

From loneliness

Plain language summary

to social connection

Charting a path to healthier societies

Report of the WHO Commission
on Social Connection



World Health
Organization



WHO Commission
on Social Connection



Health, according to the World Health Organization (WHO), is a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being and not just the absence of disease or infirmity.

This report of the WHO Commission on Social Connection is about social health. Social health is a key part of our overall health but has for too long been ignored. At the heart of social health lies social connection – how we relate to and interact with others – which has a profound impact on our health.

The report has three main goals:

- **Explain what we know** about social connection, isolation, and loneliness – how big the problem is, what causes it, and how it affects us.
- **Identify solutions that work** – like public awareness campaigns, national policies, community programmes, and ways we can build stronger relationships.
- Offer a practical **way forward** with clear steps to help governments tackle social isolation and loneliness and support people around the world to feel more connected.

This report is based on careful research, advice from experts, and real-life stories and examples.



WHY DOES SOCIAL CONNECTION MATTER?

Social health matters just as much as your physical and mental health. All three are linked. Without good social health, it's hard to enjoy good health. Unfortunately, social disconnection is widespread: between 2014 and 2023, 1 in 6 people on this planet felt lonely. Social disconnection increases the risk of death, with loneliness leading to 871,000 deaths each year (2014-2019). Social disconnection can also lead to heart disease, stroke, depression, and anxiety. And social connection is essential to maintaining our health. Beyond health, social disconnection can result in difficulties at school, university or work and fray the fabric of communities and societies.

Humans are social by nature. Throughout history, we've survived and thrived by working together. Our brains are wired to connect with others. Recent science has shown that from the moment we're born and throughout our lifetime, social interaction shapes how our brains grow and our mental health.

The COVID-19 pandemic made our need to connect even clearer. When lockdowns and other restrictions kept people apart, many felt lonely and isolated. At the same time, technology is rapidly and profoundly changing how we connect with each other. How this impacts social connection and mental health have become serious concerns.

In the last decade, science has transformed our understanding of how important social connection is to our health. Now, it's time to turn that knowledge into action.



WHAT IS THE PROBLEM?

What do we mean by social connection, social isolation, and loneliness?

Before we can fix problems like loneliness and isolation, we need to understand what these words really mean. When we have clear definitions, it's easier to measure the problem, understand its causes, and find solutions that work.

What is social connection?

Social connection is about the many ways we relate to and interact with others. It includes family, friends, classmates, coworkers, neighbours—even people we chat with online. Social connection has three main dimensions:

1. **Structure:** This is about how many people you know and how often you talk or spend time with them – in person or online. It includes different types of relationships like with friends, parents, teachers, and coworkers.
2. **Function:** This is about the support – such as practical help, emotional support, and information – you give or receive. Examples include someone you can call if your car breaks down or someone to talk to when you're feeling sad. Even just knowing someone would help can be comforting.
3. **Quality:** This is about how your relationships make you feel. Are they warm and kind? Or negative and stressful? Just having friends is not enough – what matters is how those relationships make you feel.

You can connect with people face-to-face or through digital tools like texting, video calls, or social media. These tools can be helpful, but too much screen time or negative online interactions may be harmful.

What is social disconnection?

Social disconnection occurs when a person doesn't have enough social contact, doesn't feel supported by the relationships they do have, or when their relationships are strained or negative. It can take different forms, but this report focuses on two important types: loneliness and social isolation.

Loneliness is a painful personal feeling. It happens when the relationships you have don't match what you want or need. You can feel lonely even if you're surrounded by people. Maybe you have friends, but don't feel understood or supported.

Everyone feels lonely sometimes—like after a breakup, moving to a new place, or after losing a spouse. This kind of loneliness usually fades away after a while. But if it lasts a long time, it can become a serious problem for your health and well-being.

Social isolation is more about numbers – like having very few relationships or not seeing people often enough. For example, someone who lives alone and rarely talks to others might be socially isolated. A person can be isolated but not feel lonely—some people like being alone. Still, social isolation can harm physical and mental health, especially over time.

Culture and life stage matter

Not everyone experiences social connection, loneliness, or social isolation in the same way. Culture, language, and life stage all shape how people connect with others. Most of the research has been done in North America and Europe, so more global studies are needed to understand how different people around the world experience social connection. Also, what matters to a 15-year-old girl navigating friendships in and out of school may be very different from what matters to a new mother without family support or a 65-year-old man adjusting to retirement.

How big is the problem?

There are many ways to look at how connected or disconnected people feel. Most research focuses on loneliness, and a few studies look at social isolation. Experts do not always agree whether things are getting worse or better. But one thing is clear: a lot of people around the world are lonely or isolated, and this is bad for their health, educational achievements, and income.

Loneliness

Loneliness is common everywhere, among people of all ages, and it affects males and females about equally. About 1 in 6 people in the world feel lonely (2014–2023). Anyone can experience loneliness, but two groups are more affected:

1. Young people (ages 13–29) feel the loneliest. Globally, around 17–21% say they feel lonely, with levels higher in teenagers. This may be because teenagers want more and stronger social connections during a period of life full of change.
2. People in poorer countries are lonelier. In low-income countries, about 24% of people feel lonely. In richer countries, the number is lower—about 11%. Poverty can limit time and places to meet others, making it harder to build strong relationships.

Social isolation

We don't know as much about social isolation, but the numbers we do have are concerning. Up to 1 in 3 older adults are isolated (1990-2022). Among teenagers, about 1 in 4 say they are socially isolated (2003-2018).

Other groups more likely to be affected

Some other groups are also more likely to feel lonely or isolated. These include people with disabilities, refugees or migrants, LGBTIQ+ individuals, and indigenous groups and ethnic minorities. These groups may face discrimination, unfair treatment, or barriers that make connection harder.

What causes loneliness and social isolation?

Loneliness and social isolation can happen for many reasons, and they can be different from person to person. These causes, or "drivers," can come from your personal life, your relationships, your neighbourhood, or even larger systems like government policies.

Poor health

One big driver is poor health. People who have long-term illness or struggle with mental health issues (like anxiety or depression) often feel lonely. Also, living alone or having no close relationships or family can increase loneliness. But it's not just about being alone – it's also about how your relationships make you feel.

Education and income

Education and income are also important. People with less education or lower income may have fewer chances to meet others or build strong friendships.

Personality

Personality plays a role as well. Some people are more shy or anxious, and that can make starting conversations or joining groups more difficult. People who are more outgoing often feel less lonely.

Neighbourhood and community

Your neighbourhood and community also matter. People who live in safe, welcoming areas where they feel they belong are less likely to feel lonely.

Life transitions

Life transitions – like moving, losing a job, experiencing a breakup – can leave people feeling lonely. For older adults, retirement, health problems, or losing a spouse can increase isolation. For young people, bullying, feeling excluded, or struggling with identity can play a role. Discrimination makes things worse for many people. If you're treated unfairly because of your race, gender, sexuality, disability or because you're an immigrant, it can be harder to feel accepted and connected.

Digital technology

Currently what we know about the impact of digital technology on social connection is mixed. It partly depends on the type of technology, how it is used, why it is used, and who uses it. It can be helpful, especially for people with a disability who might have restricted mobility. But it can also have downsides, especially if it leads to too much screen time or negative online experiences. Experts say we should be careful, especially when it comes to how digital technology affects young people's mental health.

What are the impacts of social connection, social isolation and loneliness?

The impacts of social connection have gone under-recognized for too long. Social connection is essential – not just for living a long and healthy life, but also for doing well in school or at work and for building safe and prosperous communities.

Mortality and physical health

Having strong social connections can help you live longer. People who are socially connected are often healthier. Support from others may, for instance, lower levels of inflammation and reduce the risk of heart disease and stroke.

On the other hand, loneliness and social isolation increase the risk of serious health problems – and even early death. Over 871,000 deaths around the world were linked to loneliness annually (2014-2019). Loneliness and social isolation can lead to problems like heart disease, stroke, high blood pressure, and diabetes. And if you feel disconnected as a teen or young adult, these health risks can carry into adulthood.

Mental health and the brain

Loneliness can lead to depression, anxiety, and even thoughts of self-harm or suicide. People who are lonely are twice as likely to get depressed. At the same time, social connection can protect against depression, thoughts of self-harm or suicide, and mental health conditions more generally.

Social disconnection can also harm the brain. It increases the risk of memory problems, dementia, and Alzheimer's disease in older people. Social connection, however, can protect the brain and make dementia less likely.

Education, work, and economy

Students who are socially connected do better in school than those who feel lonely. In one study, teens who felt lonely were 22% more likely to get lower grades or qualifications. As adults, people who are lonely may struggle more at work and have a harder time finding or keeping a job. They might also earn less money.

On a bigger scale, loneliness affects entire communities and countries. Communities with strong social bonds tend to be safer and bounce back faster from disasters. On a national level, loneliness costs billions in lost productivity and health care.

In short, staying socially connected isn't just good for us individually – it's good for society.



WHAT WORKS TO STRENGTHEN SOCIAL CONNECTION?

Solutions to reduce loneliness and social isolation range from raising awareness and changing policies and systems through to building stronger communities and supporting individuals to develop more satisfying relationships. These are briefly discussed below.

Advocacy, campaigns, networks, and coalitions

Advocacy, public campaigns, networks, and coalitions are increasingly used to promote social connection, especially at the level of whole societies.

Advocacy helps to raise awareness about social disconnection, to encourage governments to act, and gather support and funding. Advocacy is often supported by campaigns and networks that help spread the message and get more people involved.

Campaigns use TV ads, social media, public events, and posters to reach people. Not all campaigns have proven long-term effects, but many have successfully raised awareness and inspired action.

Networks and coalitions help coordinate activities and advocate for effective solutions. A 2024 global survey found over 200 groups that specifically focus on social isolation, loneliness, and/or social connection, but also found that local, national, and global networks remain underdeveloped.

To work, these efforts need clear strategies and leadership, good planning, cultural understanding, and real stories from people with lived experience. When done well, advocacy, campaigns, and networks can help change how society sees social isolation and loneliness and help build stronger, kinder, and more connected communities.

Policies to influence social connection

Policies can be a powerful way to improve social connection. In recent years, eight countries have adopted policies on social connection: Denmark, Finland, Germany, Japan, the Netherlands (Kingdom of the), Sweden, the United Kingdom (England, Scotland and Wales only), and the United States of America. This shows governments are starting to take social connection seriously.

Many recommend a “whole-of-society” approach, where governments work together with all sectors, including, for instance, schools, healthcare systems, housing, transport, communities, and businesses. Common activities recommended by these policies include public awareness campaigns, reducing shame and stigma, funding more research, and involving people with lived experience of loneliness in designing policies. These policies also stress the need for strong scientific evidence and collaboration across sectors.

However, there are challenges. Putting into practice these policies takes money, political support, and teamwork between different parts of government and society. And, since few countries have studied how well their policies work, it’s hard to know what helps most.

More countries should be encouraged to adopt policies that support social connection. They should share what they learn and include voices from people with real-life experience. With better planning, funding, and checking what works, policies can play a big part in building friendlier, more connected, and caring communities all around the world.

Community strategies

Communities are where connection happens. They are where people live, work, learn, play, and age. That’s why community-level strategies are important for helping people feel more connected and less lonely.

One of the best ways to improve social connection is by making community spaces and services – also known as “social infrastructure” – stronger and more welcoming. This includes places like parks, libraries, cafés, public transportation, schools, and healthcare centres. Even if these spaces weren’t originally built to encourage socializing, they often become spots where people naturally meet and form relationships.

To really help people connect, these spaces should feel safe and welcoming to everyone, whether they are young or older, have a disability or health problem, or are new to the area. Good community areas offer something for everyone, whether it’s group activities like sports or community gardening, or quieter spots like walking paths or benches where people can relax and chat. These improvements can boost social connection, but more research is needed to see how well these ideas work, including in poorer countries.

Communities can also help people feel connected through events and group activities. Exercise classes, community choirs, and festivals are great ways to bring people together.

Another approach is social prescribing, where doctors or health workers suggest people participate in community activities instead of giving medical treatment.

Although these and other community strategies are promising, more high-quality research is needed to know what really works. Projects should be tested and evaluated carefully, especially in places like rural areas or low-income communities.

Finally, for these strategies to succeed, it's important to involve community members in planning, design, and maintenance. Public-private partnerships and collaboration across health, education, and social sectors can also support long-term success.

Individual and relationship strategies

There are many ways individuals can strengthen their relationships to avoid loneliness and social isolation. These include:

Skills training

Skills training helps people improve their social and communication skills. It could mean learning how to start conversations, join social activities, or even use the internet to connect with others. The goal is to build confidence, so people feel better about making new friends or reaching out to others.

Social engagement opportunities

These programmes give people real opportunities to connect. Examples include befriending programs where volunteers spend regular time with someone who feels isolated, peer-support groups, or even animal and robot companions. Instead of just giving advice, these programs actively create chances for regular, meaningful interactions.

Therapy and psychological support

Sometimes loneliness comes from negative thinking patterns, low self-esteem, or difficulty managing emotions. Therapies that have been proven to be useful include cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT), which helps change how you think; mindfulness, a form of meditation; and educational sessions about loneliness and managing emotions. These strategies have shown strong results in reducing loneliness and improving mental health.

Digital technology such as online therapy, chatbots, virtual reality, and social media play a growing role in delivering these interventions, especially to those who can't leave home. But more research is essential to identify which ones help and which ones may harm.

Some of these strategies may work best when combined and adapted to specific groups, like young people, older adults, or those with mental health issues.

To maximize their impact, these strategies must continue to be carefully evaluated to identify those that work best and must be easy to access, culturally appropriate, and supported by health, education, and social care systems.

WHAT WORKS TO STRENGTHEN SOCIAL CONNECTION?

To help create a more connected world and reduce loneliness and social isolation, the WHO Commission on Social Connection suggests focusing on five key areas – policy, research, interventions, measurement and data, and engagement. Each area includes three main actions.

To make these strategies succeed, we must listen to those who feel lonely or excluded and bring different groups together. Key partners include health and social care workers, schools, technology, media, government, civil society organizations, WHO and other United Nations (UN) agencies, researchers, businesses, and people of all ages. Everyone has a role to play. When we work together in a united and focused way, we can create real, lasting change and build a more connected and caring world.

Policy – Social connection needs to be taken more seriously

1. Governments should create and support a national policy that encourages social connection and makes sure all levels of government and all parts of society work together.
2. Leaders from governments, the WHO, the UN, schools, universities, and non-profits should come together often to talk, share ideas, and lead the way on making people feel more connected.
3. A shared online platform should be built by WHO and others so that policy makers around the world can share and learn from policies that are helping to improve social connection.

Research – Social connection must be better understood

1. Global and national research capacity should be built up to improve our understanding of the issue and find better solutions.
2. Every five years, experts should decide which research questions are most important and money should be provided to explore them.
3. A *Grand Challenges in Social Connection* initiative should be launched to foster innovation and teamwork across different fields and organizations to tackle the most important problems related to social connection.

Interventions – Cost-effective interventions should be scaled up

1. WHO should create clear, science-based guidance on what works to reduce social isolation and loneliness and promote social connection.
2. An “intervention accelerator” should be launched to test and develop cost-effective interventions that work in rich and poor countries alike.
3. Countries should be supported to put proven interventions into action and scale them up.

Measurement and data – Better global data on the size of the problem and who it affects is needed

1. Governments should collect better data, and more often, to track social connection, social isolation, and loneliness. This data should include different groups, like people of different ages, genders, or abilities.
2. A global “social connection index” should be created to measure how connected people feel in as many countries as possible.
3. A 10-year effort should begin to collect this data on a regular basis from all countries, so we can better understand global patterns and make better decisions locally.

Engagement – To make social connection a priority, all key players need to be engaged

1. Social connection should be made a top priority in politics and policy, and leaders should be brought together to support it.
2. Large public campaigns should be run in countries to raise awareness using one clear global message.
3. A lasting movement should be built by working across sectors and securing ongoing funding.

The Commissioners believe that if these actions are widely put into practice, they can improve lives, help communities, and benefit entire societies. These actions can boost mental and physical health, save lives, support learning and jobs, and lower the costs of social disconnection. By building stronger social connections, we can create a healthier, more productive, and more fulfilling future for everyone.



Harness the #PowerOfConnection

