

How can men and boys combat social isolation? Experts provide tips

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With loneliness and social isolation becoming a crisis in America, particularly among boys and men, more is being done to address the problems as they become more acute.

Experts say the epidemic harms men in significant ways, thanks to not only technological forces, but masculine norms that encourage individualism and stoicism rather than deep friendship with other men.

U.S. Surgeon General Dr. Vivek Murthy, in early May at the start of Mental Health Awareness Month, called the widespread lack of social connection an "epidemic of loneliness and isolation" that poses health risks as deadly as smoking up to 15 cigarettes daily. Murthy outlined in an advisory a plan, the "National Strategy to Advance Social Connection," to help combat the problem.

Men often have fewer friends than women with 15 percent saying they have no close friends. Experts provide recommendations on what boys and men can do to combat [social isolation](#).

Engage in a group or team activity

Men tend to have side-by-side relationships with each other, Joe Grasso, a licensed clinical psychologist who earned his Ph.D. from UT-Austin and specializes in masculinity and men's issues, told The Dallas Morning News.

Participating in a group activity like sports or gaming can help facilitate connection and team building.

"Men are more likely to build friendships around shared activities, whether that's [fantasy football](#) or playing in a rec league or just getting together to watch a game," Grasso said. "Those are all 'socially-approved' ways for men to hang out together and connect."

Be positive

Niobe Way, a professor of applied psychology at NYU and author of 2011's *Deep Secrets: Boys' Friendship and the Crisis of Connection*, said group opportunities prove especially helpful if the environment surrounding an activity, like sports, is positive.

"You need a good coach to really turn sports into something that you can build lasting friendships on," Way told The News. "A coach that sort of nurtures that."

Be intentional

Way has found that boys do desire deep friendship connections with each other, but [cultural norms](#) often prevent them from pursuing more emotional intimacy with their pals.

"When they're being honest and they feel safe enough to be honest, they'll say 'Of course I want that,'" Way said. "And they have a hard time finding other men in part because they don't believe that other men want that."

Overcoming that hurdle is most of the work, Way said.

"It really is as simple as reaching out to others and asking them to do something with you," she said.

Participate in conversation

Grasso said men tend to distance themselves from relationships that are too hard to maintain, which makes friendship difficult.

He added that they often suffer from a lack of vocabulary about what they're feeling.

Way said men could be more active in their social interactions to achieve deeper friendships.

"Ask questions about what they are saying rather than just waiting to share your own story," she said. "We don't ask enough follow-up questions of each other and thus we often don't feel listened to. Men are particularly bad at asking follow-up questions. ... Follow-up questions allow us to understand someone else's experience more and allows us to feel more connected."

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