

Loneliness: A Threat to Mental Health and Building Healthy Academic Communities

Humans are built for social connectedness. Therefore, it is no surprise that Mark Zuckerberg created Facebook with the intent of improving such connections on college campuses. This social networking site took off like wildfire and is now a platform with over 2.09 billion active daily users. It inspired a whole industry of social media platforms, including Instagram and TikTok. Expedited by COVID-19 restrictions, the ability to connect online transferred to other spaces, such as work and education. Roughly a third of Americans now work from home all the time (Parker, 2023), while 53.3% of students are enrolled in online courses (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2023). Our ability to connect in the digital space is convenient, making access to friends, work, and education easier than ever, especially with our busy lifestyles. Despite the vast array of digital connections available, feelings of loneliness are at all-time highs.

According to the Office of the Surgeon General (2023), loneliness has reached epidemic proportions, making it paramount to address loneliness as a major public health concern. Any person can experience loneliness, but it seems the issue is disproportionately impacting young adults. Shin et al. (2023) investigated the prevalence of loneliness in college students using data from the National College Health Assessment. Outcomes demonstrated that over 50% of undergraduate students are lonely, and while this peaked amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, rates have not decreased to pre-pandemic levels. Loneliness, beyond its strong association with depression and anxiety, has detrimental impacts on our physical health. The advisory on loneliness released by the Office of the Surgeon General (2023) expressed that loneliness can increase the risk of premature death by as much as smoking 15 cigarettes a day, and that loneliness is associated with an increased risk of heart disease, stroke, and dementia. Moreover, loneliness shrinks our social circles, limiting our exposure to diverse people and ideas, ultimately breeding societal polarization and ideological divisions.

Urgent action is needed to improve this serious situation in our academic communities. We must begin with enhancing social connections at the individual and institutional level. The Surgeon General (2023) recommends using their Six Pillars to Advance Social Connection as a guide. The Six Pillars posit: (1) strengthening social infrastructure in local communities; (2) enacting pro-connection public policies; (3) mobilizing the health sector; (4) reforming digital environments; (5) deepening our knowledge on loneliness via research; and (6) building a culture of connection. Our healthy academic communities can institute strategic planning for connectedness and social skills with benchmark tracking, structuring social connection in academic curricula, using socially based education techniques, and continuing to create supportive environments.

With loneliness being strongly associated with depression, which is a potent predictor of suicide, we must make tackling this issue a high priority in our academic institutions. It is disheartening to know that people across our country feel alone, out of place, and lacking in companionship and support, but we have the necessary tools available to address this issue. As you move through your week, make a commitment to take time to connect with your students, coworkers, friends, and family. Promote seeking a *third space* to engage socially with others; this could be at a gym, yoga studio, book club, church, café – basically any space outside of the work and home where you connect with people over similar interests and hobbies. Remember, YOU matter, connection matters, and BHAC is here to provide you with awesome support and connection.



Fond regards,
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