

America needs a Chief Friendship Officer

September 01, 2021

America is suffering from a lack of friendship. The average American hasn't made a new friend in the last five years. According to the American Enterprise Institute's American Perspectives Survey from May 2021, Americans report having fewer friendships than in the past three decades. Nearly one in five Americans has no close social connections, a double digit increase from 2013. Fifteen percent of men have no close friendships at all, a fivefold increase since 1990.

Loneliness and isolation are far more common experiences for people with few close friendships. While loneliness can be detrimental to your health—raising stress and inflammation levels, increasing the risk of heart disease, stroke, and even the progression of Alzheimer's—social connection is a lifeline. According to psychologist and loneliness researcher Julianne Holt-Lunstad, social support can increase your chance of survival by 50%, be as beneficial as giving up smoking 15 cigarettes a day, and be more important to physical health than exercising or beating obesity. If social connection and friendship are so fundamental to our well-being, why isn't there a national strategy to foster it?

The timing couldn't be more urgent. It became abundantly clear during the pandemic that, when it comes to our social health, America lacks a social safety net. Nearly two-thirds of young people (and half of working mothers) reported serious loneliness during the pandemic. The nonprofit group Sapien Labs found that, during the pandemic, 40% of respondents ages 18 to 24 reported feeling sadness, distress, or hopelessness, as well as unwanted, strange, and obsessive thoughts. With nearly two-thirds of Americans experiencing loneliness in 2019, loneliness was already a life-threatening epidemic—and that was before a year of increased social isolation, lockdown measures, and expanded WFH practices due to COVID-19.

...