Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation (Key Highlights)

1. Introduction: Why Social Connection Matters

- Social connection is a critical determinant of individual and community health, safety, and prosperity.

- **Citable Data:**

  - Lack of social connection increases the risk of premature death as much as smoking 15 cigarettes a day.

  - Approximately half of U.S. adults report experiencing loneliness, with young adults having the highest rates.

  - Social isolation among older adults accounts for $6.7 billion in excess Medicare spending annually.

  - A 2022 study found that when people were asked how close they felt to others emotionally, only 39% of adults in the U.S. said that they felt very connected to others.

  - Despite such high prevalence, less than 20% of individuals who often or always feel lonely or isolated recognize it as a major problem.
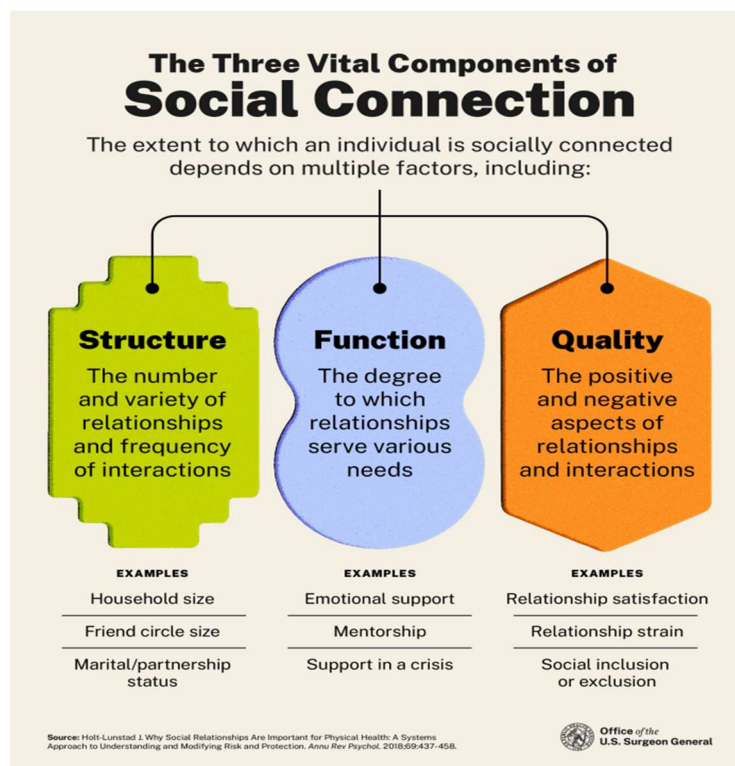

FIGURE 1: The Three Vital Components of Social Connection

2. Decline in Social Connection

- Trends show declines in social participation, community involvement, and trust in institutions since the 1970s.

- **Citable Data:**

    - In-person interaction time dropped significantly, especially for young people aged 15-24 (70% decrease since 2003).

    - The percentage of Americans who feel very attached to their local community was only 16% in 2018.

    - Objective measures of social exposure obtained from 2003-2020 find that social isolation, measured by the average time spent alone, increased from 2003 (285-minutes/day, 142.5-hours/month) to 2019 (309-minutes/day, 154.5-hours/month) and continued to increase in 2020 (333-minutes/day, 166.5-hours/month).

    - For instance, the amount of time respondents engaged with friends socially in-person decreased from 2003 (60-minutes/day, 30-hours/month) to 2020 (20-minutes/day, 10-hours/month).

    - In 2018, only 16% of Americans reported that they felt very attached to their local community.
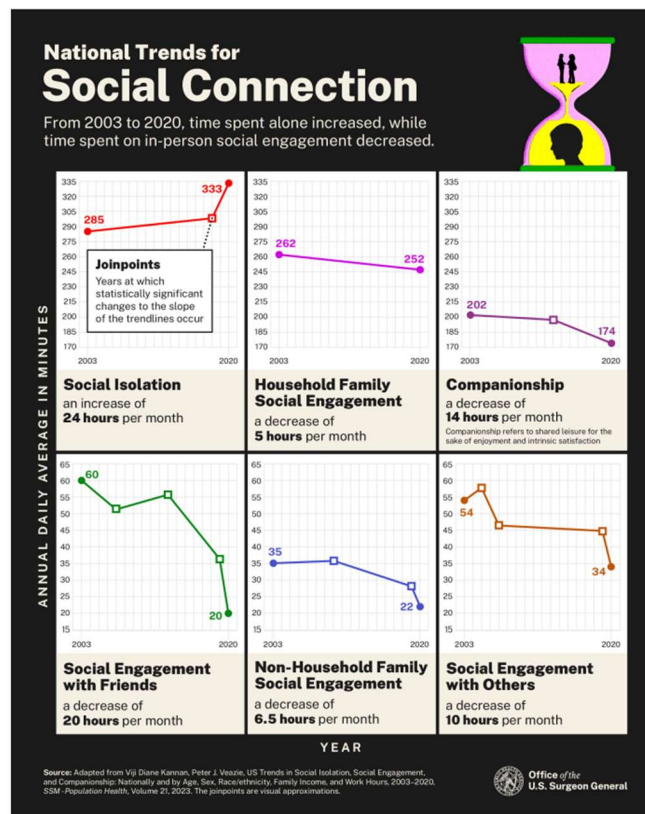

FIGURE 2: National Trends for Social Connection

3. Impacts of Loneliness and Isolation on Health

- Evidence across scientific disciplines converges on the conclusion that socially connected people live longer.

- More recent estimates, based on synthesizing data across 148 studies, with an average of 7.5 years of follow-up, suggest that social connection increases the odds of survival by 50%.

- Combining data from 13 studies on heart failure patients, researchers found that poor social connection is associated with a 55% greater risk of hospital readmission.

- Chronic loneliness and social isolation can increase the risk of developing dementia by approximately 50% in older adults, even after controlling for demographics and health status.

- Social isolation and loneliness are linked to:

  - **Higher risks of:**

    - Cardiovascular diseases (29% increased risk of heart disease and 32% increased risk of stroke).

    - Heart failure (68% increased risk of hospitalization, a 57% higher risk of emergency department visits, and a 26% increased risk of outpatient visits).

    - Cognitive decline and dementia (50% increased risk in older adults).

    - Depression, anxiety, and suicidality.

    - Poor diabetes management.

  - **Positive Impacts of Social Connection:**

    - Better immune response and reduced inflammation.

    - Enhanced management of chronic conditions, such as hypertension and diabetes.
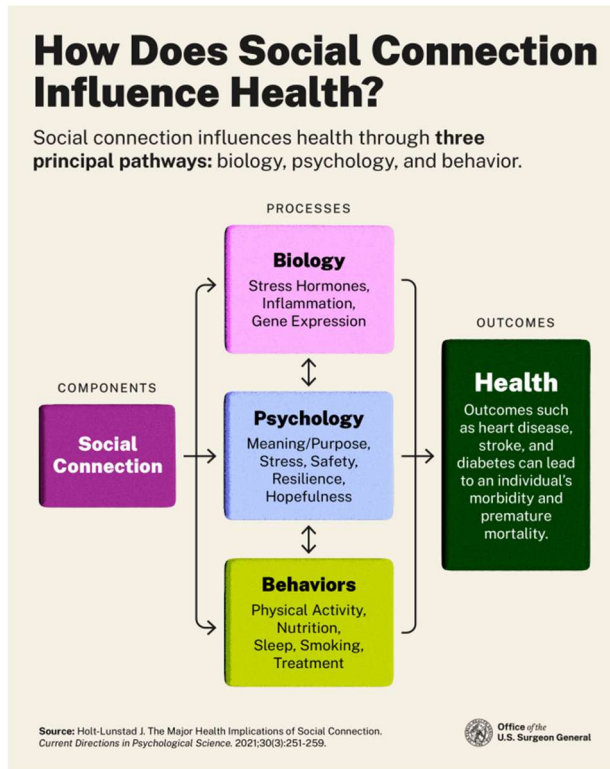
How Does Social Connection Influence Health?

Social connection influences health through **three principal pathways:** biology, psychology, and behavior.

PROCESSES

Biology
Stress Hormones, Inflammation, Gene Expression

COMPONENTS

Social Connection

Psychology
Meaning/Purpose, Stress, Safety, Resilience, Hopefulness

OUTCOMES

Health
Outcomes such as heart disease, stroke, and diabetes can lead to an individual's morbidity and premature mortality.

Behaviors
Physical Activity, Nutrition, Sleep, Smoking, Treatment

Source: Holt-Lunstad J. The Major Health Implications of Social Connection. *Current Directions in Psychological Science.* 2021;30(3):251-259.

Office *of the* U.S. Surgeon General

FIGURE 5: How Does Social Connection Influence Health?

4. Social Connection's Influence on Communities

- **Benefits of Connected Communities:**

    o Improved population health and natural hazard resilience.

    o Increased community safety and economic prosperity.

    o Stronger civic engagement and representative governance.

- **Potential Negatives**

    o Our fundamental human need for belonging is so strong that we may seek it out even in ways that may be unhealthy to ourselves or to our broader community.

    o When there are scarce resources, this can also lead to competition among various groups, leading to an "us" versus "them" mentality.

    o While high cohesion and conformity to group norms can be healthy and productive in many cases, among some groups, these social pressures may justify, rationalize, or encourage unhealthy, unsafe, or unfair behaviors such as binge drinking, violence, and discrimination.

5. Technology and Social Connection

- In a U.S.-based study, participants who reported using social media for more than two hours a day had about double the odds of reporting increased perceptions of social isolation compared to those who used social media for less than 30 minutes per day.

- Mixed impacts:

  o **Benefits:** Facilitates connection, especially for marginalized groups.

  o **Harms:** Increased perceptions of isolation with excessive social media use (over 2 hours per day doubles the odds of social isolation).

6. Recommendations for Action

FIGURE 6: The Six Pillars to Advance Social Connection

- Proposed six pillars to improve social connection:

  1. Strengthening social infrastructure (e.g., parks, libraries).

2. Enacting pro-connection public policies.

3. Mobilizing the health sector.

4. Reforming digital environments.

5. Deepening knowledge through research.

6. Cultivating a culture of connection.

Recommendations for Stakeholders to Advance Social Connection

1. Overview

This section provides tailored recommendations for various stakeholder groups to promote social connection across society. The focus is on national strategy and actionable steps.

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2. Key Stakeholder Recommendations

a. National, Territory, State, Local, and Tribal Governments

- Designate social connection as a public health priority.

- Establish leadership roles to oversee pro-connection initiatives.

- Implement "Connection-in-All-Policies" to evaluate how policies impact social connection.

- Monitor and regulate technology for transparency and social safety.

b. Health Workers, Health Care Systems, and Insurers

- Integrate social connection into clinical care.

- Train providers on the health impacts of loneliness.

- Promote collaborative care with community organizations.

c. Public Health Professionals and Departments

- Make social connection a key health indicator.

- Develop public education campaigns on social connection.

- Evaluate interventions to reduce loneliness.

d. Researchers and Research Institutions

- Prioritize social connection as a research area.

- Study the causes and impacts of social disconnection.

- Evaluate interventions and programs to enhance connection.

e. Philanthropy

- Invest in programs that foster connection, especially for at-risk groups.
- Support evaluation and dissemination of effective interventions.

f. Schools and Education Departments

- Develop strategic plans to enhance school connectedness.
- Integrate social connection into health curricula.
- Promote peer-led programs and supportive environments.

g. Workplaces

- Make social connection a strategic priority.
- Create a culture of inclusion and belonging.
- Balance work flexibility with opportunities for in-person interaction.

h. Community-Based Organizations

- Establish inclusive programs for diverse populations.
- Partner with other institutions to foster connection.
- Promote public education on the importance of social connection.

i. Technology Companies

- Design technology to promote healthy relationships.
- Avoid features that increase division or interpersonal conflict.
- Support safety standards, especially for minors.

j. Media and Entertainment Industries

- Develop content promoting positive relationships and connection.
- Collaborate with scientists to ensure accuracy.
- Avoid narratives that perpetuate division or disconnection.

k. Parents and Caregivers

- Model healthy relationships and conflict resolution.
- Monitor children's online activities to encourage positive interactions.
- Recognize signs of social disconnection in children.

l. Individuals

- Nurture personal relationships through regular engagement.
- Reduce distractions to enhance relationship quality.

- Participate in civic and community activities.

Potentially Citable Statements

1. "Loneliness is as harmful as smoking 15 cigarettes a day and more damaging than obesity and physical inactivity."

2. "Social connection reduces premature mortality risk by 50%, comparable to known interventions like flu vaccines."

3. "Declining community engagement correlates with growing societal polarization and trust deficits."

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