

Loneliness & Social Connection



You might feel lonely or disconnected if you:

- Often feel like you don't belong
- Have few close family ties and friendships
- Have difficulty meeting new people
- Are feeling loss or grief
- Feel that your life lacks purpose or meaning
- Have a mental health condition such as depression or anxiety
- Are experiencing poor physical health or having trouble getting around
- Fear being left out by others for being "different"
- Are unable to participate in activities
- Are going through a life change or transition such as retirement, moving to a new home, or a change in family or friend group
- Live alone
- Face challenges with language or culture

Anyone can feel lonely, even without an obvious cause.

Loneliness can feel like it will never end. It can also make you feel different, or “weird.” But this couldn't be farther from the truth. In fact, when you feel lonely you have more in common with people than you think. Several years ago, experts discovered that a large number of Americans feel lonely much of the time and that number continues to increase each year.

Being alone is not the same as experiencing loneliness.

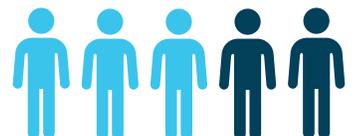
Living alone or enjoying “alone time” does not mean that a person is lonely. Loneliness happens when you don't enjoy being alone or feel alone regardless of who is around. Loneliness is a feeling that comes when you don't have the level or quality of relationships that you desire. It doesn't matter how many people are around you, if you are feeling disconnected, you are likely to feel lonely.

There are more ways than ever to connect with people around the world, yet reported rates of loneliness are higher than ever. In 2017, the U.S. Surgeon General identified loneliness as an epidemic with health consequences equal to smoking 15 cigarettes per day. The negative physical impact of loneliness includes a higher risk for heart disease and inflammation, lower immunity to disease, depression, anxiety and even dementia.

On the other hand, feeling and being connected contributes to positive mental health and protects against illness, despair, and suicide. There are many things people can try that will help them to feel more connected to other people and their communities.

FACT:

In 2019, results of a Cigna study showed that loneliness is a growing mental health crisis. **3 in 5 Americans (61%) identify as lonely**, compared to more than half (54%) in 2018.



Loneliness & Social Connection

Everyone feels lonely from time to time, but long periods of loneliness can have a negative impact on your physical and mental health.

Some signs include:

Physical Health Symptoms

- Difficulty with sleep
- Change in appetite
- Fatigue and lack of energy
- Body aches and pains, illness, or lowered immunity

Mental Health Symptoms

- Lack of motivation
- Increased symptoms of depression and anxiety
- Feelings of hopelessness, worthlessness, or thoughts of suicide
- Increased use of alcohol, tobacco, drugs, or other substances that interfere with daily activities or relationships

Try these strategies to decrease loneliness.

Humans are social creatures. We need meaningful connections to thrive. Here are some things to try if you are feeling lonely:

Get connected:

When possible, connect and have conversations with friends or family in ways that feel comfortable to you. If your loved ones don't live nearby, use technology to keep in touch.



Get support :

If loneliness is causing you distress, reach out to a friend, family member, clergy, doctor, or other health professional and let them know how you are feeling.



Get involved:

Join a club, enroll in a class, join a community center, or engage in a hobby. Meeting people with similar interests helps you engage with others.



Get active:

Physical activity improves mood and energy which helps with motivation to engage with other people.



Nurture something:

Taking care of pets, plants, or other things can provide a sense of mutual comfort, support, and purpose.



Help others:

When you give to others your focus shifts away from yourself and helps you to feel more connected.



If you are concerned about someone's loneliness:

- Give them a call
- Tell them you care
- Invite an honest conversation
- Support them in trying strategies to improve feelings of connection

If you are concerned that someone is suicidal:

- Stay with the person. Remain calm and supportive.
- Call the Maryland Crisis Hotline at 2-1-1, Press 1 or
- Text TALK to 741741 to be connected with a trained crisis counselor.