

How to Feel Less Lonely, According to the Surgeon General

America's top physician, Dr. Vivek Murthy, offers advice on how to build meaningful social connections in an increasingly lonely world.



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Americans have become increasingly lonely and isolated, and this lack of social connection is having profound effects on our mental and physical health, the surgeon general warned in an advisory on Tuesday.

Advisories from America's top doctor are typically reserved for public health challenges that require immediate attention. This is the first time one has been used to highlight the issue of loneliness.

More than half of Americans are lonely, according to a 2021 poll, which also found that young adults are almost twice as likely to report feeling lonely as those over age 65.

Dr. Vivek H. Murthy, the surgeon general, has often spoken about the decline in social connection and wrote a book about the subject, "Together: The Healing Power of Human Connection in a Sometimes Lonely World," which was published in 2020. In the new advisory, he calls on the nation to strengthen its social fabric and to prioritize meaningful relationships.

Whether we consider ourselves lonely or not, many of us can benefit from making the effort to rebuild and cultivate our connections with other people. I asked Dr. Murthy to expand on the advisory and share some of his best advice.

Reconnect with people.

To get started, take 15 minutes each day to contact a friend or a relative. Put a reminder in your calendar, if needed, so that it remains a priority. Your relationships cannot thrive unless they are nurtured.

"Those brief in-person interactions can make us feel good for a long time because we are hard-wired to connect," Dr. Murthy said.

Even if it's only a brief conversation, show how much you value the person you're speaking with by being authentic, Dr. Murthy advised. In other words, as he put it, "be real" when you're connecting with someone.

"We don't have to put on airs," he said. "We don't have to be somebody else. We can just truly be us."

It might be scary at first, but remember that people are wired to connect, Dr. Murthy added. Sharing honestly, and inviting others to do likewise, "can be incredibly powerful," he said.

Minimize distractions.

How often have you caught yourself looking at your phone while someone is speaking with you? What about during meals? Do other people do this when speaking with you? For more satisfying quality time, put the devices down and give your full attention.

"Focus on the conversation," he said. "Listening is as important as what we say."

While you're at it, scale back on social media. Virtual connection is not a replacement for in-person time with the important people in your life. Despite the ever-increasing opportunities to connect online, Americans report having fewer friends than they did decades ago.

"Over thousands of years we evolved to not only understand the content of what someone was saying but also to respond to the tone of their voice, to read their body language and to experience their presence," Dr. Murthy said. "And we lose a lot of that when we are communicating electronically."

When people call, pick up the phone.

Imagine your phone ringing. You see it's a call from your best friend from college whom you haven't caught up with in a long time. But instead of accepting the call, you decide not to answer. You tell yourself you'll call back later when you have more time to chat.

Next time, Dr. Murthy said, pick up the phone and talk. If you're in the middle of something, say, "Hey, it's really good to hear your voice," and then find another time to talk.

"That 10 seconds feels so much better than going back and forth on text," he said.

Serve others.

Studies show that volunteering can ease feelings of loneliness and broaden our social networks. Consider donating your time to an organization in your community, or offering to help your family, co-workers or friends.

"When we help other people we establish an experience or a connection with them — but we also remind ourselves of the value that we bring to the world," Dr. Murthy said. "And that's essential because when people struggle with loneliness over time, it does erode their self-esteem and their sense of self. It can make them believe over time that they're lonely because they're not likable or they're not lovable. And when we serve others, we come to see that that's not the case."

Get help.

Finally, tell someone if you are struggling with loneliness. It could be a relative, a friend, a counselor or a health care provider.

If you're feeling persistently sad and hopeless, and it is getting in the way of your ability to function in your day-to-day life or to participate in activities that used to bring you joy, then that's a red flag that you may need to speak with a professional. And if you're having thoughts of harming yourself, call the 988 crisis line.

Audio produced by Kate Winslett.

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