



THE EPIDEMIC OF LONELINESS AND PARENTAL STRESS

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Social connection is as essential for the health and well-being of human beings as food, water, and shelter. We have a biological need for supportive relationships, regular social interactions, and a sense of community connectedness and belonging. When we are isolated or feel lonely, our physical and mental health suffers. Connection is so important that loneliness and social isolation greatly increase the risk of premature death. In fact, chronic loneliness can negatively impact a person's health as much as smoking up to 15 cigarettes per day.

The United States is experiencing an [epidemic of loneliness](#) so impactful that the Surgeon General has declared it to be a public health crisis. Recent surveys have found that approximately half of adults in the US report experiencing loneliness. The percentage is even higher for young adults, among whom more than 70% report feeling either sometimes or always lonely. Over the past 20 plus years, time spent socializing in the company of friends has *decreased* by 20 hours per month and time spent alone has *increased* by 24 hours per month. The number of close friendships

has also declined over the past several decades, and during and following the COVID-19 pandemic. Almost half of Americans reported having three or fewer close friends in 2021.

There are several reasons why this might be happening. Technology is one culprit. Americans average more than six hours per day on digital platforms. In comparison to those using digital media for less than 30 minutes per day, people who reported using social media for more than two hours a day were twice as likely to report feeling socially isolated. In many cases, social media is affecting the quality and depth of individual relationships, because time spent on face-to-face interactions is key to learning how to navigate and sustain interpersonal relationships.

Change in values, self-perception, and social norms also has an impact. The collective focus on individualism and self has steadily increased over the past half century. Americans value busyness and getting ahead over relationship building.

A lack of third spaces is likewise a contributing factor. A third space is a public gathering place, distinguished from an individual's home or work. Third spaces are comfortable and relaxing for those who belong. They provide opportunity for people to meet, talk, and build

relationships around common interests and to enjoy spending time with others.

Healthy child outcomes are directly linked to the health and well-being of their parents and caregivers. Recent research has identified the pivotal role that the mental health of parents plays in the well-being of their children. Stress that is severe or prolonged can have a negative effect upon mental well-being, increasing the likelihood of mental health challenges. Over the past decade parents have increasingly reported heightening levels of stress. In 2023 48% of parents indicated that most days their stress is completely overwhelming and 41% of parents reported that most days they are so stressed they cannot function. While the COVID-19 pandemic greatly impacted the number of stressors and thereby contributed to the stress levels of parents, these comparatively higher levels of stress actually preceded the pandemic.

Lack of meaningful social connections and a deficit of social support can all escalate stress. Unfortunately, the ongoing physical and emotional demands of parenting are not well supported by our social structure and cultural norms, resulting in a sense of isolation and leaving parents with the feeling that they are doing it alone. In a 2021 survey, approximately 65% of parents and guardians, and 77% of single parents in particular, experienced loneliness, compared to 55% of non-parents. While some parents can access resources, including the support of a committed co-parent, extended family, and friends who share in the responsibility of raising children, many parents are managing all these challenges largely on their own. And even for those with these supports, many parents still report feeling alone.

The surgeon general envisions creating a culture of connection with intentionally designed opportunities and spaces that foster supportive social connections among and with parents and caregivers as they guide their children across the span of childhood and adolescence. These relationships can counteract some of the negative impacts of stress and promote emotional well-being. Communities need to evaluate and leverage their resources to support parents. One type of community resource that is often not well understood and overlooked are Family Resources Centers.

Family Resource Centers serve as important community hubs providing direct access to programming, services, and resources to families universally, at no or low cost, as well as disseminating information and offering referrals to their extensive networks of community partners. Family Resource Centers provide both structured and informal opportunities for parents to connect, support one another, and deepen their relationships over time. Expanded awareness and access to Family Resource Centers are important tools for combatting the epidemic of loneliness and reducing parental stress. To learn more about FRCs or find one near you, visit FiveforFamilies.org.

The information in this brief is drawn from the following sources:

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U.S. Surgeon General. (2023). *Our Epidemic of Loneliness: The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory on the Healing Effects of Social Connection and Community*. <https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/surgeon-general-social-connection-advisory.pdf>

U.S. Surgeon General. (2024). *Parents Under Pressure: The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory on the Mental Health & Well-Being of Parents*. [hhs.gov/sites/default/files/parents-under-pressure.pdf](https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/parents-under-pressure.pdf)

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