

Loneliness and Isolation: A Public Health Response

Molly I. Perez, LMSW



KENT COUNTY
**Health
Department**



About the Presenter



Objectives

Define loneliness and isolation

Describe the impact of social disconnection

Identify global and local initiatives

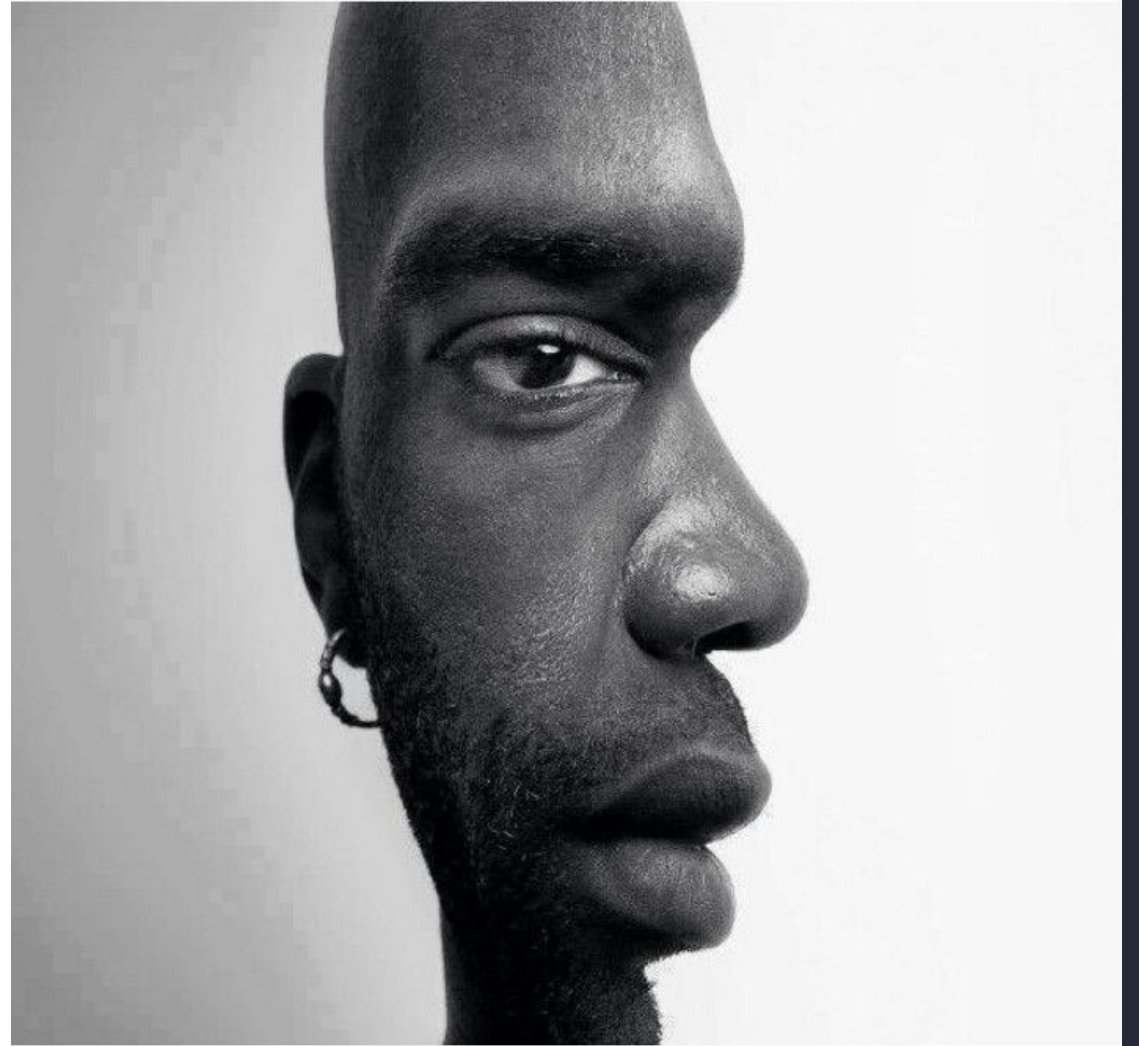
Explore public health strategies



What is Loneliness?

Rooted in perception

Subjective internal experience^s



Types of Loneliness

Intimate



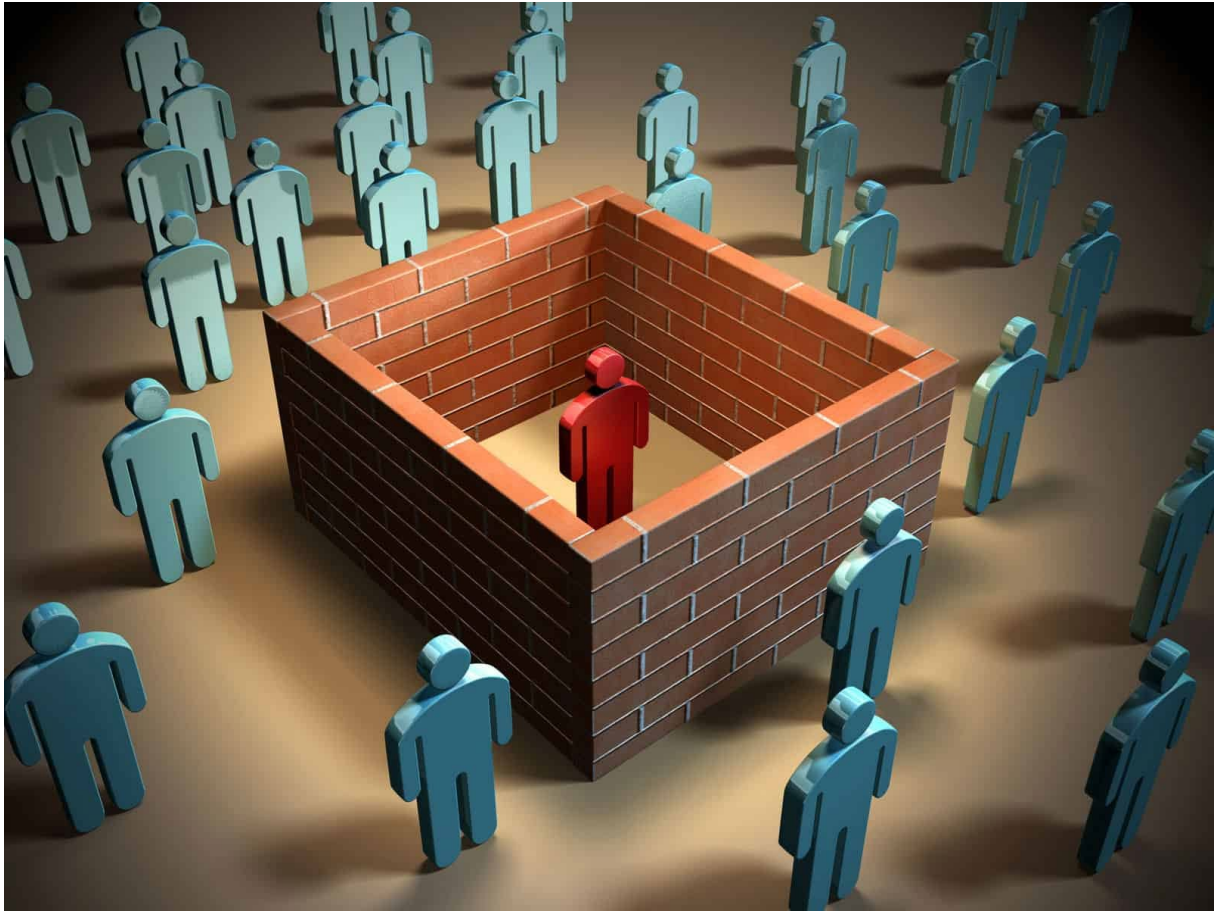
Relational



Collective



What is Social Isolation?

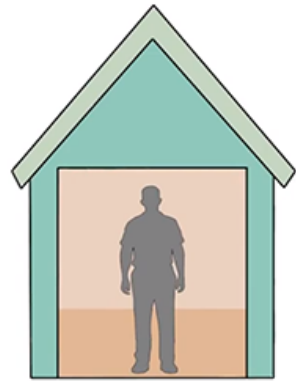


Objective lack of contact with others

Can be quantified

Measurable contacts / frequency of interaction

Isolation vs Loneliness



Social Isolation



Loneliness

Can a socially isolated person feel lonely?

Why they can:

- Fewer options for meaningful connection
- Humans are wired for social bonds
- Absence of contact can create emotional pain
- Isolation and loneliness can co-occur
- Linked to depression, poor health & early death

Why they might not:

- Some prefer solitude or are introverted
- Quality matters more than quantity of relationships
- Few but fulfilling connections may be enough
- Cultural values may prize independence
- Solitude can align with personal well being

Key Point

- Isolation = lack of objective contact
- Loneliness = subjective emotional state
- An isolated person feels lonely only if their actual social contact falls short of desired connection

References:

Cacioppo & Patrick, 2008

Holt-Lunstad, 2023

National Academies of Sciences, Engineering & Medicine, 2020

Demographic Variables

No real differences in gender, race, ethnicity or political ideology⁵

Income does make a difference⁵

Gen Z & Millennials overall have the highest rates of loneliness¹²

Quality of connections impacts health more with age⁸

Social integration most important for adolescents⁸



Sources of Loneliness

External Demands

- **Technology**
- **Remote work⁵**
 - **Lack of workplace support, poor leadership & weak coworker bonds¹²**
- **Limited time with family⁵**
- **Overworked/too busy/too tired⁵**

Internal Perceptions

- **Mental health negatively impacting relationships⁵**
- **Individualistic society⁵**
- **Lack of spiritual connection⁵**
- **Too much focus on self⁵**

What else may contribute to loneliness?

Are the specific circumstances, life events, & other examples that may influence one's experience of loneliness?

**Loneliness is the opposite of
love & belonging**

MASLOW'S HIERARCHY OF NEEDS



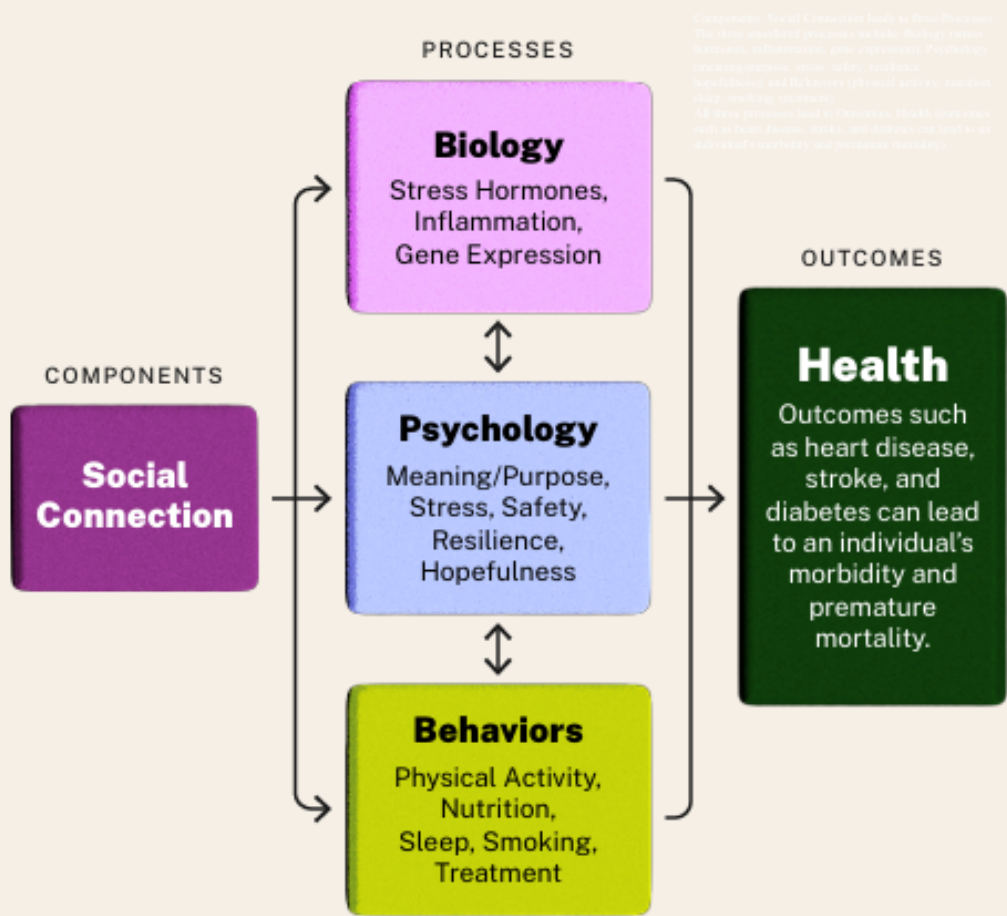
Why Does This Matter?



- **Humans are designed for connection¹**
 - **Infants who lack human contact fail to thrive and often die¹⁶**
 - **Solitary confinement is a form of punishment and torture¹⁶**
- **More connection leads to improved resilience & better health related behaviors¹**
- **Reduced social cohesion impacts society¹⁹**
 - **Essential for civic function**

How Does Social Connection Influence Health?

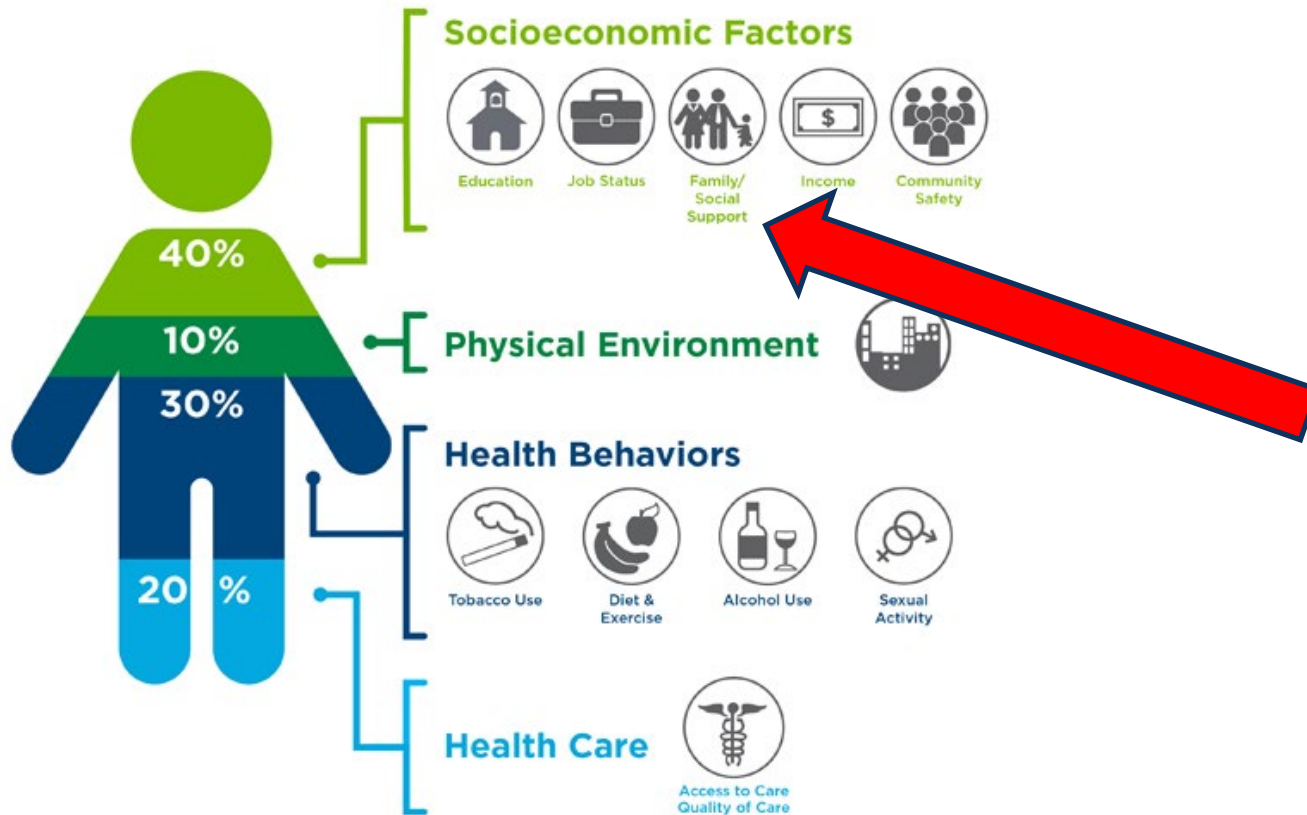
Social connection influences health through **three principal pathways**: biology, psychology, and behavior.



Source: Holt-Lunstad J. The Major Health Implications of Social Connection. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*. 2021;30(3):251-259.

Social Determinants of Health

What Goes Into Your Health?



- **Socioeconomic factors are a large contributor of health**
- **Family/Social Support make up part of those factors**
- **Connection is part of those socioeconomic factors**
- **Connection is a social determinant of health**

Physical Health Impacts

- **Comparable to smoking 15 cigarettes/day**
 - 29% increased risk of heart disease¹
 - 32% increased risk of stroke¹
- **Greater mortality impact than obesity¹**
- **Increased ER visits and hospitalization²**
 - And readmission¹¹
 - Require more long-term care¹⁰
- **More susceptible to virus & illness¹**
- **Increased rates of death⁴**



- **Poorer physical health²¹**
 - **Poor health behaviors**
 - **Poor oral hygiene**
- **Associated with sleep disturbances²¹**
- **Related to increase in inflammatory markers²¹**
 - **Effects comparable to inactivity¹**

Physical Health Impacts

Mental Health Impacts



- **50% increased risk of developing dementia in older adults¹**
- **Double rates of depression²²**
 - **Including poorer management of depression²**
 - **81% of lonely adults report depression and anxiety⁵**
 - **Loneliness, depression and anxiety can feed off each other⁵**
- **Leads to increased death via substances & suicide¹⁷**

Educational achievement is lower²³

Poorer work performance including increased absenteeism & burnout¹²

Lonely workers report double the sick days²³

Cost businesses \$154 billion a year

Stress & turnover due to disconnection²³

Economic Impact





US Surgeon General's Advisory


When I first took office as Surgeon General in 2014, I didn't view loneliness as a public health concern. But that was before I embarked on a cross-country listening tour, where I heard stories from my fellow Americans that surprised me.

People began to tell me they felt isolated, invisible, and insignificant.

Even when they couldn't put their finger on the word "lonely," time and time again, people of all ages and socioeconomic backgrounds, from every corner of the country, would tell me, "I have to shoulder all of life's burdens by myself," or "if I disappear tomorrow, no one will even notice." It was a lightbulb moment for me: social disconnection was far more common than I had realized.

Given the profound consequences of loneliness and isolation, **we have an opportunity, and an obligation, to make the same investments in addressing social connection that we have made in addressing tobacco use, obesity, and the addiction crisis.** If we fail to do so, we will pay an ever-increasing price in the form of our individual and collective health and well-being.

Each of us can start now, in our own lives, by strengthening our connections and relationships. Our individual relationships are an untapped resource—a source of healing hiding in plain sight... Answer that phone call from a friend. Make time to share a meal. Listen without the distraction of your phone. Perform an act of service. Express yourself authentically. The keys to human connection are simple, but extraordinarily powerful.



Global Responses



The Public Health Role

- **Screen for loneliness in assessments**
- **Educate within our systems**
- **Advocate for responses**
- **Develop inclusive resources**
- **Support & partner with community interventions**
 - **Peer support, community gardening & social prescribing**



Mobilize the Health Sector

- **Recognize connection as a priority for health & well-being¹**
- **Incorporate it into assessments¹**
 - **Using validated metrics²**
- **Discuss as part of routine care²**
- **Identify & address early¹**
- **Particularly primary care providers since they see the whole person²**
 - **Start with med students & residents²**



Responses

- **Frame connection as a core component of health & a preventative strategy¹⁰**
- **Normalize it as a social determinant of health & respond accordingly¹⁷**
- **Educate the public with programs and campaigns¹⁰**
- **Expand surveillance & interventions¹**
 - **No universal measure of loneliness¹¹**
- **Loneliness occurs in clusters & can spread like a contagion¹⁷**
- **Research the cause of disconnection¹**



Develop Partnerships



- **Public health & healthcare alone cannot address it²**
- **Promote partnerships system-wide²**
- **Partner with libraries, schools, faith-based organizations & rec centers for natural gathering spots¹⁰**

Public Policies



- Advocate for national guidelines like we do with exercise & nutrition ¹¹
- Ensure social connection is considered in policymaking across sectors¹
 - Consider loneliness when thinking about SDoH¹¹
 - Evaluate if policy minimizes harm from disconnection⁸
- Policies that promote affordable housing, accessible transportation & safe neighborhoods help increase social cohesion¹

Infrastructure in Communities

- **Limited funding sources for public gathering spaces¹³**
- **Continuity⁶**
- **Parks, libraries, community centers¹**
- **Programs that encourage engagement & belonging¹**
- **Organizations with low financial barriers⁴**
- **Walkable cities⁴**
 - **Walking groups⁶**



- Practices that promote well-being³
- Normalize use of EAPs & include connection in wellness initiatives¹²
- Recognize connection as a retention tool³
- Regular check-ins¹²
- Promote mentorship & peer support¹²
- Break out of silos¹²

Workplace Connections



Hybrid & Remote Work



- **Put policies in place that protect remote workers' life outside of work³**
- **Fully remote staff have higher levels of loneliness (25%) vs 16% of onsite staff³**
- **Encourage online engagement & connection³**
- **Connection is fueled when our senses are involved**
 - **Connecting on a screen doesn't give the same stimuli⁹**

Caring Culture

- **Collective service to others⁵**
- **Cultivate connection as the norm¹¹**
- **Ongoing care; not sporadic occasions¹⁴**
 - **Feelings of connection last less than 24 hours¹⁴**



- **Reach out to loved ones⁵**
- **Love oneself⁵**
- **Forgive & help others⁵**
- **Use of technology⁷**
- **Create opportunities⁹**
- **Be social**
 - **Interactions with strangers (small talk & smiles) can be enriching⁹**
- **Cognitive Behavioral Therapy²**
 - **Addresses the maladaptive thinking & promote behavioral change**

Individual Responses

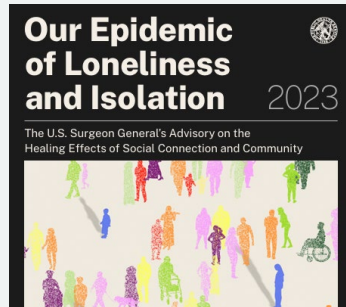


What Would You Do?

Share one idea to address
loneliness in your role, specific to
your community

Resources

US Surgeon General



- <https://www.hhs.gov/surgeon-general/reports-and-publications/connection/index.html>

WHO Guidelines



- <https://www.who.int/groups/commission-on-social-connection/report/>

National Institute of Health

STAY CONNECTED
to Combat Loneliness
and Social Isolation

- <https://www.nia.nih.gov/toolkits/social-isolation>

Call to Action

- **Recognize the issue**
- **US doesn't prioritize social connection in public health frameworks¹¹**
- **Prioritize connection**
- **Educate, connect, advocate**



“

*Behind every data point on loneliness,
is a person who just wants to matter.*

—Molly I. Perez, LMSW

*The cure for loneliness isn't more
contact; it's more care.”*

*— Dr. Vivek Murthy, U.S. Surgeon
General*

”

Questions?



Contact

Molly Perez, LMSW (she/her)
Public Health Program Supervisor
Community Wellness Division
Strong Beginnings Program
Kent County Health Department
molly.perez@kentcountymi.gov
Office: 616-632-7173

 www.linkedin.com/in/molly-perez-8560132b4

References

1. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. (2023). *Our epidemic of loneliness and isolation: The U.S. Surgeon General's advisory on the healing effects of social connection and community*. <https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/surgeon-general-social-connection-advisory.pdf>
2. Mullen, R. A., Tong, S. T., Lum, H. D., Stephens, K. A., & Krist, A. H. (2024). The Role of Primary Care in the Social Isolation and Loneliness Epidemic. *Annals of family medicine*, 22(3), 244–246. <https://doi.org/10.1370/afm.3102>
3. Burrell, J. (2024, August 28). *Building a connected workplace: HR's role in reducing loneliness*. College and University Professional Association for Human Resources. <https://www.cupahr.org/blog/building-a-connected-workplace-hrs-role-in-reducing-loneliness-2024-08-28/>
4. Kobayashi, L. (2024, December 12). *Loneliness is a public health issue: Let's tackle it together*. *The Pursuit – University of Michigan School of Public Health*. Retrieved from <https://sph.umich.edu/pursuit/2024posts/loneliness-is-a-public-health-issue-lets-tackle-it-together.html>
5. Ross, E. M. (2024, October 25). *What is causing our epidemic of loneliness and how can we fix it?* *Usable Knowledge*, Harvard Graduate School of Education. <https://www.gse.harvard.edu/ideas/usable-knowledge/24/10/what-causing-our-epidemic-loneliness-and-how-can-we-fix-it>
6. *How South Korea is spending £250 m to cure its loneliness epidemic*. (2025, June 3). *The Times*.
7. De Freitas, J., Uguralp, A. K., Uguralp, Z. O., & Puntoni, S. (2024). *AI companions reduce loneliness* (Wharton School Working Paper No. 24-078) [Preprint]. arXiv. <https://doi.org/10.48550/arXiv.2407.19096>
8. Yang, Y. C., Boen, C., Gerken, K., Li, T., Schorpp, K., & Harris, K. M. (2016). Social relationships and physiological determinants of longevity across the human life span. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America*, 113(3), 578–583. <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1511085112>

- 9. Godman, H. (2023, March 8). *3 ways to create community and counter loneliness*. Harvard Health Publishing. <https://www.health.harvard.edu/blog/3-ways-to-create-community-and-counter-loneliness-202303082900>
- 10. References with a 10 are same as 9
- 11. Holt-Lunstad, J. (2022). Social connection as a public health issue: The evidence and a systemic framework for prioritizing the “social” in social determinants of health. *Annual Review of Public Health*, 43, 193–213. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-publhealth-052020-110732>
- 12. Cigna. (2021). *The Cigna Loneliness Index: Report and insights*. Cigna Corporation. <https://www.cigna.com/about-us/newsroom/studies-and-reports/loneliness-index>
- 13 University of Michigan School of Public Health. (2024). *Loneliness as a public health issue*. University of Michigan
- 14. Stephen Waldron. (2025, August 25). *Participating in in-person events fosters social connections*. UGA Today. Retrieved [insert date you accessed it], from <https://news.uga.edu/in-person-events-foster-social-connections/>
- 15. Wikipedia. (n.d.). *Chatty Café Scheme*. In *Wikipedia*. Retrieved [September 2025], from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chatty_Caf%C3%A9_Scheme
- 16. Public Policy & Aging Report. (2017). *The potential public health relevance of social isolation and loneliness: prevalence, epidemiology, and risk factors*. *Public Policy & Aging Report*, 27(4), 127-130. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ppar/prx030>
- 18. Crowe, C. L., Liu, L., Bagnarol, N., & Fried, L. P. (2022). Loneliness prevention and the role of the public health system. *Perspectives in Public Health*, 144(1), 31–38. <https://doi.org/10.1177/17579139221106579>
- 19. Williams, S. E., & Braun, B. (2019). Loneliness and social isolation—a private problem, a public issue. *Journal of Family & Consumer Sciences*, 111(1), 7–14. <https://doi.org/10.14307/JFCS111.1.7>

20. Holt-Lunstad, J., Robles, T. F., & Sbarra, D. A. (2017). Loneliness and social isolation as risk factors for mortality: A meta-analytic review. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 10(2), 227-237. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1745691614568352>
21. Sherman, D. W., Alfano, A. R., Alfonso, F., Duque, C. R., Eiroa, D., Marrero, Y., Muñecas, T., Radcliffe-Henry, E., Rodriguez, A., & Sommer, C. L. (2024). A Systematic Review of the Relationship between Social Isolation and Physical Health in Adults. *Healthcare (Basel, Switzerland)*, 12(11), 1135. <https://doi.org/10.3390/healthcare12111135>
22. Mann, F., Johnson, S., Burns-O'Connell, M., Spiers, N., & others. (2022). Loneliness and the onset of new mental health problems in the general population: A longitudinal systematic review. *Social Psychiatry and Psychiatric Epidemiology*, 57(7), 1601-1612. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00127-022-02261-7>
23. Engel, L., Rizal, M. F., Clifford, S., Faller, J., Lim, M. H., Le, L. K.-D., Chatterton, M. L., & Mihalopoulos, C. (2025). *An updated systematic literature review of the economic costs of loneliness and social isolation and the cost-effectiveness of interventions*. *Pharmacoeconomics*, 43(9), 1047-1063. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40273-025-01516-w>