



Mylea Charvat, Ph.D.
The Fifth Vital Sign

LONELINESS

The Impact of Social Isolation and Loneliness

Although worse now, social isolation and loneliness have long been a problem.

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Dolly, a senior who lives alone, looks forward to playing bridge for several hours with her friends every day. That is, until [COVID-19](#). With shelter-in-place and recommendations by the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#) for older adults to stay home, Dolly hasn't had any social interaction for more than two months and feels it is taking a toll on her mental health—citing feelings of loneliness and bouts of [depression](#) during this time.

Dolly isn't the only one feeling socially isolated and lonely. While COVID-19 has amplified it, even before the crisis more than [one-third](#) of adults aged 45 and older felt lonely, and [one in five](#) Americans said they felt lonely or socially isolated. Living alone can be one of the contributing risk factors for loneliness, and according to the U.S. Census Bureau, 28 percent of older adults live by themselves.

"[Loneliness](#) became a 'hot' topic due to COVID-19. The reason people now openly discuss it is that we can 'blame' the virus for our loneliness, and that eliminates the stigma usually connected to loneliness," said Dr. Ami Rokach, clinical psychologist and author of *Loneliness, Love and All That's Between*.

According to the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (NASEM), loneliness is the feeling of being alone, regardless of the amount of social contact, while [social isolation](#) is a lack of social connections. It is important to note the distinction: Social isolation can lead to loneliness in some people, while others can feel lonely without being socially isolated.

The Impact of Social Isolation and Loneliness on:

Mental Health Month

While social distancing and shelter-in-place are helping flatten the pandemic curve, there are unintended implications on mental and cognitive health. According to the [Kaiser Family Foundation](#), about 45 percent of adults in the United States say worry and [stress](#) related to the pandemic are having a negative impact on their mental health.

Coincidentally, May is [Mental Health Month](#), an observance in the United States since 1949 to bring awareness and to provide practical tools to care for mental health. It is an especially important present-day reminder to take care of one's mental health as people may experience higher levels of stress, loneliness,* and depression during this time, which can lead to higher risks of health problems such as [dementia](#).

Dementia

While there haven't been many studies on the short-term effects of social isolation and loneliness, a recent report from NASEM indicated that "high levels of loneliness, infrequent social contacts and low-level group participation" was associated with about a [50 percent](#) increased risk of dementia.

And in a 2018 Florida State University College of Medicine study, loneliness was shown to increase the risk of dementia by [40 percent](#).

The Economy

As people age, the likelihood of becoming socially isolated increases due to loss of loved ones, lack of family, loss of social contacts due to [retirement](#), and declining health. According to the AARP Public Policy Institute, social isolation among older adults will cost Medicare [\\$6.7 billion](#) in federal spending annually. The AARP seeks to raise awareness and to highlight the risk factors for loneliness and social isolation with their [fact sheet](#).

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The Importance of Social Interaction and Staying Connected

Studies show that social interaction (and other modifiable lifestyle factors such as getting enough sleep, exercise, and eating a healthy [diet](#)) can prevent the [risk of dementia](#) globally by 35 percent. And [research](#) showed that dementia prevention was even greater in low-income countries: India (41%), China (40%), and a sample of Latin American countries (56%).

It is important for people to regularly engage in meaningful social interaction to maintain their brain health at all ages. A [study](#) conducted by Dr. Lisa Berkman of Harvard University found that socially active individuals experienced less decline in [memory](#). Those with the highest sociability reported half as much memory loss compared to those least social. Despite factoring in other demographics like age, [gender](#), race, and health, the statistics remained unchanged.

If shelter-in-place continues, and physical social gatherings or activities are not a possibility, there are many other ways and virtual activities available to feel connected, less lonely, and improve cognitive health. Jonathan Kanter, director of the Center for the Science of Social Connection at the University of Washington encourages [video chats](#) and calling regularly to check in with friends and family. The National Institute of Health determined that just 10 minutes of daily social interaction increases performance on cognitive assessments and can give an important cognitive edge as we age.

I am a huge proponent of connecting with friends and loved ones to improve cognitive health. However, it is important to note that just because a person is surrounded by people does not mean they will feel less lonely or that the likelihood of dementia decreases. For both boxes to be checked, individuals must be engaged and participate in social activities outside of the family, so just living with family members does not provide the right type of social interaction to assure cognitive benefits.

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lonely, view it as an opportunity for introspection and a time to experience new things when we couldn't before or perhaps took it for granted.

When the COVID-19 dust settles and we return to our normal lives, it is important to keep up with connections we've made and to remain socially engaged—whether it is joining a bridge club, volunteering in community groups, or traveling to meet new people and try new experiences. Humans are social creatures and it is inherent to our cognitive and mental health to connect with one another, now and later, to enrich our lives and help us get through the tough times.

Contact your healthcare provider or a mental health worker if you or someone you know needs support or someone to connect with.

*In a 2017 [meta-analysis](#) co-authored by Julianne Holt-Lunstad, PhD, a professor of psychology and [neuroscience](#) at Brigham Young University Professor, loneliness was found to be as detrimental to one's health as [smoking 15 cigarettes](#) a day, and twice as harmful to physical and mental health as [obesity](#). Social isolation can increase mortality by 29 percent.

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