



# Overcoming Loneliness

## Loneliness: A Public Health Issue

Despite the fact that people are connected more than ever through technology, more of us are experiencing loneliness. A recent study has found that feeling lonely doesn't just contribute to more behavioral health problems—it literally can shorten your life.

## Loneliness Adversely Affects Health

People who say they are lonely have a much greater risk of dying of heart disease than people who say they aren't lonely. Lonely women have double the risk of early death, while lonely men have nearly half the risk, according to researchers. Loneliness is often referred to as the "new obesity" to elevate its recognition as a serious national health problem.

Doctors have known for some time that people who are lonely have increased risk for anxiety and depression, which can also lead to more health concerns. Researchers say that the problem is getting worse because more people live alone than ever before.

## Are You Lonely?

Everybody feels lonely from time to time, but chronic loneliness can sneak up on you. How do you know whether you're lonely? Some recent studies offer some clues.

- ◆ Has your TV watching increased? If you are spending hours a day watching TV alone, you may be lonely. Researchers found that lonely people are more likely to watch more television than people who aren't lonely.
- ◆ You don't feel refreshed after downtime alone. We all need time to unplug from the daily grind, whether it's taking a long walk or heading to a movie. Lonely people don't feel recharged after their downtime. They feel lonely.
- ◆ You are constantly on social media? People who are frequently checking their Facebook or Twitter are likely to be feeling secluded, according to researchers. The connection we get through social media isn't the same as the feeling gained by doing something you enjoy with another person, but for someone who is lonely it can feel like a lifeline.

## Action Is Key

If you suspect you're lonely, don't "get used to it." Take action to bring more connections into your life. You can start by contacting all those friends you've been intending

to reach out to for lunch, dinner or a drink after work. Even if it's been a while since you've seen your friends, make an effort to get together with them.

Another avenue is to start attending group activities that you enjoy. Play darts, take a yoga class, go to church, or train for a marathon. Organizations such as meetup.com list groups of like-minded people in your area who enjoy a variety of things, such as books, Bunco, sailing, technology, or salsa dancing. Choose a group and check it out.

## Think Forward

Schedule something to look forward to. Think forward. Set up a family reunion or a vacation to give yourself something you can see on your calendar that you can anticipate. Sometimes just knowing that you have activities scheduled helps when you're feeling lonely.

Lonely people often think they are socially awkward, but studies have shown that this not the true. It may be difficult to put yourself out there, but knowing that you are going to do better than you think you will may help to get you out the door.

Get a pet. Coming home to a furry friend that is excited to see you is a sure cure for loneliness. What's more, walking the dog or brushing the cat can lower blood pressure in addition to making you feel less lonely.

## Not a Willpower Thing

It's important to know there is nothing shameful about feeling lonely. Sometimes lonely people feel as if they should just get over their feelings or think they should toughen up about being on their own. Human beings are meant to be in community, and so it is natural to yearn for others when we don't have enough social interaction.

Sometimes people who are lonely have additional issues that keep them from being able to make connections. Phobias or social anxiety can keep you trapped in your home. Depression can keep you from getting off the sofa. It's important to get help for these issues, especially if they are contributing to isolation.

## Your EAP Can Help

Talk to the EAP about solutions to problems associated with isolation, life changes, and loneliness. EAPs are problem-solving, resource experts. We'll help you create a plan and take action to get help for yourself or a loved one who struggles with isolation and loneliness.

*"Loneliness as a Public Health Issue: the Impact of Loneliness on Health Care Utilization Among Older Adults" by Kerstin Gerst-Emerson and Jayani Jayawardhana, American Journal of Public Health, May 2015. Learn more: [www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov](http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov) (Search PMC4386514)*

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