Is being disconnected a disease?

Chronic loneliness isn't 'just a bad feeling' you have; it's a serious health concern

Matt Alderton Special to USA TODAY NETWORK

When his beloved wife of 75 years, Mary Jane, died in December 2025, it was like "losing a right arm," says 96-year-old John Malmquist of Costa Mesa, Calif.

"I miss her every day," says Malmquist, who enjoys the daytime company of professional caregivers, as well as two grown children and a couple of grandkids who live nearby. At night, however, the absence of another human heartbeat is immense and inescapable.

The lonely nights are made bearable by the promise of impending camaraderie: Every morning, Malmquist works out with the same group of men at the YMCA of Orange County in Newport Beach, California. They chat and exercise. Sometimes, they visit him at home. And if for some reason he doesn't show up at the Y, they call to make sure he's OK.

"They've been very good friends," Malmquist says. "Without those guys to talk to every day, I'd be lost."

It's what the Y has always been about, says YMCA of Orange County Chief Marketing and Communications Officer Anna Romiti. "Whether it's dedicating 30 minutes to a workout or taking your child to a swim lesson and sitting in the bleachers, everything within our facilities is created with community in mind," she says.

Not everyone is so lucky to have that sense of community, laments Lucy Rose, founder of The Cost of Loneliness Project, whose mission is preventing the physical, emotional and economic consequences of loneliness. She established the organization in 2017 after her own struggles feeling lonely.

"There was a period when I was on the road six days a week for almost two decades ... And what I learned is, you cannot build deep friendships from a hotel room," says Rose, who for nearly 30 years has had a career in pharmaceutical consulting. "My health started to suffer. I was tired in ways sleep couldn't fix. And for a long time, I didn't connect any of it to loneliness."

Then, finally, she did. "I had to be honest with myself," Rose continues. "I was lonely, and it was hurting me."

Loneliness is hurting a lot of people. The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) says one in three U.S. adults reports feeling lonely. Health care company Cigna puts the number even higher. As many as half of Americans feel alone "sometimes" or "always," it says.

However you parse the data, "the scale is staggering," marvels Rose, who says its ubiquity and gravity make loneliness a public health problem. "We need to start treating authentic human connection as clinical infrastructure," she insists. "It belongs in the same conversation as blood pressure, cholesterol and exercise. It is that fundamental to our health."

ISOLATION AS ILLNESS

In 2023, Surgeon General Dr. Vivek Murthy said the United States was experiencing an "epidemic of loneliness."

"Loneliness is far more than just a bad feeling – it harms both individual and societal health," Murthy said in a public health advisory, in which he asserted that the impact of loneliness on mortality is greater than that of physical inactivity and equivalent to that of smoking up to 15 cigarettes a day.

It's "chronic" loneliness that most concerns public health officials. "We all experience moments of loneliness. You move to a new city, you show up somewhere and don't know anyone. That passes," Rose explains. "Chronic loneliness is what happens when the need to be seen or to belong goes unmet for so long that it starts taking a toll on you — emotionally, physically and in the ways you cope."

People can experience chronic loneliness even when they're surrounded by others, notes Ruth Rathblott, author of "Unhide & Seek," in which she explores how hiding parts of oneself can cause and exacerbate loneliness. "Loneliness isn't about how many people you're around, or whether you have people in your life," she says. "It's about whether anyone actually knows you, whether you feel seen and whether you feel as if you matter."

What makes loneliness so perilous is the body's physiological response to it, suggests cardiologist Alan Rozanski, professor of medicine at the Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai and director of nuclear cardiology at Mount Sinai Morningside, both in New York. "People who are lonely and feel it on a chronic level have a higher degree of inflammation, are more likely to have insulin resistance and have a greater likelihood for heart disease," he says.

Because living, hunting and sheltering in groups was more advantageous for ancient humans, the brain perceives loneliness as a threat to survival, explains Rozanski, who says the resulting stress response increases inflammation and cortisol, a stress hormone that impacts weight, blood pressure, sleep, cognition, bone density, muscle mass and immune function, among other things.

People who are chronically lonely also struggle to find meaning and purpose, which makes them vulnerable to mental health conditions like depression and anxiety, Rozanski says.

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And then there are behavioral risks like smoking, substance use, overeating and inactivity, all of which can be health-harming coping mechanisms for chronically lonely people.

Alone or in combination, the physical, mental and behavioral consequences of loneliness can increase the risk of not only heart disease, but also stroke, diabetes, dementia and, ultimately, early death. In fact, the World Health Organization estimates that loneliness contributes to more than 871,000 deaths per year worldwide.

"The costs are real, and they pile up at every level," says Rose, who also notes impacts on health care systems and businesses. Social isolation among older adults in particular accounts for roughly $6.7 billion in excess Medicare spending every year, she reports, while loneliness in the workforce is estimated to cost about $460 billion per year in lost productivity, absenteeism and premature death.

CREATING COMMUNITY

If there's a bright side to the loneliness epidemic, it's the large number of Americans building communities to help solve it. Among them is social entrepreneur Spud Marshall, who in 2013 co-founded Co.Space, an "intentional living community" for college students and young professionals in State College, Pennsylvania. Residents in the 21-person house partake regularly in "family" dinners, facilitated events, collaborative passion projects and outdoor camping retreats.

The house has "helped retain creative young talent in the area, sparked business partnerships and romantic relationships, and, most importantly, given people a place where they feel like they belong," explains Marshall who says everyone at Co.Space moves there for the same fundamental reason. "People don't want to go through life alone. ... They want to do life together."

Just 100 miles away, in the small town of Boiling Springs, Pennsylvania, Rachel Andreoli is building a different kind of community. Called the South Middleton Collective, it started in 2025 as a Facebook Group dedicated to connecting neighbors. Now, more than 400 members – all of whom live in Boiling Springs – meet regularly for all sorts of gatherings, from trivia nights and ice cream socials to walking groups and book clubs.

"People are meeting new neighbors, running into each other at the grocery store and post office, and reconnecting with people they used to know," says Andreoli, who started the group to prove that, despite the ubiquity of technology and partisan politics, people still "want to leave their houses and put down their phones and be humans together."

"It is the most beautiful testament to our desire for connection."

Men are particularly hungry for connection, suggests Jonathan Jacobs, who recently launched the Los Angeles chapter of "Men Walking, Men Talking."

"We're getting together every two weeks for coffee, conversation and our steps. It's a low-stakes way to meet some new people and build meaningful relationships," explains Jacobs, who says typical social outlets for men – team sports, for example – are centered around competition instead of community. "Without the distraction of a sport or challenge, we just get to talk about our lives." The group sourced its first attendees via Reddit in fall 2025, and more than 100 men have shown up for walks since.

There are organizations trying to solve loneliness at scale, too. SocialRx, for example, works with health plans and health systems to issue social prescriptions. The idea is simple: Doctors who screen for chronic loneliness can issue prescriptions connecting patients with nonclinical, community-based activities with therapeutic benefits, such as taking a dance class, joining a community garden or participating at an open mic night.

"Just like you place an order to the pharmacy, we have a national network of community partners providing community-based activities where social connection happens," explains SocialRx founder and CEO Chris Appleton, who says people tend to trust lifestyle advice more when it comes from doctors. "There's just something about the power of the prescription pad. ... It gets people out of the house, off their phones and engaged with others."

CATALYZING CONNECTION

Although a large social network can be advantageous, quality trumps quantity, Rose suggests. "What heals loneliness is authentic, meaningful human connection," she says. "It's reciprocal. It involves being seen and seeing someone else in return. It requires some willingness to be vulnerable. And it engages us physically — touch, eye contact, hearing warmth in someone's voice. Technology can support communication; it can't replace the biological experience of being present with another person."

You can't force "authentic, meaningful" relationships, but you can facilitate them by curating circumstances that catalyze connection – for example, shared activities like book clubs, wine and paint nights, choirs, cooking classes and volunteer groups.

"Structured social interactions can be extremely helpful, especially things that involve creativity, like art or music," says social psychologist Michelle Quist Ryder, CEO of the American Psychological Foundation. "When you're appreciating something together or creating something together, it gives you a shared experience without the stress of staring at each other and trying to come up with conversation."

Even simpler is spending more time in "third spaces" – shared spaces that are neither home nor work, like parks, farmers markets, food halls, coffee shops, churches, gyms and libraries.

"These are spaces where low-pressure, everyday human contact happens naturally," explains Rose, who says even small attempts at connection can make big impacts. "This is one of the most solvable public health challenges we face, because connection is free. It starts with each of us. You can reach out to someone today. You can show up. You can sit with someone and just listen. Those small acts of presence have real, measurable effects on the person receiving them and on the person offering them. We are wired for connection. We feel it in our souls. When we honor that, good things happen."