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## Social Isolation and Loneliness

Many people experience moments of isolation and loneliness. Being isolated or lonely can affect how you feel, both mentally and physically. It can cause anxiety, depression, and other types of mental distress.

If you are isolated or lonely, there are things you can do to take care of yourself and stay connected.

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### Understanding social isolation and loneliness

Social isolation and loneliness are related, but they aren't the same thing.

When you are **socially isolated**, you are physically alone or separated from others. You have very little contact or support from other people.

**Loneliness** is a *feeling*. It can happen when you are isolated, but it can also happen when you are surrounded by people. When you are lonely, you might feel like you don't have as many meaningful relationships, friendships, or connections as you would like to

have.

About 1 in 5 people living in the U.S. say they feel lonely often or all of the time.

For people between the ages of 50 and 80, it's 1 in 3.

You can feel lonely even when you have lots of friends and family around you. Many people feel this way. This is especially common if you have, or had, cancer.

## **Isolation, loneliness, and cancer**

People who have, or had, cancer are more likely to experience isolation and loneliness than people without cancer. They are more likely to struggle with anxiety, depression, and thoughts of suicide. Loneliness among cancer survivors is also linked to higher mortality (death) rates.

At any point in your cancer journey, it's normal to feel like you can't relate to other people. This can be very lonely. You might also feel powerless, or like no one understands or sees the "real" you.

You might feel:

- Like people are there for you physically, but not for anything deeper
- Like no one wants to listen or talk about the uncomfortable or messy parts of cancer
- Guilty for sharing negative thoughts when you "should" be thankful to be alive
- Afraid to tell others how afraid you are
- Empty or numb (or you might feel nothing at all)
- Like other people are uncomfortable being around you

Loneliness is common, but many people are afraid to talk about it. You might feel ashamed to share your struggles. You might also worry people will judge you. But talking about loneliness is one of the best ways to manage it. Sharing your story can also make it easier for other people to talk about their own loneliness.

## **Who is most at risk?**

Social isolation and loneliness can happen to anyone. But some groups of people are at greater risk. This includes:

- Any marginalized group
- People and communities who have been underrepresented or under resourced
- People with disabilities

- Living alone

While older adults are among the loneliest age groups, they are less likely than young adults to reach out for support.

## What are the symptoms of loneliness?

Many people are afraid to share that they feel lonely. Some people might not even realize that they're lonely. Here are some signs that you, or someone you know, might be experiencing loneliness:

- Feeling depressed or anxious most of the time
- Aggressive or passive behavior
- Worse sleep than usual
- Problems with memory, thinking, or focus
- Poor hygiene or self-care (like not showering or brushing teeth)

## What if I like being alone?

You might enjoy spending time alone. This is healthy, and it can be healing. But there is a difference between enjoying time alone and self-isolation.

**Self-isolation** is when you distance yourself from other people. Avoiding everyone for long periods of time doesn't usually improve your well-being. Self-isolation is often about escaping, avoiding, or numbing unpleasant thoughts or beliefs.

Unfortunately, self-isolation often makes negative thoughts and beliefs worse. Self-isolating for long periods of time also increases your risk for developing:

- Anxiety
- Depression
- Thoughts of suicide (suicidal ideation)
- Intrusive thoughts (repetitive and often upsetting thoughts that you can't control)
- Substance use disorder

## 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline

988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline provides 24/7, free and confidential support via phone or

chat for people in distress, resources for you or your loved ones, and best practices for professionals. Includes information on finding your local crisis center.

**Phone:** 988

- Interpretation for more than 240 languages
- ASL Videophone for people who are deaf or hard of hearing

**Text:**

**Social connections** are the relationships and interactions we have from day to day.

Just like social isolation can have a negative effect on your health, building social connections and meaningful relationships can have a positive effect. These connections have physical benefits and can even boost your immune system.

This happens in 3 main ways:

### ***Your body***

Social connection can affect your hormones and levels of inflammation.

### ***Your mind***

Social connection improves stress and triggers “feel-good” chemicals in your brain like oxytocin and serotonin. It can also improve your sense of safety, meaning, purpose, and resilience (your ability to cope with difficult things).

### ***Your behaviors***

People with good social connections get more physical activity, have better nutrition and sleep, and are less likely to use tobacco.

## **Social connections and managing your cancer**

Increasing your social connections can also be an important part of managing your cancer.

This is because people with positive social connections are more likely to engage in healthy behaviors like physical activity and eating nutritious foods. They are also more likely to get preventive health care, including vaccinations and cancer screening tests.

There are many ways to build positive social connections. It is more about the quality of your social connections, not the quantity (amount).

Some examples of positive social connections are:

- Friendships
- Romantic relationships
- Family relationships

- Coworkers and colleagues
- Community, sports, or volunteer groups
- Faith or church groups
- Everyday conversations with strangers

## **Tips for managing isolation and loneliness**

Just like other health problems, it's important to manage isolation and loneliness so it doesn't get worse. Reaching out and being vulnerable with other people builds meaningful connections. These connections can help you create a sense of belonging. They can make you feel valued and less alone. Here are a few things you can do to take care of yourself and stay connected:

### **Join a support group**

Look for an online or in-person support group for people with cancer (or their caregivers). Connecting with people who know what you're going through can be comforting.

### **Sign up for an activity or class**

Sign up for an activity or class. You can learn something new and meet other people who share your interests.

### **Check in with people**

Make time to reach out and check in on other people. Call or text someone who might also be feeling lonely or isolated. Supporting others can help you feel less alone, too.

### **Be present with others**

When you spend time with people, put away distractions. This shows others you value their time and appreciate your conversations with them. These types of interactions help build quality relationships.

### **Act with kindness and respect**

Try to remember that other people in your life might be lonely too, even if it doesn't

seem like they are. Just as you have many thoughts and feelings no one knows about, so does everyone around you.

Don't assume someone isn't lonely because of who they are or how they appear on the outside. Sometimes, we intentionally or unintentionally hide the sad or lonely parts of ourselves from the outside world and social media.

### **Try mindfulness-based activities**

Studies show that certain mindfulness-based activities can improve social connectivity and decrease feelings of loneliness.

Mindfulness is about noticing and being present with your thoughts, emotions, body, and the world around you. Our minds distract us from the present moment all the time, so it's easy to get caught up in thoughts about the past or future.



Some third places shown to improve loneliness include:

- Coffee shops, cafes, and restaurants
- Museums, libraries, and parks
- Churches and faith centers
- Social and sports clubs
- Salons and barbershops
- Community, youth, and senior centers

If you aren't ready to talk to others or jump into a class, you can simply spend time together in a shared space like a coffee shop. You still benefit from being around others even if you never talk to them.

## What caregivers, friends, and family can do

### [Cancer and Mental Health: How Caregivers, Friends, and Family Can Help](#) <sup>5</sup>

It's hard to know how to help someone who feels isolated or lonely. If you are a friend, family member, or caregiver of someone with cancer, you might also feel like you need to "stay strong" for them. There are many simple, daily ways you can support your loved one, and yourself. [Learn more](#)

## Find more support

### [Cancer Survivors Network](#)

An online community where people with cancer, survivors, and caregivers can connect with others 24/7.

### [Cancer Help](#) <sup>6</sup>

Contact the ACS cancer helpline to get answers and information

### [MHA - Mental Health America](#)

Find a counselor or mental health provider.

## Hyperlinks

1. [suicidepreventionlifeline.org/](https://www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org/)

2. [www.cancer.org/cancer/managing-cancer/side-effects/emotional-mood-changes/depression.html](http://www.cancer.org/cancer/managing-cancer/side-effects/emotional-mood-changes/depression.html)
3. [www.cancer.org/cancer/managing-cancer/side-effects/emotional-mood-changes/anxiety.html](http://www.cancer.org/cancer/managing-cancer/side-effects/emotional-mood-changes/anxiety.html)
4. [www.cancer.org/cancer/survivorship/coping/practice-mindfulness-and-relaxation.html](http://www.cancer.org/cancer/survivorship/coping/practice-mindfulness-and-relaxation.html)
5. [www.cancer.org/cancer/caregivers/how-to-help-a-loved-one-in-distress.html](http://www.cancer.org/cancer/caregivers/how-to-help-a-loved-one-in-distress.html)
6. [www.cancer.org/about-us/what-we-do/providing-support.html](http://www.cancer.org/about-us/what-we-do/providing-support.html)

## References

Adams RN, Mosher CE, Rand KL, et al. The Cancer Loneliness Scale and Cancer-related Negative Social Expectations Scale: development and validation. *Qual Life Res.*

Survivor views on social isolation & loneliness. American Cancer Society Cancer Action Network (ACS CAN). August 2023. Accessed March 27, 2024.

<https://www.fightcancer.org/policy-resources/survivor-views-social-connection-isolation>

Understanding loneliness and social isolation: how to stay connected. National Institute on Aging. National Institutes of Health (NIH). 2020. Accessed March 1, 2024.