Fighting the Loneliness Epidemic

By Manfred F. R. Kets de Vries , INSEAD

How individuals and firms can take action when loneliness becomes a preoccupying concern.

"We are all so much together, but we are all dying of loneliness." - Albert Schweitzer

Loneliness is the most central and inevitable challenge of all human experience. We are born alone and will die alone. Many of us experience loneliness no matter how many people we are with, and no matter how close we are to them.

Changes in contemporary society have made it ever more difficult for us to build meaningful relationships. We increasingly work from home. Fewer of us are **members of professional associations**. In many countries, unemployment is on the rise. Most problematic, organisations where paranoia prevails are **becoming the norm**.

In our personal lives, more people than ever before live alone, either because they have chosen to delay marriage, have divorced or have altogether given up on forming a stable partnership. Even people in a relationship often suffer from a lack of intimacy. Nothing can be lonelier than

being in a couple with an emotionally distant person.

Furthermore, communities are no longer what they used to be. In big cities, it has become easier to ignore the others around us. As we order food and all sorts of goods online, there's not even a need to talk to a cashier. Recent years have seen the rise of self-service checkout lines.

In addition, intergenerational solidarity is declining. Extended family is a disappearing concept. Social institutions like churches and neighbourhood clubs have frayed. Some futurists suggest that we have entered an age of dystopia, living as we do in a world that's dominated by technology, which contributes to feelings of **disconnection and alienation**.

All too often, we turn smart phones, tablets and computers into pseudo-defence systems to help us cope with our loneliness. These devices have become the ideal crutches to lean on, especially when we feel anxious. Constantly looking at our phone and multiplying attention-seeking social media postings show our desire to be needed by others.

The heavy costs of loneliness

Feeling connected to others in a meaningful way – not through screens – can be considered a fundamental human need. It is crucial to both our wellbeing and survival. Unfortunately, such connection has become increasingly hard to find. For example, in the United States, between 25 and 45 percent of adults report being chronically lonely. And although people of any age can be socially isolated, the risk of losing contact with friends, family and community members becomes much greater as we age. According to estimates, social isolation in Americans aged 65 or older results in nearly **US$7 billion** in additional health care costs per year, a figure that is only anticipated to increase.

Indeed, loneliness can wreak havoc on our health. The adverse health consequences of loneliness at every stage of life include depression, insomnia and an increased risk of dementia. In addition, people who are lonely are less likely to go to doctor's appointments, take their medicine, exercise and eat a healthy diet. Most worrisome of all, social isolation and loneliness increase the odds of a premature death **by 26 percent**.

Loneliness can accelerate during life transitions such as the death of a loved one, a divorce or a move to a new place. However, chronic loneliness is most

likely to set in when individuals don't have the emotional, mental or financial resources to satisfy their social needs or lack a social circle that can provide these benefits. It is in these situations that many of the negative health consequences of loneliness become more noticeable.

Dealing with loneliness

When loneliness becomes a preoccupying concern, it is high time to take action. The first step is to recognise the problem. Too many people see loneliness as a shameful affliction and prefer to avoid thinking about it, let alone do something about it.

So what can we do about loneliness? While there is no one-size-fits-all intervention, here are a few suggestions, depending on the root cause.

Improving communication skills

Loneliness does not necessarily come from a lack of people around us. Sometimes it arises from being unable to communicate to others the things that are important to us. Organisations can promote communication skills by sponsoring related training.

Participating in social events

Many websites and organisations, such as Meetup.com, InterNations or local community centres, offer activities specifically designed to improve our social skills and increase opportunities for social interaction. At work, organisations can offer funding and incentives for employees to form social committees or join networking associations.

Connecting through kindness

Engaging in random acts of kindness or participating in altruistic activities such as in-person volunteering can help create a sense of connection. Companies can give their staff paid time-off to do volunteering as part of their CSR programmes.

Trying a form of co-living

A very effective step to decrease loneliness is the creation of living communities where the inhabitants share dining, laundry and recreational spaces. Such a structure makes it easy to form clubs, organise child and

elder care and even celebrate events. Along the same line, firms can partner with relevant organisations to promote carpooling.

Finding purpose

Having a purposeful life can be a great antidote to loneliness. At work, if employees feel engaged in the company's mission, they may feel more connected to their colleagues. In another **Knowledge article**, I have described the characteristics of organisations that promote trust and wellbeing.

Seeking psychotherapy

Psychotherapists can help people recognise and deal with their negative thoughts about how they perceive themselves and think others perceive them. They can also unravel the childhood dynamics at the origin of chronic loneliness. Psychological counselling should ideally be part of employees' benefits.

Getting a pet

If all else fails, adopting a "comfort animal" (such as a dog or cat) can be the answer.

The value of solitude

While recognising that loneliness can be a serious health hazard, we shouldn't underestimate the value of solitude. If we can find ways to enjoy our own company, we are less likely to feel lonely. As many philosophers and psychologists have pointed out, personal growth and development often derive from time spent alone. Solitude gives us an opportunity to discover who we really are.

Past the yoke of loneliness, solitude is even necessary for us to thrive. As the poet May Sarton has said, "Loneliness is the poverty of the self; solitude is the richness of the self."

Find article at

https://knowledge.insead.edu/leadership-organisations/fighting-loneliness-epidemic

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