Spotlight on the Problem

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OUTLINE

- Define the problem
- How big is the problem?
- How serious is the problem?
- Risk Factors
- Potential solutions
Loneliness and Social Isolation are not the same thing

**Social Isolation:** Is objectively being alone, having few relationships, or infrequent social contact.

**Loneliness:** Is subjectively feeling alone/ The discrepancy between one’s desired level of connection and one’s actual level.
What exactly is the problem?

- Is it the perception of loneliness?
- Lacking social contact, interaction, or perceived support?
- Lacking a close intimate partner or someone in the home to rely on in times of need?
- Being in a strained relationship or lacking supportive relationships?
Measurement in Research

- **Structural**
  - The existence and interconnections among differing social ties and roles
  - Examples: Size of social network (Social isolation/integration), marital status, living alone

- **Functional**
  - Functions provided or perceived to be available by social relationships
  - Examples: Received support, Perceived support, Perceived Loneliness

- **Quality**
  - The positive and negative qualities of relationships
  - Examples: relationship satisfaction, conflict, ambivalence
Each of the measurement approaches has been significantly associated with health outcomes.

Each may influence health in different ways.
Social Connection

**Structural:**
The connection to others via the existence of relationships and their roles

**Functional:**
A sense of connection that results from actual or perceived support or inclusion

**Quality:**
The sense of connection to others that is based on positive and negative qualities

Risk Continuum
High Social Connection is associated with protection

Low Social Connection is associated with risk
(e.g., living alone, social isolation, loneliness, poor quality relationships)
The Problem
Low Social Connection
(social disconnection)
US Census Data

- more than a quarter of the US population (27%) lives alone
- over half the U.S. adult population is unmarried
- 1 in 5 have never married
- The divorce rate in the US around 40% of first marriages
CIGNA 2018 U.S. LONELINESS INDEX

In partnership with Ipsos, Cigna fielded a national online survey of 20,000 U.S. adults to explore the impact of loneliness in the U.S. The survey revealed that most Americans are considered lonely, as measured by a score of 43 or higher on the UCLA Loneliness Scale, a 20-item questionnaire developed to assess subjective feelings of loneliness as well as social isolation.

THE STATE OF LONELINESS IN AMERICA

1:2 NEARLY HALF of Americans report sometimes or always feeling alone (46%) or left out (47%).

1:4 ONE IN FOUR Americans (27%) rarely or never feel as though there are people who really understand them.

2:5 TWO IN FIVE Americans sometimes or always feel that their relationships are not meaningful (43%) and that they are isolated from others (43%).

ONE IN FIVE people report they rarely or never feel close to people (20%) or feel like there are people they can talk to (18%).

ONLY AROUND HALF OF AMERICANS (53%) have meaningful in-person social interactions, such as having an extended conversation with a friend or spending quality time with family, on a daily basis.

Americans who live with others are less likely to be lonely (average loneliness score of 43.5) compared to those who live alone (46.4). However, this does not apply to single parents/guardians (average loneliness score of 48.2) - even though they live with children, they are more likely to be lonely.

GENERATION Z IS THE LONELIEST GENERATION AND CLAIMS TO BE IN WORSE HEALTH THAN OLDER GENERATIONS.
- Gen Z (adults ages 18-22) has the highest loneliness score (48.3), and the Greatest Generation (adults ages 72+) are the least lonely (38.6).
- The Greatest Generation is most likely to say their physical health is good, very good or excellent (77%). Gen Zers are least likely to say their physical health is good, very good or excellent (65%).
SOCIAL ISOLATION is associated with $6.7 Billion in additional Medicare spending each year.

Source: Medicare Spends More on Socially Isolated Older Adults
#socialisolation
EPIDEMIOLOGICAL DATA

Established magnitude of the problem
Social Connection → 50% reduction in risk for early mortality

Adjusting for age & initial health status
Objective vs. Subjective Isolation?

- Increased likelihood of death was
  - 26% for loneliness,
  - 29% for social isolation
  - 32% for living alone

- Consistent across gender, initial health status, cause of death, and country of origin

Social Connections have a Profound Effect on Risk for Mortality (Holt-Lunstad, Robles, & Sbarra, 2017)

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Effect on Health & Well-Being

- 29% increased risk for heart disease and 32% increased risk for stroke (Valtorta, 2016)

- 64% increases risk of developing Alzheimer's disease (Holwerda et al, 2012).

- Wounds heal slower (Gouin & Kiecolt-Glaser, 2013)

- Greater perceived stress and depression (Cacioppo et al, 2010)

- Poorer Sleep (Hawkley et al, 2010)
## Potential Risk Factors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Factors</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Living alone, being unmarried, no participation in social groups, fewer friends, strained relationships.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Poor health and Well-being</td>
<td>Mobility impairments, Cognitive impairments, Poor mental health</td>
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<td>Life Transitions, Role Loss or Change</td>
<td>Leaving the workforce, Loss of partner, family, or friends</td>
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<td>Societal Barriers</td>
<td>Prejudice/discrimination, Lack of opportunities to engage and contribute</td>
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<td>Lack of Access &amp; Inequality</td>
<td>Poverty, Marginalized Groups</td>
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<td>Communication Barriers</td>
<td>Untreated hearing loss, Language barriers</td>
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Because there is no single cause social disconnection, no one approach will work for everyone.
What works and what doesn’t?

The literature on effectiveness of interventions is mixed.
Mismatch may be damaging

Received support may not always be helpful, if it isn’t responsive to what is needed/desired.
General Approaches to Reduce Risk

- Supporting and Maintaining Existing Relationships
- Building New Relationships
- Psychological Approaches to change thinking about relationships
Thank you

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