



MENTAL HEALTH

Anxiety, Depression Increased During Pandemic. Why Not Loneliness?

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When the pandemic hit, mental health professionals predicted lockdowns and social distancing would result in a wave of loneliness. But researchers who study loneliness say that hasn't happened.

NOEL KING, HOST:

One thing we're all supposed to do these days to try and limit the spread of coronavirus is keep away from other people, but with physical separation, you get lonely, right? Reporter Joanne Silberner has found that actually the COVID-19 pandemic has not brought on a loneliness pandemic, too.

JOANNE SILBERNER, BYLINE: On a typically chilly Saturday night in San Francisco earlier this summer, 63-year-old Dana Amarisa and her 93-year-old mother, Jeanne Lacey, were getting ready to go dancing in the street outside their house.

DANA AMARISA: Ready to dance, Mom?

SILBERNER: Early in the pandemic, Dana moved to San Francisco from Mexico, where she'd spent most evenings dancing on the beach. The transition to her mom's home was difficult.

Were you experiencing any loneliness before this started?

AMARISA: Oh, Lord, yes. Oh, my gosh. I was transplanted from my home, my friends, my job.

SILBERNER: So several months ago, she and her mom started a new COVID-19 tradition - physically distanced dance parties outside their home. They put up signs inviting neighbors to join in.

AMARISA: How are you? You came to dance?

UNIDENTIFIED PERSON: I did.

AMARISA: Yay. Well, you came to the right place.

SILBERNER: Jeanne uses her walker. It's a fine dance partner, she says. In January, before the pandemic took hold, researchers at Florida State University College of Medicine asked 2,000 people around the country about loneliness. Are there people you can talk to? Are you part of a group of friends? Do you feel supported? They found a pretty high level of loneliness to start with, and they expected the pandemic would make things much worse. Angelina Sutin is one of the researchers.

ANGELINA SUTIN: There was a lot of fear early on because we are social animals, and we want to be around other people. We want to be together.

SILBERNER: But when they checked back with the survey participants in late March and late April, when many were under lockdown, they were surprised.

SUTIN: The thing that everybody thought was going to happen didn't happen.

SILBERNER: While some people did report being lonelier, others reported being less lonely. And there was no overall increase in loneliness. They published their results in the journal *American Psychologist* and repeated the survey in July - again, no jump in

loneliness. Sutin says it looks to her like the efforts people made to stay connected - dance parties at a distance, Zoom chats, singing from balconies and porches - made a difference. A new survey from the University of Michigan did find feelings of isolation among people 50 to 80 years old. But other researchers looking into loneliness during the pandemic are not seeing an increase.

JONATHAN KANTER: Our topline result is that we didn't see this massive wave of loneliness that was predicted.

SILBERNER: That's University of Washington psychologist Jonathan Kanter. He and his team have been surveying people in Seattle and around the country, and a government survey in the United Kingdom and a national survey by the University of Southern California are also failing to find a loneliness pandemic. But there's something unusual going on here. Depression and anxiety are definitely increasing. Many studies have confirmed that, and those mood disorders have long been linked to loneliness. Sandro Galea is dean of the School of Public Health at Boston University. He found Sutin's surveys to be well done but perplexing. He says there could be a lot that this pandemic can teach us about the link between loneliness, depression and anxiety.

SANDRO GALEA: The relationship between social isolation, physical distancing, loneliness, how that mediates or does not mediate a relationship with depression or anxiety. I think that's a really interesting set of questions and one from which we can learn quite a bit.

SILBERNER: The role of the digital world in mitigating loneliness may be worth exploring, he says. Meanwhile, back in San Francisco, Dana Amarisa and her mom plan to continue with their dance parties...

AMARISA: I love salsa.

SILBERNER: ...Even after the pandemic ends.

AMARISA: Thanks for coming.

UNIDENTIFIED PERSON: You're welcome.

SILBERNER: For NPR News, I'm Joanne Silberner.

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