

Togetherness

Welcome to the First Unitarian “University” of Westchester! Yes, you heard that right, the first part today is pretty thick. I am starting off with two extended quotes from Dr. Vivek Murthy, “Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation: The U.S. Surgeon General’s Advisory on the Healing Effects of Social Connection and Community.” These quotes have a lot of concepts and figures, so pay close attention. It gets easier a little later.

People may lack social connection in a variety of ways, though it is often illustrated in scientific research by measuring loneliness and social isolation. Social isolation and loneliness are related, but they are not the same. Social isolation is objectively having few social relationships, social roles, group memberships, and infrequent social interaction.^{19,21} On the other hand, loneliness is a subjective internal state. It’s the distressing experience that results from perceived isolation or unmet need between an individual’s preferred and actual experience.^{9,10,19}

The lack of social connection poses a significant risk for individual health and longevity. Loneliness and social isolation increase the risk for premature death by 26% and 29% respectively.³⁷ More broadly, lacking social connection can increase the risk for premature death as much as smoking up to 15 cigarettes a day.⁴ In addition, poor or insufficient social connection is associated with increased risk of disease, including a 29% increased risk of heart disease and a 32% increased risk of stroke.³⁸ Furthermore, it is associated with increased risk for anxiety, depression,³⁹ and dementia.^{40,41} Additionally, the lack of social connection may increase susceptibility to viruses and respiratory illness.⁴²

(Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation: The U.S. Surgeon General’s Advisory on the Healing Effects of Social Connection and Community, pg. 8.)

Vivek Murthy, United States Surgeon General for the second time, wants to help us avoid the pain he suffered when he stopped being Surgeon General the first time. I applaud his courageous openness in sharing the circumstances that motivated his interest in loneliness—it helps lessen the needless shame people

often feel because they feel lonely in an isolating society like ours. Here is his report:

“I was suddenly disconnected from the colleagues with whom I had spent most of my waking hours. I had largely neglected my friendships during my [first] tenure [as Surgeon General], convincing myself that I had to focus on work and I couldn’t do both. Even when I was physically with the people I loved, I wasn’t present—I was often checking the news and responding to messages in my inbox. After my job ended, I felt ashamed to reach out to friends I had ignored. I found myself increasingly lonely and isolated . . .” (Vivek H. Murthy, “Surgeon General: We Have Become a Lonely Nation. It’s Time to Fix That.” *New York Times*, 4/30/2023)

Starting in 2018, the United Kingdom established a cabinet level Minister for Loneliness, following a report from a commission that found all of the negative health effects Murthy noted, and that it especially affected the elderly (some of whom may be with us here, today). The report had high-minded suggestions, such as “develop a new national indicator to measure progress on loneliness issues, annual reporting on the problem and calls on local mayors, politicians, business leaders and volunteer groups to engage in the issue. . . the American Psychological Association writes that up to 40 percent of Americans over the age of 45 suffer from chronic loneliness.” (Jason Daley, “The U.K. Now Has a “Minister for Loneliness.” Here’s Why it Matters” *Smithsonian Magazine*)

Although a high degree of loneliness has often been attributed to the aged, the *New York Times* reported that “More than half of Americans are lonely, according to a 2021 poll, which also found that young adults are almost twice as likely to report feeling lonely as those over age 65.” (Christina Caron, “Steps to Address the Loneliness Health Crisis,” *New York Times*,” 5/9/2023, pg. D7)

To sum up where we are now in this thicket of facts, figures, and concepts, loneliness is dangerous to every facet of health and is strongly correlated with social isolation. Loneliness is widespread and common in American society. It is a public health crisis.

But here's the part Dr. Murthy seems not to factor into his thinking—he was set up for this kind of pain. He lives in a society where he does not automatically benefit from the privileges more easily afforded other ethnicities. He's a doctor, so think about the probable course of his career: he went to boarding school or high school in one place but then he probably went someplace else for college, and another place for medical school, and then there may have been further dislocations for residency, internship, jobs, etc. The amount of moving is stunning and not unusual for people who achieve. Given his achievements, he just might be something of a workaholic. Then he is given a highly visible, important position demanding all of his attention, which ends suddenly, and he realizes he has neglected the friends he once had—again. Remember, he said, "I felt ashamed to reach out to friends I had ignored. I found myself increasingly lonely and isolated." He courageously challenged the shame that usually attends such a realization. Lots of regular people also need to move for schooling, jobs, to follow a spouse to another locale, find a lower tax base in retirement, and finally then seek independent, assisted, and nursing home residences which uproots many people who are at their most vulnerable stage of life. These frequent moves, and the long work hours that make them possible, contribute to isolation, which fosters loneliness. We all have our stories of isolation and loneliness too.

Just to cover the big losses, the pandemic so isolated people that anxiety and depression increased hugely. You know that period.

Further, isolation can be weaponized. When I first joined the Foundation for Religion and Mental Health as a counseling center director, I had moved many times. I was looking to settle down, set down roots. I had not anticipated the jealousy and fear directed at me by many—although not all—of the other directors for that agency's dozen centers. Ironically, "Collegiality" was frequently cited as a guiding value for our interactions in tense, competitive, monthly, three-hour directors' meetings. When the agency's president announced at a directors' meeting that I had been given Fellow standing in the American Association of Pastoral Counselors (full therapist accreditation) there was silence until one director said, "Congratulations!" Looking back, I have realized two things. One, as

the youngest director, with excellent credentials, others may have felt threatened. Two, there could be a reason that for fifty years I have pursued an intimate relationship with someone who sees Inclusion as her very reason for being and has been deeply devoted to this community's well-being.

Dr. Murthy's report contains many high-minded, abstract recommendations for advancing social connection at every level of society, such as "Strengthen Social Infrastructure in Local Communities" to "Invest in local institutions that bring people together" and "Build a Culture of Connection" by "cultivating values of kindness, respect, service, and commitment to one another." There must be a hundred suggestions in his advisory, but since none of them are supported by money they stand no chance of implementation.

Nevertheless, this report attempts to change our perspective on loneliness. The effect of these loneliness observations and recommendations is like an eye exam, where an optometrist puts that round machine in front of your eyes and clicks lenses back and forth, while saying, "Is this clearer or this, is this clearer or that?" Murthy's report has changed the optics so that loneliness is no longer just a pain we might have to endure shamefully until something nicer or easier to tolerate comes along. Murthy was brave enough to write about his own loneliness and to help others see it not as a personal deficit but a result of how we live. Loneliness, in his telling, is an important public health problem. Socializing is not any longer just sweet or nice, it is essential to health. Connecting, connecting with feelings, is very important. It is essential for each person to socialize for their own physical and emotional health, and for the health of others. Connecting is not just nice; connecting with others who have concern for each other, and our society's well-being is very crucial.

I will cite a discrete example, gun control. The many mass shootings have cast a pall over sending children to school or going to the mall or the supermarket. A lot of people are now more anxious in going someplace where there will be many people. And very little is being done about gun control, even for the AR-15 style rifles with rapid-fire capabilities. When (according to the New York Times) some mothers take pictures of their schoolchildren every morning,

so they can identify their bodies if the kids are killed at school by the clothes they wore, we are in very big trouble with trust. At least this congregation unanimously passed a gun-control petition ten years ago that reads:

We the undersigned members of the First Unitarian Society of Westchester, are saddened, frightened, and angered by the level of gun violence in our streets, in our public places, in our houses of worship and in our schools. Of late, even small children have become targets of deeply troubled individuals with easy access to weapons capable of mass killings.

This is unacceptable in a civilized society. It must stop. Now.

For the safety of our children, our friends, our neighbors, and our communities, we request immediate action from our elected officials.

This action may include, but should not be limited to, the following:

- ✦ All firearms should be registered with appropriate federal agencies;
- ✦ The sale of assault rifles should be banned;
- ✦ The sale of high-capacity magazines should be outlawed;
- ✦ It should be required that legally owned guns be stored in gun safes; and
- ✦ It should be required that all guns be equipped with trigger locks.

We call upon our elected officials to give protection from gun violence urgent priority until our children and our communities are safe.

We did and are doing something. When Congressional Representative Mike Lawler emailed me about his support for “National Police Week,” I emailed back that we had passed that resolution and, since police respond by running toward danger, if he really appreciates police he would push for gun control. That was a week ago and I have not heard back. The Surgeon General’s report said: “Trust in each other and major institutions is at near historic lows. Polls conducted in 1972 showed that roughly 45% of Americans felt they could reliably trust other Americans; however, that proportion shrank to roughly 30% in 2016.” (Vivek Murthy, pg13) Harel Shapira, a sociologist, took 42 firearms training classes in

various parts of American, and said: "The classes I attended trained students to believe that their lives are in constant danger. They prepared us to shoot without hesitation and avoid legal consequences. They instilled the kind of fear that has a corrosive effect on all interactions—and beyond that, on the fabric of our democracy." (Harel Shapira, "Firearms Classes Taught Me, and America, A Very Dangerous Lesson" The New York Times, 05-16-2023) In order to build trust in America, we will need to demonstrate not only our own trustworthiness but realistically build in the laws for trusting others.

Finally, you are doing something by just showing up here or on Zoom. You are standing against social decay. The steady decline in any congregational affiliation—by 25% of the U.S. population in 20 years--is a source of isolation in this society, because congregations are one of the most open, least restrictive communities for someone who has identified their loneliness. As Ecclesiasticus says, form your close relationships with those who recognize profoundly positive values, because that commonality of beneficial service motivates us to kindness.

When the pandemic wound down, I told my clients that those who can should come in to see me in person—I'm better in person. I can better see the micro-movements that signal anxiety or depression in what someone says. In person, they can hear me more fully and we can see each other in three dimensions, not flattened like TV characters. In person, I can see those here who are happy or concentrating or bored or offended—yes, I see your expressions! — and I can explain myself more fully or shift the tone. But those who show up on Zoom also support the congregation as a whole. Thanks to Matthew and our tech volunteers who complete the circle of relatedness for those who cannot attend in person. We applaud those who—one way or another—participate, so we will continue hybrid services. And when you soldier on and arrive to sit and stand among us, we will shower you with our delight at seeing you. If hugs aren't your thing, just let Sarita know.

This congregation has demonstrated a capacity for togetherness despite a double crisis. Hurricane Ida and Covid tested--but did not defeat you. You pledged 100% last year and our numbers have been stable. When Board

members phoned every member about renting 595 Hartsdale Avenue, the response was overwhelmingly positive—especially if we take down the ceiling tiles. Resilient love is formulated in daisies and sunbeam periods but demonstrated and confirmed when the going gets rough. The going got very rough and you stood by us. You responded by affirming that you belong to each other. Each of you is building community for yourselves, but also for everyone else when you attend, however you attend. You know how to speak from the heart, listen to others from the heart, and respond with words and action. We are the fortunate ones who can risk vulnerability. If we are to keep isolation and loneliness from taking over, we have both an obligation and an opportunity to listen, respond, and tap into a source of love that heals.