

Why feelings of isolation have skyrocketed in the US

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Being alone doesn't automatically equate with misery. French writer Michel de Montaigne famously removed himself from public life and retreated to a tower on his country estate, where he wrote about the joys

of sitting with oneself in his enduring piece "On Solitude," published in 1580.

"We have a soul able to turn in on herself; she can keep herself company; she has the wherewithal to attack, to defend, to receive and to give. Let us not fear that in such solitude as that we shall be crouching in painful idleness," he wrote.

Of course, there's a distinction between contemplative solitude and isolation. Increasingly, Americans seem to be experiencing the latter. United States Surgeon General Vivek Murthy declared that loneliness had reached "epidemic" proportions. [Nearly half of Americans](#) reported measurable loneliness, even before the COVID-19 pandemic.

Too much alone time grates on the soul, brewing melancholy and anxiety. It can have serious physical affects, too: Prolonged loneliness is associated with boosted risk of stroke, diabetes and premature death.

Understanding the reasons behind the spike in isolation may be essential to remedying it and its effects, but USC Dornsife College of Letter, Arts and Sciences experts concede it's a complicated puzzle.

Empty nests, lonely neighbors

Alumna Cat Moore '05 served as USC's director of belonging from 2021 to 2024 and writes a [newsletter](#) devoted to the subject of loneliness. She reminds us that feeling lonely is a perfectly normal part of the human experience. Even those living in tight-knit communities will inevitably experience it.

"If you're not lonely in this moment, guess what? Wait a minute. Wait a year. Wait a decade. You may lose a spouse. You may lose a friend. You may change cities, change jobs," says Moore, who graduated from USC

Dornsife in 2005 with a degree in philosophy.

She's concerned that much of the recent public discourse around loneliness, even labeling it an epidemic, is stigmatizing a very normal feeling, one that has been with us throughout human history.

Yet, she concedes that there is indeed an unprecedented increase in troublesome feelings of isolation, particularly in the West.

Marriage rates in the U.S. have fallen [by some 60% since the 1960s](#). Americans are having [fewer children](#) and more adults are choosing [not to have any at all](#). A record [30% of us](#) live alone.

This is, to some extent, the natural outcome of the expanding lifestyle choices available to Americans as pressure to marry and have children has receded.

However, turning human interaction into an option, rather than a baked-in part of the day, might be accelerating our loneliness, says Darby Saxbe, professor of psychology and founding director of the USC Dornsife Center for the Changing Family. Living communally doesn't require scheduling, making reservations or leaving the house to share a laugh or get a hug, but living alone does, she explains.

Saxbe notes that the large, old houses in her neighborhood, once home to sprawling families, often house just one or two people these days. Emptier houses mean fewer neighbors, and thus less opportunity for spontaneous encounters.

Fewer neighbors may seem like a blessing, but living alongside others provides essential social enrichment. G.K. Chesterton wrote in [his essay](#) on the importance of neighbors: "The thing which keeps life romantic and full of fiery possibilities is the existence of these great plain

limitations which force all of us to meet the things we do not like or do not expect."

Alone in the matrix

Technology has often promised to fill the gaps in our social fabric. Online dating once seemed like a savvy solution to perpetual singledom. Yet, these apps [could actually be preventing us](#) from making that vital love match.

"We keep thinking there are endless choices, that maybe someone better will come along," says Julie Albright, lecturer in USC Dornsife's Master of Science in Applied Psychology program and author of the [book](#) "Left to Their Own Devices." "But at the end of the day, people who don't choose are going to end up lonely because they're not in a relationship. You have to choose, and you have to commit to build something."

This could explain why many young people now express disillusionment with these sites and are foregoing them altogether.

Social media, despite the 24/7 connectivity it offers, also doesn't seem to be improving our social life. The use of these platforms is [climbing steadily](#), but [more and more Americans report](#) having few (or no) close friends.

Moore acknowledges that new technology can be helpful in keeping families connected. Her children can stay in touch with their grandparents, who live in another state, thanks to video chatting.

However, when online connections don't translate into in-person interaction, it undermines the primary benefit of friendship. "If you cannot do basic conversational skills, like taking an interest in other people when you're in public because all you can do is navigate a [digital](#)

[world](#), that's a problem. We're not digital creatures; we're organic ones," she says.

To get the most out of much-needed in-person socializing (and to model good screen restraint to kids), Albright recommends removing phones from the line of sight altogether: "The research shows that if you even have a phone on the table, it's like a drug. Part of your attention is on that phone and you're not really paying attention to those around you."

Are you there, God? It's me, lonely

Another long-standing bedrock of community is on the decline. Less than [half of Americans claim membership](#) in a house of worship, down from close to 75% of the population from the 1940s through the 1980s. Most Americans only [attend church service once a year](#), and even that number is declining.

Weekly services previously provided a built-in group of friends and acquaintances formed around a common ethos. "Religion offers a common identity, despite the fact that there's always differences within [a congregation]. There is something that they all generally believe and can attest to," says Richard Flory, executive director of the USC Dornsife Center for Religion and Civic Culture.

Social clubs, politics or hobby groups may position themselves as alternatives, but religion leaves some pretty big shoes to fill. It also offers a pathway to self-transcendence; an experience of something beyond oneself that can help people feel a little less alone in the universe.

"I don't see that with new community groups, like SoulCycle, which are perpetually popping up. That's just not baked into their model," says Flory.

To rebuild a religious community, Flory has a few suggestions. Offer services that fit around busy family schedules, like a weekly faith dinner. People often seek opportunities to serve others and to build something together. Hosting volunteer work and community outreach may also get people back in the pews, says Flory.

Every lonely person is lonely in their own way

There may be another component to the problem: a person's unique, biological make-up.

[A study](#) by Elisa Baek, assistant professor of psychology at USC Dornsife, revealed that lonely people's brains process the world differently than those who aren't lonely. It also showed that each lonely person processed the world distinctly from other lonely people.

"The 'Anna Karenina principle' is a fitting description of lonely people, as they experience loneliness in an idiosyncratic way, not in a universally relatable way," says Baek.

For Moore, there is no one "loneliness" with a capital "L." There are only individual experiences of loneliness as diverse and complex as human life.

Wherever you might fall on the isolation scale at present, our radically changing social landscape means that we have all become pioneers in unfamiliar terrain, she says. "That will require us to be extraordinarily proactive, extraordinarily self-aware and extraordinarily innovative."

Provided by University of Southern California

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