

U.S. surgeon general announces national plan to fight 'loneliness epidemic'

May 2 2023, by Cara Murez



U.S. Surgeon General [Dr. Vivek Murthy](#) has declared war on what he

calls a "loneliness epidemic" in the United States.

Murthy [announced](#) a "National Strategy to Advance Social Connection" to address this "epidemic of loneliness and isolation."

"In recent years, about one-in-two adults in America reported experiencing loneliness," Murthy said in an [advisory](#) released Monday about the strategy. "And that was before the COVID-19 pandemic cut off so many of us from friends, loved ones and support systems."

Social connection can make communities more resilient, he noted.

"Loneliness I think of as a great masquerader. It can look like different things," Murthy told *CNN* on Monday. "Some people, they become withdrawn. Others become irritable and angry. ... I think the time you get concerned is when you start experiencing a feeling of loneliness for prolonged periods of time. If you feel lonely, you pick up the phone and call a friend, and then it goes away, or you get in the car and go see a family member, that's OK. That's loneliness acting like hunger or thirst, a signal our body sends us when we need something for survival. It's when it persists that it becomes harmful."

The national strategy is part of the Biden administration's mental health efforts, said White House press secretary [Karine Jean-Pierre](#), according to *CNN*.

The Surgeon General's framework for [social connectedness](#) has six pillars that together rely on efforts by public policymakers, communities, [tech companies](#), [public health officials](#), health care systems and researchers.

It would strengthen [social infrastructure](#) in communities. The first pillar would rely on increasing connections through volunteer organizations or

[religious groups](#), while also focusing on libraries and green spaces, public transit and education.

"Investing in local communities and in social infrastructure will fall short if access to benefits is limited only to some groups," the advisory noted. "Equitable access to social infrastructure for all groups, including those most at-risk for social disconnection, is foundational to building a connected national and global community."

The framework would also urge governments and institutions to create more "pro-connection public policies" and reduce connection disparities.

Its third pillar would educate [health care providers](#) about the physical and mental benefits of [social connection](#). This would include tracking disconnection and providing local solutions.

Reforming digital environments is another goal.

"Technology can also distract us and occupy our mental bandwidth, make us feel worse about ourselves and our relationships, and diminish our ability to connect with others. Some technology fans the flames of marginalization and discrimination, bullying and other forms of severe social negativity," according to the advisory.

A research agenda that addresses data gaps is another critical piece.

"Consistent measurement will be critical to better understanding the driving forces of connection and disconnection, and how we can be more effective and efficient in addressing these states," the advisory said.

The last important step is building a culture of connection in which Americans "cultivate values of kindness, respect, service and commitment to one another."

The advisory also offers suggestions for how specific groups can do this work, with parents and caregivers having an important role in helping their children build connections while modeling screen-free socializing and constructive conflict resolution.

Individuals can also take time to connect with others, cut back on harmful social media use or other disconnecting habits and be open with health care providers, including in times of crisis.

Loneliness and isolation can impact sleep, inflammation and the immune system in younger adults, while being linked to pain, depression and shorter lifespans in seniors. Loneliness may have connections to numerous health conditions, including [heart disease](#), stroke, diabetes, addiction, suicidality and dementia, Murthy said.

"Given the profound consequences of [loneliness](#) and isolation, we have an opportunity, and an obligation, to make the same investments in addressing social connection that we have made in addressing tobacco use, obesity and the addiction crisis," Murthy added.

More information: The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has more on the impact of [loneliness and social isolation](#).

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