Loneliness isn’t just a social problem — it’s a physical problem as well, as scientific research over the past decade has revealed in spades. Research into the topic has found links between social isolation and a variety of physical and mental health conditions, including heart disease, high blood pressure, depression and anxiety. Knowing this, some social critics are asking a once-unthinkable question: should social contact be treated as a basic need, on par with food, water, sleep and shelter?

Research suggests that the answer is yes, in part because we now have a better understanding of how the human body responds to loneliness — and, in contrast, adversely reacts to a lack of social connection. According to a new study published by scientists in Psychological Science, the flagship journal of the Association for Psychological Science, the same part of the brain that is triggered when a person is hungry is activated when a person is lonely, too.