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U.S. Surgeon General Cites Loneliness As Serious Mental Health Hazard In New Report

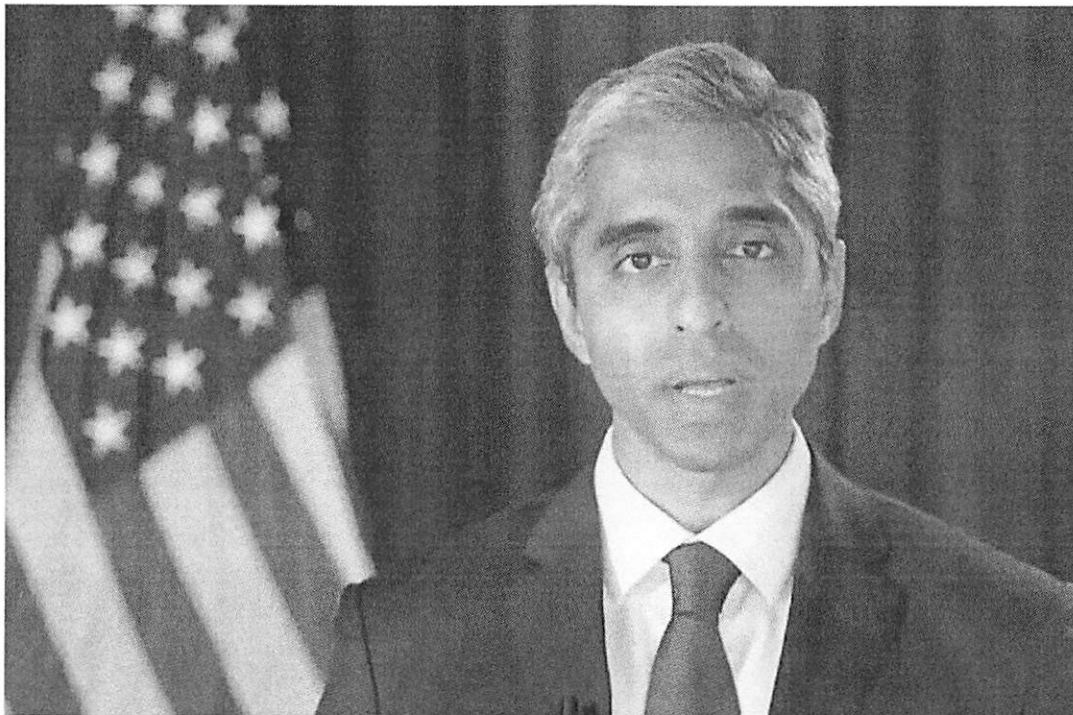
Bryan Robinson, Ph.D. Contributor 
author of *CHAINED TO THE DESK IN A HYBRID WORLD* (NYU Press, 2023)

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Dr. Vivek Murthy, 19th and 21st Surgeon General of the United States, cites loneliness as a public ... [+] DNCC VIA GETTY IMAGES

May is Mental Health Awareness month. Dr. Vivek Murthy, the U.S. Surgeon General, released an 85-page advisory declaring

loneliness a new public health epidemic in the United States.

“Our epidemic of loneliness and isolation has been an underappreciated public health crisis that has harmed individual and societal health. Our relationships are a source of healing and well-being hiding in plain sight—one that can help us live healthier, more fulfilled and more productive lives,” Murthy states. “Given the significant health consequences of loneliness and isolation, we must prioritize building social connection the same way we have prioritized other critical public health issues such as tobacco, obesity and substance use disorders. Together, we can build a country that’s healthier, more resilient, less lonely and more connected.”

The new report tracks a decline in social connections—especially among young people—and shows that half of adults are lonely, linking it to billions of dollars in health care costs. The findings show that loneliness is as bad as smoking and has profound effects on mental health, increasing the risks of heart disease, stroke and dementia. He cites the antidote to this crisis as a need to rebuild the social fabric of this country through social connections.

The recent advisory is personal to Murthy, author of the *New York Times* NYT +0.6% bestseller, *Together: The Healing Power of Human Connection in a Sometimes Lonely World*. In 2020, I sat down with him and asked about his own difficulty with loneliness as a child (Forbes.com). He described how hard it was for him to admit feeling lonely.

“As a child, I struggled with it,” he told me. “One of the reasons I never told my parents was there’s a feeling among many—and certainly it was true for me when I was young—that if you’re lonely, you’re somehow not likable. Or you’re not capable of being loved. And nobody wants to feel that way about themselves. I certainly

didn't as a child. Admitting I was lonely was hard. I think that's true for many people.”

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With all the electronic devices at our fingertips, it's ironic that workers would suffer from loneliness. But research supports Murthy's premise. Social connection is linked to a 50% drop in risk of early death. Studies show that 40% of wage earners feel isolated at work. Yet, employees who feel they belong are happier, healthier and more productive than coworkers who feel excluded. They receive twice as many raises and are 18 times more likely to be promoted. Plus, employees with a high sense of belonging take 75% fewer sick days than employees who feel excluded—equating to almost \$2.5 million worth of lost productivity each year, per 10,000 workers.

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Six Surprising Findings About Loneliness

Loneliness is misunderstood. The Surgeon General has set the record straight with six points that provide a deeper understanding

about this devastating condition.

- 1) There's a stigma associated with loneliness. Murthy acknowledges that many people struggle but don't talk about it and have trouble admitting to themselves that they're lonely.
- 2) Most people think loneliness is a feeling and haven't considered that it also has physical components to it. Murthy cited a famous study conducted by Julianne Holt-Lunstad at Brigham Young University, showing that the mortality impact of loneliness is equivalent to smoking 15 cigarettes a day. "It was, in fact, greater than the mortality impact of obesity or sedentary living," he noted. "The issues we focus on so often in public health, and rightly so, such as tobacco use, obesity and exercise are so important for our health. Her findings suggest that we need to think of it as a public health issue."
- 3) Loneliness can throw you into a cycle. The paradox is that people who are lonely don't want others to think something's wrong with them. So they further isolate themselves. According to Murthy, "When we struggle with a problem that we can't share, it further isolates."
- 4) Loneliness takes a toll on worker engagement which in turn negatively affects creativity and productivity, Murthy asserts. "It also affects how others see them in a negative way."
- 5) There is a difference in solitude and loneliness. "Solitude—being alone or isolated—is about being physically alone; it's an objective phenomenon, based on the number of people around you," Murthy notes. "But loneliness is a subjective term about how you feel about your connection. I might have one person around me but not feel lonely at all because I feel a deep connection to myself and that

person. Or I could have one hundred people around me and feel profoundly lonely which happens to many people. We could ensure that people are interacting with others all day long, but that doesn't mean we will reduce loneliness.”

6) Media connections are not necessarily the same as deeper connections. “There can be an assumption that because you're virtually connected through social media, email or text that somehow that protects you from loneliness. Sometimes it can, but not always” he said. “What matters when it comes to loneliness is the quality of your connections with people. Technology can sometimes be a quality connection, and sometimes it can detract from quality connection. It can lead us to substitute lower quality interactions from what used to be higher quality in-person interactions. The kind of conversations you have via text are different qualitatively from the conversations you have in person or on the phone when you can hear someone's voice and understand their tone, feelings and intentions.”

How Companies Can Address Loneliness

The Surgeon General believes if you're a leader of an organization, it makes sense to acknowledge a couple of things: “The data shows that many people in your workplace are probably struggling with loneliness and that loneliness comes with consequences, not just for social interaction but concrete outputs that an organization cares about such as productivity and creativity.”

The key to address workplace loneliness isn't blaming technology or pulling people together for a daily happy hour or the annual company party or picnic, Murthy explained. The substantive goal is to create a work culture where employees can connect with themselves and one another in deeper ways. “We all have a desire to be seen and loved. That's part of being human,” he adds.

“Sometimes you can go through conversations at work and exchange pleasantries but never get below the surface to see coworkers for who they are. It’s when we get into the deeper levels of sharing and understanding one another that we build strong connections. Those connections are the antidote to loneliness.”

So the question for leaders in the workplace is how to create environments that allow for that type of deeper sharing. “That doesn’t mean you have to divulge every aspect of your life,” Murthy concluded. “What it does mean is that we acknowledge when we come to work, that we come as a whole person, not just as a skill set, but as human beings who have concerns, worries, joys and a whole life outside work. When we can show up more fully as those people and share those dimensions of our lives with each other, we can strengthen connections. And that ultimately helps individual workers and the organization.”

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Bryan Robinson, Ph.D.

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