
INTIMACY: THE ANTIDOTE TO THE LONELINESS EPIDEMIC

MADISON TURUNEN

In 2023, loneliness was declared a national epidemic by US Surgeon General, Dr. Vivek Murthy. The national advisory report – titled “Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation” – considers what contributes to social disconnection and details the importance of social connection for personal and community health. Through this analysis, the Surgeon General provides a national strategy to advance social connection, calling stakeholders, communities, and individuals to intervene. My goal in writing this paper is to fulfill the recommendation for individuals to “understand the power of social connection and the consequences of social disconnection” (Office of the Surgeon General, 2023) and the recommendation for researchers to develop cross-disciplinary research (Office of the Surgeon General, 2023) by using my background in Peace and Justice and the work of experts in other fields.

Since becoming Surgeon General, Dr. Vivek Murthy learned that Americans across the country experience loneliness in a variety of ways. He defines loneliness as, “far more than just a bad feeling – it harms both individual and societal health. It is associated with a greater risk of cardiovascular disease, dementia, stroke, depression, anxiety, and premature death. The mortality impact of being socially disconnected is similar to that caused by smoking up to 15 cigarettes a day, and even greater than that associated with obesity and physical inactivity. And the harmful consequences of a society that lacks social connection can be felt in our schools, workplaces, and civic organizations, where performance, productivity, and engagement are diminished” (Office of the Surgeon General, 2023).

The Surgeon General’s understanding of loneliness will be the definition utilized in this paper.

This paper will explore the epidemic of loneliness through the lens of trauma awareness and resilience by synthesizing the overlap between loneliness with theories embodied emotions. Loneliness is not merely an isolated condition or a fleeting feeling; it is a complex,

multifaceted experience that deeply impacts an individual's mental and physical well-being. Utilizing the language set by Dr. Vivek Murthy, this paper will consider loneliness as more than a condition or feeling, rather constituting expressions and experiences that compound as trauma. Loneliness often intertwines with a profound sense of emotional disconnection, which can exacerbate the experience and deepen its effects.

Theories on embodied emotions will help us understand how loneliness is physically manifested in the body, influencing our physiological states and overall health. Further, this paper explains how cultivating intimacy within our relationships and communities can deter loneliness. Intimacy involves more than just physical closeness; it encompasses emotional depth, mutual understanding, and genuine connection. By fostering environments that promote open communication, empathy, and support, we can create stronger, more resilient communities where individuals feel seen, heard, and valued. This approach can mitigate the effects of loneliness, transforming it from a chronic condition into a manageable, and even preventable, aspect of human experience. Through this comprehensive exploration, I aim to shed light on the intricate connections between loneliness, trauma, and resilience. By understanding these connections, we can develop more effective strategies to address the loneliness epidemic, ultimately fostering healthier, more connected communities.

Embodied Emotions

Stress can be understood as two definitions: the events and changes that create a reaction, and the hormonal response to experiencing those situations. For this analysis, stress will be discussed as the human reaction. Stress is a natural reaction to daily life; concern arises when stress is prolonged. If our basic needs are not met, our minds and bodies are in a continuous state of stress, taking a toll on physical and psychological health:

“Over time, repeated activation of the stress response takes a toll on the body. Research suggests that chronic stress contributes to high blood pressure, promotes the formation of artery-clogging deposits, and causes brain changes that may contribute to anxiety, depression, and addiction” (Harvard Medical School, 2020).

The overstimulation of the brain caused by prolonged stress can also result in the disruption of survival instincts. The brain is naturally predictive, meaning the brain uses associations “to a casual understanding of physical or emotional sensations and their causes” (Michael Niconchuk, 2020), to distinguish stressors from survival stimulants. Chronic stress cannot be easily distinguished from survival stimulants by the brain. Loneliness is a cause of chronic stress, Dr. Vivek Murthy describes the embodiment of loneliness as equivalent of smoking

fifteen cigarettes a day (Office of the Surgeon General, 2023), as a direct result of the impact of lacking social connection on the brain.

In connection with the brain's response to stress is the response of the nervous system. Our throats, lungs, stomachs, livers, spleens, pancreases, kidneys, and guts are all connected to each other and the brain by a single organ – the vagus nerve (also referred to as the wandering nerve or the soul nerve). Much of the research on the vagus nerve is recent and still developing, but:

“We do know that the soul nerve is where we experience a felt sense of love, compassion, fear, grief, dread, sadness, loneliness, hope, empathy, anxiety, caring, disgust, despair, and many other things that make us human. When your body has an emotional response, such as when your stomach clenches, your voice catches, your pulse races, your shoulders tighten, your breathing quickens, your body braces for impact, or you have a sense that danger is lurking, that's your soul nerve at work. When you feel your heart opening or closing down; when you feel anxious in the pit of your stomach; when you sense that something wonderful or terrible is about to happen; when something feels right or wrong in your gut; when your heart sinks, when your spirit soars; or when your stomach churns in nausea – all of these involve your soul nerve...Your soul nerve is vital to your health and well-being. It regulates your breathing, heart rate, and blood pressure. It helps prevent inflammation. And it can reduce pain, improve your mood, and help you manage fear.” (Menakem, 2017).

Studies have also found that traumatic or highly stressful events can send the nervous system into hyper-arousal – causing hyperactivity, hypervigilance, mania, anxiety, panic, irritability, rage, and pain – or hypo-arousal – causing depression, disconnection, exhaustion, fatigue, and numbness (Leitch, 2015). Dr. Vivek Murthy's study on loneliness examines how social connection influences these biological processes. Social connection has a protective effect on biological systems, but social disconnection compounds risks and harms to the physical and physiological (Office of the Surgeon General, 2023). Without social connection, our brain and nervous systems cannot be regulated, and loneliness continues to act as a chronic, and even traumatic, stressor on the body.

Cultivating Intimacy to Deter Loneliness

Since the 1980s, psychologists have defined intimacy and intimate relationships as a buffer to the pathogenic effects of stress. Evidence has found that individuals who have intimate relationships recover from illness faster, have low probability of recurring stress, and have fewer stress related symptoms (Prager, 1997). Intimacy is not limited to physical touch within domestic and familial relationships, but rather extends to all relationships, characterized

through strong communication, low performance or effort rates, and security (Miller & Lefcourt, 1983). In other words, intimacy is cultivated when individuals are able to comfortably be present and give their whole selves to a relationship.

Intimacy is crucial to development and social well-being from childhood through adulthood. This is because human beings can co-regulate one another – think of a mother’s ability to console an infant through touch or sound – and our nervous systems depend on co-regulation as a means of reducing stress.

“Emotional regulation to reduce distress appears to be a fundamental human behavior that doesn’t just happen *within us*, but *between us*. We’re constantly consoling others and being consoled, from instances of forgettable disappointment to life-changing traumas” (Kohrt, 2021).

This process exists at both micro and macro levels - often the distinction divides between experiences of companionship with peers, acquaintances, and distant relatives (micro) and experiences of intimacy with parents, siblings, friends, and partners (macro) – varied by behavior (Buhrmester & Furman, 1987). Beyond intimate relationships are intimate interactions (dyadic communicative exchanges) that are characterized by the behavior of sharing private and personal experiences to foster closeness and bonding (Prager, 1997). Through this understanding, cultivating intimacy allows for a sense of belonging and the embodiment of emotions to emerge, while acting as the antithesis to shame, to ultimately deter the feelings and experiences of loneliness.

Conclusion

Loneliness will continue to disrupt our needs, sense of belonging, and physiological and psychological health until the experience is collectively addressed through de-stigmatization and social connection. The issue of loneliness has been exacerbated by the intense rise in digitalization and online communication, work, and relationships in recent years. However, this epidemic does not have to be the new norm. In fact, it is unsustainable to allow it to continue. Utilizing education, creating community spaces, expanding civic engagement, and centralizing health and well-being will be the catalyst for resilience. Addressing the loneliness epidemic requires a holistic approach that focuses on nurturing intimacy and connection in all areas of life. By investing time and effort into our personal relationships, being present and engaged in our interactions, and building supportive networks at home, work, and within the community, we can create a robust safety net for those struggling with loneliness. Through these efforts, we can foster a society where everyone feels a sense of belonging and connection, ultimately enhancing our collective well-being.

References

Buhrmester, D., & Furman, W. (1987). The development of companionship and intimacy. *Child development*, 1101-1113.

Gabor, M. (2022). *Myth of Normal*. Penguin Random House. 15-36.

Harvard Medical School. (2020). *Understanding the Stress Response*. Harvard Health Publishing.

Hwang, T., Rabheru, K., Peisah, C., Reichman, W., & Ikeda, M. (2020). Loneliness and social isolation during the COVID-19 pandemic. *International Psychogeriatrics*, 32(10), 1217-1220.
doi:10.1017/S1041610220000988

Irani, T. A., Wilson, S. B., Slough, D. L., & Rieger, M. (2014). Graduate Student Experiences On- and Off-campus: Social Connectedness and Perceived Isolation. *International Journal of E-Learning & Distance Education Revue Internationale Du E-Learning Et La Formation à Distance*, 28(1).

Jandrić, P. (2022). Alone-Time and Loneliness in the Academia. *Postdigit Sci Educ* 4, 633-642.

Kohrt, B. (2021). *We Heal One Another*. Aeon.com

Leitch, L. (2015). *The Nervous System and Resilience*. Threshold GlobalWorks.

Mcleod, S. (2023). *Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs*. Simply Psychology.

Menakem, R. (2017). *My Grandmother's Hands*. Central Recovery Press. 137-147.

Miller, R. S., & Lefcourt, H. M. (1983). Social intimacy: An important moderator of stressful life events. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 11(2), 127-139.

Niconchuk, M. (2020). *The Field Guide for Barefoot Psychology*. Beyond Conflict. 22-30.

Office of the Surgeon General. (2023). *Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation*. National Advisory.

Prager, K. J. (1997). *The psychology of intimacy*. Guilford Press.

Ravilochan, T. (2021). *The Blackfoot Wisdom That Inspired Maslow's Hierarchy*. The Esperanza Project.

Van Dernoot Lipsky, L. (2009). *Trauma Stewardship*. Berret-Koehler Publishers, INC. 41-46.
