

Loneliness continues to rise for Americans under lockdown

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Loneliness, particularly among folks under shelter-in-place orders, is a

growing issue for Americans during the coronavirus pandemic, new research finds.

More people report they are feeling lonely, depressed and even harboring thoughts of suicide as COVID-19 cases in the United States soar. And those who are chafing under lockdown or other stay-at-home restrictions appear to be at the greatest risk, according to a research letter published in the December issue of the journal *Psychiatry Research*.

"Our society is becoming lonelier the longer the pandemic continues, which will likely lead to increased [mental health issues](#) in the near future," said the letter's author, William Killgore, director of the Social, Cognitive and Affective Neuroscience Lab at the University of Arizona in Tucson.

Between April and September 2020, his team conducted an online survey of about 6,200 U.S. adults. Roughly 1,000 participants answered questions about loneliness and their lockdown status each month.

By September, close to 65% of those who were locked down to reduce the spread of COVID-19 reported high levels of loneliness versus 48% of those who were living without such restrictions, the survey showed.

Higher levels of loneliness were associated with greater risk for depression and suicidal thoughts, the authors noted.

"We have to find a way to balance our ability to protect ourselves and others against the spread of the novel coronavirus, while also finding ways to maintain healthy emotional and [social connections](#) with others," Killgore said.

The findings held up regardless of respondents' age, gender and whether they had recently lost a job due to the pandemic, according to the report.

It's possible that factors other than stay-at-home orders, such as fear of the virus due to high local infection rates, may predispose a person to feeling lonely, the authors added.

The survey is ongoing.

"We continue to collect about 1,000 participants each month to monitor the ongoing psychological reaction to the pandemic," Killgore said.

Even before the pandemic, loneliness was a significant public health concern, he said.

"Loneliness has been associated with higher levels of anxiety, depression, perceived stress and suicide, as well as risk of heart disease, stroke, more frequent hospital visits and greater mortality from any cause," Killgore said. "Some have suggested that high loneliness may be riskier to long-term physical health than obesity."

Although vaccination for COVID-19 is under way, social distancing and face coverings will remain important for months to come. Now is not the time to start taking risks, Killgore stressed.

"For many people, prolonged stay-at-home restrictions may be leading to a form of social starvation and could lead them to engage in potentially risky decisions to be closer to others than they should be during the [holiday season](#)," he said.

Patrick Raue, a professor of psychology at the University of Washington School of Medicine in Seattle, said the new findings add to what is already known about the mental health impact of public health precautions such as social distancing and lockdowns.

"As isolation gets prolonged, people could be at an even greater risk,

which is why the health care system should be prepared to meet these needs," he said.

While most of his own research focuses on senior citizens who are lonely, Raue said many of the same strategies can apply to all age groups. Feeling more connected starts with brainstorming things you might do to feel closer to others, he noted.

"You are creating a bank of activities you can draw from, especially during those times when you might not feel so inspired," Raue said.

Killgore offered some specific suggestions, urging people to begin by spending more time outside in sunlit areas and exercising.

"Even light stretching and walking was correlated with lower loneliness," he said.

Try to get adequate sleep, maintain a daily routine and eat a [balanced diet](#), which will also help, Killgore said.

"Finding humor and something to do that gives you purpose and meaning each day, whether that is work, hobbies or activities that you are passionate about, is significantly correlated with lower [loneliness](#), so focusing on these seems to have real benefits," he added.

Killgore and Raue said it's important to find ways to connect with others.

"There are many forums [online] for various interests and hobbies, and even apps for playing games and having parties on line," Killgore said.

If you don't know how to yet, learn to Zoom, Raue recommended.

"Get help with setting this up. It's easier than you think, and it's a

wonderful way to join activities with others," he said. Another idea: Look for virtual activities such as museum tours.

If forging a virtual connection seems too daunting, there's always the telephone and snail mail.

"If there ever was a holiday season when we needed to send Christmas and holiday cards, it is this one," Killgore said.

More information: The [U.S. National Institute on Aging](#) offers tips on getting and staying connected during and after the pandemic.

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