

## Social Isolation: Our 21st Century Mental Health Phenomenon

Since March of 2020, pandemic lockdowns and quarantines have put our lives on hold while tough travel restrictions have only widened the distances between us. All in-person gatherings had to be avoided, and as businesses closed their doors, for the first time in history, a significant percentage of the population became unemployed or began working remotely.

As a direct result, out of sheer necessity, we became dependent upon websites and mobile apps that offered contactless fast food and grocery deliveries, we logged into streaming services and podcasts to find news and entertainment and we spent time with our family, friends, and coworkers online. Even though we have tried to go about business as usual, our prolonged physical separation from other human beings has left many of us feeling lonely and disconnected.

### We're Gonna Need A Bigger Boat

Social isolation and the loneliness that comes with it can be insidious. Social isolation is quite different from a lockdown or the temporary self-isolation that we have all become accustomed to since the beginning of the pandemic.

Social isolation is the prolonged absence of social and interpersonal connections, often with other contributing factors such as disabilities, lack of transportation, unemployment, long-term illness, or domestic violence.

However, since early 2020, as our social connections have become social *disconnections*, and as we have transitioned from our face-to-face world into our 'new normal' behind computer screens and masks, reported cases of depression, anxiety, and suicide have surged by 25% due to increased social isolation. The American Psychological Association states that more than 42 million Americans identify as lonely.

Studies also show that [socially isolated older adults](#) are at increased risk for dementia. Information provided by the CDC states that more than one-third of adults aged 45 and older feel isolated and lonely, and one-quarter of adults over 65 are considered socially isolated.

Social isolation is not just a mental health concern but also a physical health issue. Experiencing prolonged periods of social isolation affects our psychological and physical health. It can lead to heart disease, stroke, diabetes, high blood pressure, substance abuse, and premature mortality.

There is not a single socio-economic demographic left unaffected. Social isolation could become a pandemic in its own right if we do not recognize the signs and work to make changes.



### What About Martin?

*Data entry assistant Martin C. has been working from home for two years. He has an office in his home where he works following a consistent schedule, completing his tasks while working at two computer screens every day. Recently, Martin has had trouble concentrating and has made more mistakes than usual. He feels stressed about work but doesn't think it's anything he can't handle. Martin has regularly scheduled video conferences with his teammates a couple of times a week. Still, since few people bother to turn on their cameras, meetings are generally just group phone calls.*

*Like everyone else since the pandemic began, Martin has gotten into the habit of ordering the things he needs online, so he rarely even leaves his house. At lunchtime, his food is delivered and left on his doorstep, and the tip for the driver is left via the app. In the evening, Martin logs off his computer, and though he was supposed to meet a friend for dinner, he cancels because he doesn't feel like going out. So, Martin picks up his phone as he walks to the couch, ready to order dinner and catch up on social media while watching television.*

*As he scrolls through his social media accounts, he feels a little tired and down but, unable to put his finger on the reason, chalks it up to a long day and the fact that he often stays up too late and hasn't been sleeping well. Martin rationalizes that he will feel better tomorrow if he gets some more rest.*

Such is the insidious nature of social isolation that Martin does not even realize that he has become socially isolated. After two years of off-and-on forced social distancing, to him, his routine seems almost normal.

The ease and simplicity of contactless deliveries such as DoorDash and Amazon Prime have unquestionably contributed to the increasing numbers of people who now live in a state of nearly complete social isolation.

### Resources

- [The Lethality of Loneliness: John Cacioppo \(TEDx Talk\)](#)
- [Understanding the Effects of Social Isolation on Mental Health](#)
- [How Do You Talk To a Friend Who's Struggling With Depression? Here Are 5 Simple Tips.](#)

If someone you know is experiencing mental health symptoms due to social isolation, depression, or anxiety, talk to your doctor or call the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. It is a free, confidential treatment referral and information service for individuals and family members facing mental health and substance abuse issues.

**S.A.M.H.S.A. Helpline at 1-800-662-HELP (4357)**

**National Suicide Prevention Lifeline 1-800-273-8255**

Benefits eligible employees enrolled in Disability Insurance, Critical Illness Insurance, Leave Management Service, or Basic Life, regardless of any other election, have access to [ABILITY ASSIST® COUNSELING SERVICES](#) through The Hartford. Counselors are ready to listen to your concerns and help you with emotional or work/life counseling. They can also provide assistance with many factors that can contribute to stress, anxiety, and depression, such as financial issues, legal support, and health concerns.

**If you see something, say something, it could help save a life.**



### Table For One, Please!

Despite this, not all social isolation is terrible, and most people enjoy disconnecting every now and then. It is important to remember that there is a difference between isolation and solitude and that time spent alone can be relaxing, rejuvenating, and meditative.

Everyone is different, but human beings are instinctively highly social animals, and in general, we do need the company of others to share in our human experiences.

It is important to remember that while some solitude can be good for our mental health and emotional well-being, too much can have the opposite effect and lead to social isolation.

### The Introspection Connection

Multiple symptoms of social isolation overlap with those of anxiety and depression. Often one or both conditions are present in someone who is socially isolated, making it even more important to act.

So, you might ask, if Martin was unable to realize he was socially isolated, how can we possibly expect to [recognize the warning signs](#) in ourselves or those around us? Self-examination can be difficult, but it is essential to help us see the warning signs in ourselves.

- **Pay attention to your eating habits**
  - If you experience significant weight gain or loss, you might want to think about why. Are you eating out of boredom or maybe 'forgetting' to eat at all?
- **Be mindful of changes in sleep patterns**
  - Notice if you are sleeping either more or less than normal. Do you have trouble falling or staying asleep or are you tired and irritable no matter how long you sleep?
- **Difficulty with mental focus**
  - Commonly called 'brain fog,' this can include trouble focusing on tasks, impaired memory, and difficulty making decisions. Do you have difficulty following a train of thought or find yourself staring at your task list, overwhelmed, not knowing where to begin?
- **Loss of interest in hobbies**
  - Losing interest in things you enjoy is very often linked to depression and other mood disorders. Have you not wanted to take part in the past-time hobbies and activities that you would normally?
- **Avoiding social activities**
  - Canceling plans, avoiding friends or family, or avoiding activities where you will interact with others. Even if you make plans to go out, do you regularly cancel them and avoid going out with people, shopping, going to movies, or other events?

### Making A Positive Change

Recognizing the issues is the first step, but once we have identified signs of social isolation, what can we do to start making a change?

- **Connect with loved ones often through online games, video chats, and messaging.**
  - Staying connected with others helps us to feel less lonely and isolated.
- **Go to a movie instead of streaming and go grocery shopping in person, instead of having your groceries delivered.**
  - Getting out and doing everyday things can be great mood-enhancing activities.
- **Get outside for some fresh air and sunshine.**
  - Natural sunlight provides us with the best way to get essential Vitamin D, but don't forget the sunscreen!
- **Talk to someone about the way you are feeling.**
  - In-person or virtual sessions of [talk therapy](#) can be extremely helpful in identifying the symptoms of social isolation, depression, and anxiety and can help you make healthy changes.