

Seeking Connection

Ken Stern

Older Americans are lonely.

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It's a public health crisis

'I don't know how to make new friends at my age.' 'I feel isolated in my home.' 'I'm worried that I will lose all my work friends when I retire.' Those are the type of comments I get in my side gig as a writer of a weekly advice column on social connection. It was never on my career plan to start dispensing advice to people over 50, but with our longer lives, many of us are on second, third and fourth acts anyway. Business is brisk in the advice trade because fear of loneliness and loss of social networks as we age is a rising concern in a rapidly aging country and world.

It's a big issue: Being lonely has all sorts of negative health consequences, especially later in life when people are more vulnerable to downturns in both physical and cognitive health. More people are becoming aware that loneliness is connected to everything from heart disease to diabetes to dementia, but they are still stunned to find that researchers have judged that being lonely is roughly equivalent to smoking 15 cigarettes a day. And a new national study from AARP, released in December 2025, found that 40% of adults age 45 and over are lonely, a material rise from the 35% that AARP found in both 2010 and 2018.

Loneliness is not evenly spread, even among older adults. Men, for instance, are more likely to be lonely than women but so are people who are not working, make less than \$25,000 a year, live in rural areas or identify as LGBTQ+. Conversely, while no group escapes the threat of loneliness, you are better off being highly educated, wealthy and over 70.

To be fair, there really is no period of our lives that we can escape the modern plague of loneliness. But loneliness in the second half of life needs to be a focus of public health policy, not just because rates of loneliness are increasing but because we have so many more older people in the United States now. If you do math on the AARP study, it pencils out that there are more than 50 million adults in the 45 and over category who measure out as lonely.

That's a public health crisis.

What is going on with older Americans and loneliness?

The AARP study provides clues to the source of our decline in social connection. It's not that we are less friendly as people than we were a decade ago, but we participate far less in activities that provide the glue of social connection. Declines in social connection date back at least to the 1980s – Robert Putnam's 'Bowling Alone' is rooted in social trends of that era – but it is shocking what is happening with older Americans over just the last decade and a half.

According to AARP, attendance at religious services by people 60 and over plunged from 50% to 37%, belonging to a community group dropped from 32% to 25% and volunteering rates fell from 47% to 33%. These are huge, epochal changes for older Americans that have happened in just the past 15 years. COVID-19, we might speculate, may have had something to do with that, but trends predate the pandemic and there is no evidence that in the three years past that participation rates among older adults are rebounding.

How we build a more connected society

What are we to do about this?

Increasingly, social connection is like the weather. We all talk about it, but no one does anything about it. Former Surgeon General Vivek Murthy declared a loneliness crisis in 2023, but left office without taking many concrete steps toward addressing it. The new Make America Healthy Again report, to its credit, identified loneliness and lack of social connection as a source of poor health in America's youth, but, to its discredit, only one of its over 180 recommendations related to social isolation, and even that recommendation (phone use in schools) falls outside the traditional purview of the federal government.

Local governments have occasionally acknowledged the problem, but rarely with sustained interest. New York named Ruth Westheimer as its first Ambassador for Loneliness in 2023 but the job, such as it is, has remained unfilled since her death in 2024.

Piecemeal initiatives are inadequate to address a problem that is undermining the health and happiness of so many older Americans. It is particularly complex because everything from how we live (far apart from each other) to how we work (older workers routinely lose social networks when they are pushed out from work) to how we use technology (way too much) contributes to our epidemic of loneliness.

But we can take heart from the fact that our peer countries view elder loneliness not as a problem for each person to tackle for themselves, but as a public health crisis. Both the U.K. and Japan have appointed Ministers of Loneliness, and Germany has built a network of some 400 Senior Citizens Offices with the express purpose of helping older people find volunteer opportunities and social connection. Japan's Silver Jinzai Human Resources Centers help almost a million older adults, ages 65 to 100, engage in part-time work.

These societies, and other successful aging nations, are creating a social health infrastructure to support connection, purpose and engagement in the second half of life. They are creating a road map that we can follow – and hopefully put me out of business as a social connection advice columnist.

Ken Stern writes the 'Ask Ken' advice column on social connection. He is also the author of the book 'Healthy to 100: How Strong Social Ties Lead to Long Lives.'

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Illustration by Dani Cherchio/USA Today Network; and Getty Images

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