

We Know the Cure for Loneliness. So Why Do We Suffer?



By Nicholas Kristof

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This is the fourth in the series “How America Heals,” in which Nicholas Kristof is examining the interwoven crises devastating working-class America and exploring paths to recovery.

Loneliness crushes the soul, but researchers are finding it does far more damage than that. It is linked to strokes, heart disease, dementia, inflammation and suicide; it breaks the heart literally as well as figuratively.

Loneliness is as deadly as smoking 15 cigarettes a day and more lethal than consuming six alcoholic drinks a day, according to the surgeon general of the United States, Dr. Vivek Murthy. Loneliness is more dangerous for health than obesity, he says — and, alas, we have been growing more lonely. A majority of Americans now report experiencing loneliness, based on a widely used scale that asks questions such as whether people lack companionship or feel left out.

Yet there are solutions as well, approaches that build connections and bind us together. Britain is the pioneer of these efforts, having established the post of minister for loneliness in 2018. Britain oversees public-private partnerships that

collectively knit millions of people together with programs like nature walks, songwriting workshops and community litter pickups.

A minister for loneliness is a less obvious need than a defense minister or a foreign minister. But other countries are paying attention: Japan has also appointed a minister for loneliness, Sweden has a minister for social affairs who has tackled the issue aggressively, and there have been calls in Australia and other countries for such a post.

That's because if the researchers are correct, social isolation probably kills far more people in the West each year than terrorists and murderers, and it costs the public enormous sums in unnecessary health costs. Countermeasures can make a huge difference: One review of 148 studies concluded that social connections increase the odds of an individual's surviving over roughly the next seven years by about 50 percent.

This article is the fourth in an occasional series about how to fix the problems that have left so many people behind in America. The genesis for the series is the troubles I've witnessed: As I've written, more than one-quarter of the children who rode the No. 6 school bus with me in Yamhill, Ore., have died from drugs, alcohol, suicide and other so-called deaths of despair.

These pathologies are linked to social isolation. I've seen how old friends self-medicated with meth or alcohol in part because they were disconnected from the community, and then addiction and criminal records left them even more stigmatized and isolated.

The Great Depression was economically devastating, and yet mortality then didn't rise but actually fell. Why didn't we have more deaths of despair in the 1930s? I think in part because in the 1930s there were community institutions — churches, men's clubs, women's associations, bridge clubs, bowling leagues,

extended families — that buffered the pain and humiliation of unemployment and economic distress, and in some cases these groups actually stepped up and became more active during times of distress.

Those community institutions have frayed. Now we're on our own, and perhaps that's why so many are also dying alone.

It's not easy to rebuild networks. I've seen how drug addiction destroys trust and social capital, making it even more difficult to knit people together and help those who are most vulnerable. But we can do better in addressing the challenges around us, and this series is an attempt to show how.

Social isolation is the rare malady whose cure is fully known and costs relatively little, yet is still so difficult to achieve. In the 21st century, we are a social species living atomized lives; even when living in a high-rise apartment building in a densely inhabited city, surrounded by people in every direction, we can easily feel bereft and melancholy.

Stuart Andrew, the British minister for loneliness, told me that one of the challenges of loneliness is the stigma that surrounds it. We're embarrassed that we're lonely and slow to seek help — so he has been sharing stories of his own lonely childhood.

“I realized that I was gay in my teens,” he said. “I felt isolated because of where I lived, in rural, rural Wales. And I didn't know anybody else who's gay. So that was a bit of a struggle trying to come to terms with that.”

The steps to tackle loneliness aren't grand, high-tech or expensive. In fact, one of the strategies is simply to get people back into old-fashioned patterns like eating meals together, holding parties and volunteering to help one another out.

The British ministry has parceled out some \$100 million to address loneliness since 2018, often to support local initiatives. In the working-class neighborhood of Acton in London, I dropped in on a neighborhood center that was hosting a weekly family-style luncheon for women and children in the area, many of them immigrants who struggle with English. It's a chance for them to get out of the house and make friends.

“We're all about community building,” said Sophie Tebbetts of FoodCycle, a nonprofit that runs the lunches and has recruited 5,000 volunteers to help with this and other programs.

“You come to mix with people of different generations,” said Nigel Rock, 71, a retiree who was helping prepare the food for the Acton lunch. “You do the work, you chat and you have a good time.” This was his first day volunteering there, but he said he expected to continue to come each week.

Traditionally, this role of community building was often filled in America or Europe by a local church or other faith institution, but the decline of religious attendance has left a gap. Because church buildings often have unused space, secular community events are now held in them; they still provide the physical architecture for connections, even if the faith architecture has eroded.

For King Charles's coronation in May, Britain organized a day of “The Big Help-Out” to encourage people to come together and volunteer, and an astonishing six million people did so. The response was so impressive that this may become an annual event.

Britain's anti-loneliness efforts revved up in June, with Loneliness Awareness Week and “Great Get-Together” events across the country to coincide with the birthday of a British member of Parliament and friend of mine, Jo Cox, who helped lead efforts to address loneliness before she was murdered in 2016. Programs ranged from poetry workshops to book discussions and litter pickups, followed by a free drink at the pub.

In Brighton, more than 100 people nibbled on sandwiches and joined a singalong organized by two local charities. “Once you get humans in the room, talking together, the magic happens,” said April Baker of Together Co, one of the nonprofit organizers.

The other organizer was the Glamour Club, founded five years ago to bring people together.

“We’re on a mission to establish a Glamour Club in every village, town and city in the U.K.,” said Janice Moth, its founder. The club, which started in the English town of Worthing, holds meetings that people attend in their most glamorous clothing.

“We’re not meant to be lonely as a species,” said Paul Dolan, a professor of behavioral sciences at the London School of Economics who attended the Brighton event. “If you were to think of the most significant interventions to improve life expectancy, after quitting smoking, it’s: Don’t be lonely.”

One of the paradoxes of humanity is that while we (along with other primates) evolved to be social creatures, wealth drives us toward solitude. When we have the resources, we stop sleeping eight to a hut and build a big house with high walls, and each family member has a private bedroom and bathroom — and then to afford the mortgage we work so hard that we never manage to have meals together.

Early on, some thought that Facebook and other social media would bind us together, but many experts now think these platforms have instead made us more lonely. People look at Instagram feeds and conclude that everyone else is having fun. Meanwhile, time with screens substitutes for time with human beings. All this may help account for the crisis in mental health of young people over the last dozen years. We often think that older people are most lonely, but polls find that young adults are twice as likely as seniors to report loneliness.

As a dog lover, I think of pets as providing a natural solution to loneliness, but the evidence of that isn't clear. Likewise, there's talk that robots or artificial intelligence bots may engage us and lure us out of social isolation, but that's also uncertain. It seems that there's something to be said for friends who are living, breathing human beings.

One milestone in addressing America's loneliness challenge came this spring with an 81-page report by the surgeon general, Dr. Murthy, "Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation." In 1964, the surgeon general at the time issued a landmark warning about the dangers of cigarette smoking, helping lay the groundwork for a long decline in tobacco use that by one estimate saved eight million lives. I suspect that this report on loneliness will also be remembered as one of historic significance.

"Loneliness is far more than just a bad feeling," Murthy wrote. He compared it to tobacco, obesity and addiction. Unless we take serious steps to address it, he warned, "we will further retreat to our corners — angry, sick and alone."

Murthy offers a strategy to address loneliness that begins with building up the infrastructure that enables social connection. That includes physical infrastructure, such as parks and libraries, and also social infrastructure to weave together volunteers or enthusiasts with similar interests. Once again, Britain provides a model.

The English town of Frome, which has fewer than 30,000 people, has trained more than 1,100 volunteers to be "community connectors." They engage people and encourage them to join events or participate in programs.

As for physical infrastructure to address loneliness, one example is the "chatty bench," adopted in the United Kingdom, Sweden and Australia. This is a park bench with a sign encouraging strangers sitting there to chat with each other; in

a Northern Ireland town, the sign says: “Sit here if you are happy to chat with passers-by.”

There are also “talking cafes,” where people are encouraged to gab with other coffee drinkers. There are “libraries of things,” where you can mingle with neighbors to borrow camping equipment or a carpet cleaner or lend out your own gear.

Solutions to loneliness are like that — little nudges to encourage us to mingle the way we evolved to. They’re so easy, and loneliness seems so debilitating, that we should be doing more.

So, President Biden, how about creating a senior government post analogous to a minister for loneliness? And mayors and governors, how about some chatty benches in American parks, along with volunteers deputized to bring us out for nature walks and singalongs?

We Americans, atomized and polarized, addicted and distressed, are a lonely crowd. Overwhelming evidence suggests that for the sake of our happiness and well-being, we need one another.

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