that churches were not higher on the list, as with UUFS, most of us feel like it's one, perhaps THE one, place in the community they feel at home and safe to speak our minds.

As a disabled adult, I struggle with both physical and mental health issues. I do experience loneliness. For me, volunteering, going to the YMCA, and forcing myself to partake in community offerings helps. One thing is certain: You are not alone in your loneliness.

I'll close with repeating that joke. "If I could have dinner with anyone dead or alive, I would

