

Q&A: Meaningful social interactions are the only 'cure' for loneliness

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'Tis the season for friends and family, which could be crucial for combating loneliness, but one Western researcher says we should strive to maintain social connections at all times of the year.

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), social isolation and [loneliness](#) is becoming an increasing health concern around the globe. The WHO estimates 1 in 4 older people experience social isolation and between 5% and 15% of adolescents experience loneliness.

Julie Aitken Schermer is a jointly appointed professor in the DAN department of management and organizational studies, and psychology. Among her research interests is loneliness and its impact on people.

Western News: When we talk about loneliness, what do we mean?

Julie Aitken Schermer: Loneliness is a dissatisfaction with personal [social connections](#). Individuals need to belong and matter to others and loneliness reflects the state of not having those connections. According to the WHO, the terms, "loneliness" and "[social isolation](#)" are the same. Both terms reflect an inability to have meaningful contact with others.

WN: What are the concerns associated with loneliness?

Aitken Schermer: Some of the findings show that loneliness is related to negative health factors, including poor sleep, cardiac issues and [self-harm](#).

I am a bit concerned with the emphasis on older people only in the community loneliness programs. Some of our research suggests that [younger people](#) are also quite lonely, and I believe we should also invest resources in discovering why younger people are lonely and how they can be helped.

WN: Are people lonelier than they used to be?

Aitken Schermer: One salient point raised recently by the WHO is that one third of [older people](#) are lonely. As the population ages, then the incidence of loneliness may in fact increase. Since the pandemic was announced and lockdowns took place, more focus has been placed on the topic of loneliness, especially in North America, but it is important to also note that in 2018 the U.K. expanded the responsibilities of the minister for sport and [civil society](#) to include looking at loneliness as a critical issue. More retrospective, versus current, data is needed to determine if loneliness has been increasing for the public.

WN: Does technology impact loneliness?

Aitken Schermer: One of my graduate students, Kristi Baerg MacDonald, explored the relationship between smartphone usage and loneliness. She found if you use technology to actually interact with others, you report lower loneliness, but if you use it passively to do things like scrolling through [social media](#), there is an association with higher levels of loneliness.

WN: What can be done to combat loneliness?

Aitken Schermer: The only "cure" for loneliness is meaningful social interactions with at least one person. The challenge is getting individuals together and interacting in a meaningful way. One option, which appears to have success for some individuals, is the social prescription model adopted in the U.K. In that model, an individual is prescribed activities with others, such as gardening or hiking.

When engaging in these activities, people tend to naturally start talking about what they are doing, perhaps talking about the weather, and slowly the people might start talking about themselves, resulting in a more meaningful interaction.

Provided by University of Western Ontario

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