

Light Paper

Combating the Epidemic of Loneliness in The United States: Creating More Connected Communities



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Stories

Ree, age 12: I'm sitting with some of my friends and that day everyone is talking about the latest gossip of a girl getting together with a boy. I tried to ask a question about them, as I really didn't know what was going on. Everyone laughs and is like "oh it's nothing." They go back to talking and a couple minutes later, a girl says "Why are you so smart Ree? You can't hang with us if you are. Too bad you have no idea what's going on. Clearly you aren't as smart as everyone says". That was like a punch in the stomach. I've always been the "smart kid", but I didn't realize it had put me so far apart. Now, no matter who I try to talk to, I know that there'll always be that loneliness in me, because I had yet to find another soul who understood me.

Emily, age 23: After college, I moved to a different state for work, where I had literally no family or friends prior to moving. I had such high hopes of making a fresh start for myself and finally meeting my squad, that "Friends"-esque type family that you build for yourself and aren't born into. Well, finding that is easier said than done, but I felt that I had found that with my coworkers. We're all around the same age and enjoy spending time with one another. However, as time goes on, I've found that we're drifting apart and don't really

connect the same way we used to. We used to all go to lunch together and would round everyone up so we could all eat together in the break room. Recently though, I looked up from my computer and realized that I was all alone in the office. It was 11:30 a.m., and everyone had gone to lunch without me, and never told me that they were leaving. I felt so abandoned and isolated, that it triggered my loneliness again and I've been struggling to cope since. I've found that being left out of group conversations, jokes, etc. is a big trigger for me, and so even though this incident was small, it felt so deliberate, that I've been wondering why my "squad" has decided that I'm not important enough to them to include on a regular basis anymore. What did I do wrong? Why don't I warrant their interaction, companionship, and camaraderie? Thankfully, I have a wonderful best friend that lives in the same city as I do now, and my family (my parents in particular) are the people I'm closest to in the world, so I know that I can pick up the phone, day or night, and talk to the people who love me more than anything else in the world. I'm so incredibly grateful for this, but I long to have the "squad goals" that everyone else my age seems to have. Then that leads to feeling guilty for not being appreciative enough of the people that I do have in my life, causing a vicious cycle of loneliness, guilt and despair.

Anonymous, age 52: Later in life I wound up in a leadership role with more than forty employees and several direct reports at the company where I worked. It was a high-profile position that involved public speaking, television appearances, attending galas, and meeting upon meeting. I was inundated with people coming and going from my office. I had a narcissistic boss who was emotionally abusive. I realized that I was the buffer for all these wonderfully talented people, but I couldn't really talk about how difficult the experience was for me with anyone at the office. When things became really challenging, I would take long walks, stay in the washroom for longer periods of time, or I would get sick and stay home from work. Even though I had this highly public job, I was utterly lonely.

Summary

This Light Paper will summarize the US Surgeon General's extensive report on the "Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation" in the US. After the synopsis, we will distinguish between the often interchangeably used phrases "being alone" and "loneliness." Following this key differentiation, we will analyze some of the possible reasons the US is struggling with loneliness and social isolation and provide additional recommendations to create a more connected society.

The stories at the beginning of this paper are atypical of our Light Paper format of sharing a singular narrative. Instead, this variety of voices and perspectives offer a nuanced portrayal of the loneliness epidemic in the US, enriching our understanding of the issue. These stories are quoted from [The Loneliness Project](#), a passion project created by Marissa Korda to create an archive of stories of loneliness. Korda generated this digital space to develop a community through real people sharing their experiences around loneliness.¹

As you can see, the stories are from people of all ages. Loneliness affects are widespread,

and this is a multifaceted issue which prompts researchers to capture many narratives to understand the full scope of the epidemic. These stories shed light on the many different faces of the loneliness epidemic.

Dr. Vivek H. Murthy, the 19th and 21st Surgeon General of the US, established isolation, and loneliness as a significant public health concern, emphasizing the necessity for social connection and community nationwide. We will cover the growing “Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation” consuming the US. An individual’s mental and social well-being are crucial for leading a healthy and fulfilling life, which in turn contributes to the resilience of families. If an individual is struggling with their well-being, it can impede their ability to effectively participate in their family dynamics.

This Light Paper issue will summarize the Surgeon General’s report while discussing other relevant data and make the critical distinction between “being alone” versus “loneliness.” This paper also will discuss circumstances that have contributed to loneliness in the US. In the recommendations section, see strategies to increase social satisfaction across communities to support happy and healthy living, such as:

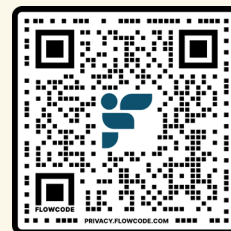
- To address loneliness effectively, the United States can draw inspiration from innovative approaches implemented in other countries.
- Like other nations cultivating “anchors of connection”² through rituals, communities can explore similar strategies to foster bonds.
- Encouraging education on the importance of connection in institutional settings can raise awareness and equip individuals with the skills needed to cultivate meaningful relationships from an early age.

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