

Virtual connections shown to combat loneliness

June 11 2020



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Positive virtual contact with neighbors is a key antidote to feeling lonely, according to new research.

Researchers from The Australian National University (ANU) say that even just one meaningful interaction, virtual or face-to-face, can have lasting [mental health benefits](#).

"Data has shown us that loneliness is a killer—it can be as harmful as heavy smoking for our health," said Dr. Tegan Cruwys, from ANU Research School of Psychology.

"This new research shows how community connections are a vital way to help combat loneliness," she said. "We found participants' mental health was improved from attending just one neighborhood event, and the benefit was still felt even six months later."

Last month, online searches for "how to stop feeling lonely" increased by 100 percent, according to Google Trends.

Amid a global pandemic, the researchers analyzed community connections made during Relationships Australia's Neighbor Day Campaign in both 2019 and 2020.

Looking at 344 different neighborhood activities across suburbs in every state of Australia during 2019, they found that people who felt part of their neighborhood after attending the event felt less lonely and had better wellbeing.

Early data from 2020, which takes in the experiences of almost 300 respondents, showed a significant increase in loneliness between early March and early April.

"In the context of stay-at-home regulations, we are seeing not only an increase in physical isolation but also in people's sense of subjective isolation from one another. This is a known risk factor for health," Dr. Cruwys said.

She noted, "A large part of the answer to [loneliness](#) lies in feeling connected to a community. It is meaningful to feel like you are part of a community that values you. It doesn't have to be neighbors—it can be belonging to your family or your workplace. What is most important is that people feel a sense of belonging."

Dr. Cruwys' 2019 research published in *BMC Geriatrics* found that connecting to the community was four times more important for mental health outcomes for retirees than the state of their finances.

"Social connectedness is on average four times stronger than [financial security](#) in predicting good health for older people," she said.

"While a lot of effort goes into preparing retirees to manage their financial future, most people often don't receive any support in managing their social future."

More information: Tegan Cruwys et al. Friendships that money can buy: financial security protects health in retirement by enabling social connectedness, *BMC Geriatrics* (2019). [DOI: 10.1186/s12877-019-1281-1](#)

Provided by Australian National University

Citation: Virtual connections shown to combat loneliness (2020, June 11) retrieved 24 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2020-06-virtual-shown-combat-loneliness.html>

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