Alone, Together: The Social Consequences of COVID Confinement

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“Emperor Frankenstein”

Our Plan

01  Making the Case for Connection
02  Aloneness, Isolation, or Loneliness
03  Loneliness Trends Pre- and Post-COVID
04  Where Do We Go?
01
Making the Case for Connection
“Statistically, this [social support and relationships] is one of the strongest areas under study. What isn’t clear is how it works. How does a relationship get into the body and influence biological processes? All we know at this point is, something very important is happening.”

—Dr. Leonard Syme, professor of epidemiology at UC-Berkeley
What is social support?

- Being cared for and loved (shared intimacy)
- Being esteemed and valued (self-worth)
- Sharing companionship, communication and mutual obligations (sense of belonging)
- “Informational” support (access to information, appraisal, advice, and guidance)
- Access to physical or material assistance

Source: *Health Psychology* (Taylor, 2019)
### Primary Risk Factors for CV Disease

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Risk Factor</th>
<th>Relative Risk (RR)</th>
<th>Prevalence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hypertension</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>47%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cholesterol</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inactivity</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Smoking</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>12.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Isolation</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>??%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Centers for Disease Control, 2021
Famous Studies in Social Connection

Tecumseh, MI
10-year study of 3,000 adults in Michigan. 4x mortality for socially isolated.

Roseto, PA
Italian-American community with 1/6 incidence of heart disease

Honolulu, HI
650 at-risk youth over two decades. 25% were “transcenders.”

Source: Mind/Body Health: The Effects of Attitudes, Emotions, & Relationships (Karren et al., 2006)
0 2
Aloneness vs. Isolation vs. Loneliness
Aloneness
- [Objective] experience of not being with another individual
- Can be positive, negative, or neutral

Social Isolation
- Lack of social contacts
- Few social interactions

Loneliness
- [Subjective] experience of distress from being alone or separated
- Gap between desired and actual relationships

Source: National Institutes for Health, 2022
Aloneness
Social Isolation
Loneliness
The UCLA 3-Item Loneliness Scale

This scale comprises 3 questions that measure three dimensions of loneliness: relational connectedness, social connectedness and self-perceived isolation. The questions are:

1. How often do you feel that you lack companionship?
2. How often do you feel left out?
3. How often do you feel isolated from others?

The scale generally uses three response categories: Hardly ever / Some of the time / Often
Health Risks of Loneliness

Health risks associated with loneliness and social isolation are comparable to the dangers of smoking and obesity.

- Loneliness increases the risk of death by 26%.
- Social isolation increases death risk by 29%.
- Living alone increases death risk by 32%.
- Being socially connected reduces death risk by 50%.

“Just as diabetes disrupts our ability to self-regulate the level of sugar in the “internal environment” of our blood, loneliness can disrupt our ability to self-regulate in the external, social world.”

—Drs. John Cacioppo & William Patrick

Famous Failures in Social Connection

**John Watson**

“Never hug and kiss them. Never let them sit in your lap. If you must, kiss them once on the forehead when they say goodnight.”

**Germ Theory**

Mortality rates in some “so-called sterile” nurseries were 75-100%.

**Math Stressor**

Measured cortisol levels of girls given false feedback on math test.

Humans are not fully self-regulating
More opiate receptors in limbic brain than anywhere else
Lieberman & Eisenberger (2015) fMRI study on social rejection (social pain = physical pain)
Social isolation syndrome impairs brain development

Health Effects of Isolation and Loneliness During Pandemic

**Physical Health**
- Cardiovascular Disease
- Obesity & diabetes
- Weakened immunity

**Cognitive Health**
- Cognitive impairment
- Dementia
- Alzheimer’s Disease

**Mental & Behavioral Health**
- Depression & Anxiety
- Suicidality
- Sleep

**Economic Health**
- 6.7B medical spending
- Lower productivity
- More absenteeism

Source: Holt-Lunstad et al., 2015; Ong, Uchino, & Wethington, 2015; NASEM, 2020; AARP, 2018
Loneliness Trends Pre- and Post-COVID-19
Occurrence of loneliness, solitude, and isolation in writing from 1800-2000

Source: Lepore, 2020
Living in the U.S.A

We’ve Become a lot Lonelier

We have fewer friends who we can have deep conversations with. More Americans have no close friends.

Americans with no close friends outside of family (%)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1985</td>
<td>36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>53%</td>
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Average # of Confidants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Average</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1985</td>
<td>2.94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>2.08</td>
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Source: Clearvue Health, 2019
And what has been the biggest contributor to this change?

Major trends

- Mental health decline
  - 50%
  - 25% General mental health decline
  - 15% Increased stress
  - 10% Increased general anxiety
  - 10% Increased COVID-specific anxiety
  - 10% Increased "burnout"

Subthemes

- Declined
  - Thinking back to the start of COVID-19, how has your general well-being changed?
  - 85%
- Improved
  - 22%

Source: Campbell & Gavett, 2021
Loneliness in Teens

Where do we go?
Built Environment as a Social Determinant of Health

Source: Peavey & Taylor, 2016
Social Determinants of Health

**CULTURE:** Social norms around socialization, in-person connections, and stigmatization of loneliness

**BUILT ENVIRONMENT:** Design of homes, workplaces, schools, third-places, neighborhoods and cities

**COMMUNITY:** Local resources, events, collective social capital, trust and sense of belonging

**ORGANIZATIONAL:** Policies and norms around staff collaboration, socialization, and shared meaning

**INTRAPERSONAL:** Social interaction quality, frequency and duration

**INTERPERSONAL:** Genetic predisposition, individual choices and preferences for social connection

Source: Peavey, 2020
THANKS!

On to the sessions...

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