

Are You Lonely? You're Not Alone.

A new book from former U.S. Surgeon General Vivek Murthy explains why many Americans feel lonely, and what we can do about it

By Andrea Petersen



Photo: Getty Images

As U.S. Surgeon General during the Obama administration, Vivek H. Murthy grappled with issues like the opioid crisis, violence and rising rates of mental illness and obesity. Contributing to all of those problems, he argues, is loneliness.

In his new book, “Together: The Healing Power of Human Connection in a Sometimes Lonely World,” that is slated to be published by Harper Wave next month, Dr. Murthy says that loneliness is both pervasive and destructive. He cites research showing that people who are lonely have a greater risk of heart disease, stroke and [dementia](#). Loneliness also seems to be on the rise: A 2020 survey from health insurer Cigna found that 61% of American adults are lonely, up from 54% in the company’s 2018 survey.



Vivek Murthy is an internist and served as U.S. Surgeon General during the Obama administration. Photo: Meredith Nierman

Dr. Murthy, an internist, also proposes solutions, including volunteering, scheduling time to connect with loved ones and even saying ‘hello’ to strangers. (So quit putting off that call to your college roommate.) And he shares anecdotes of people and communities who have found creative ways to foster relationships, such as a network of “men’s sheds,” a combination of workshop and social club.

Here are edited excerpts from an interview:

How did loneliness come onto your radar as a public health concern?

I was having conversations with people across the country. What struck me in all of those stories, whether I was hearing about addiction or violence or depression or anxiety were these threads of loneliness. Nobody came out and said, “Hi, I’m struggling with loneliness.” They would say things like, “We feel like we are on our own. Nobody cares about us. We feel invisible.”

When we have emotional pain in our lives, we are going to seek to relieve that pain in some way. Do we reach for alcohol? Do we reach for food? Do we reach for a friend to call? It became clear to me that for many folks this feeling of abandonment and feeling invisible is driving a lot of emotional pain. And how that was then manifested in their life varied. Addiction. Violence.

How do you define loneliness?

Loneliness is a subjective feeling that you’re lacking in social connections. This is different from isolation, which is the more objective measure of how many people you have around you. I could have a ton of people around me but if I’m not feeling connected to them I may be lonely. It comes down to the quality of the relationships and part of what determines the quality of the relationships is how open people feel they can be which means in part how vulnerable they can be. More often than not, it doesn’t look like somebody sitting in the corner of a room all alone. Loneliness can look like anger, frustration, irritability. It can look like depression or anxiety.

Who is most at risk for loneliness?

[Loneliness seems to peak](#) in adolescence and early adulthood. There’s another peak during the 50s and another peak during the 80s. The 50s are a time when a lot of people are questioning where their life is going. Often they’ve allowed their relationships to wither over time after decades of focusing on work and taking care of kids. When people are in their 80s, they really start to lose spouses and friends and their mobility.

Share Your Thoughts

What have you found to be the best strategy to combat loneliness? Join the conversation below.

It may seem surprising that [young people are struggling](#) with such high rates of loneliness because they’re super connected and constantly in touch with their friends. I think it comes back to the quality of connections. Even though they are more connected than ever before, I think there are more perils than ever before to being yourself and being vulnerable. If I did something or said something embarrassing when I was in middle school, 10 people knew about it and would maybe make fun of me. These days, if you do that somebody is videoing it and putting it on

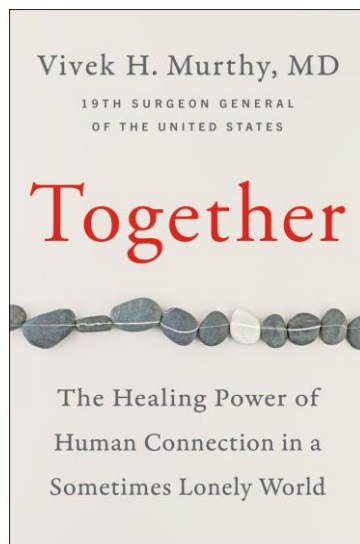
YouTube and before you know thousands of people are laughing at your vulnerable moment. I think that makes people hesitant to be as open and vulnerable.

What do you believe is driving loneliness in the U.S.?

First, mobility. We can go to a different place than where we grew up for school. We can move multiple times over our lifetime for jobs. That's really wonderful, but it comes at a cost. We move away from communities that we know and we haven't figured out ways to compensate for that adequately.

The second thing is technology. Technology and social media can strengthen or weaken our connections. If I was coming to New York and I post on Facebook, "Anybody free for dinner tonight?" and I meet up with a friend offline, that's a wonderful example of how online connection can facilitate offline connection. But what happens more often than not is it reduces the amount of time we have for in-person connections. And it can have the effect of reducing the quality of our in-person interactions because it distracts us. How often is it that we have been on the phone catching up with a friend but we're also scrolling through our inbox or refreshing social media?

The most insidious contributor has to do with culture and what we hold to be important when it comes to self worth and a person's value. Culture is telling us what makes you successful has to do with wealth, reputation and power. So many young people and adults these days walk around feeling that they are not thin enough, not good looking enough, not wealthy enough.



How can we alleviate loneliness?

Service is a powerful pathway of getting out of loneliness. It takes the focus off of you and puts it onto someone else. When we're dealing with chronic loneliness, we tend to focus more on ourselves and we tend to have a lower threshold for perceiving threat around us. So someone may come and ask us to have lunch with them but we may look at them with suspicion. Loneliness can become a downward spiral. Service breaks that pattern by shifting the focus off of you and onto someone else. It also reminds you that you have value to add and give to the

world. That is something that when you're struggling with loneliness you can forget very quickly. You can start to believe that you're lonely because you're not likable.

It can feel difficult to find the time to build other social connections. What can people do?

Be very disciplined about dedicating some time—even if it is five minutes a day—to calling or talking to someone you love. That kind of consistency, even if it is just five minutes a day, helps to remind us that we have a well of connection in our lives.

We can also focus on increasing the quality of time we have together. Look at the time we are already spending with people and ask ourselves how can I get more out of that time? Make that time as focused and as undistracted as possible. That means putting our devices away and listening carefully. A small amount of high-quality time can have a really powerful impact on how people feel.

And you also suggest that we talk to strangers, too?

Even something as simple as saying hello and smiling. That could be people we're passing on the street, the person we're paying at the cash register at the grocery store, at the coffee shop. Those micro moments of connection can have a lasting impact on how good we feel. They can also remind us that we have the ability to connect with people.

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