Loneliness Poses Profound Public Health Threat, Surgeon General Says

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Loneliness presents a profound public health threat akin to smoking and obesity, U.S. Surgeon General Vivek H. Murthy warned in an advisory issued Tuesday that aims to rally Americans to spend more time with each other in an increasingly divided and digital society.

Murthy said half of U.S. adults experience loneliness, which has consequences for mental and physical health, including a greater risk of depression, anxiety — and, perhaps more surprisingly, heart disease, stroke and dementia.

His advisory calls for a collective effort to “mend the social fabric of our nation,” including teaching children how to build healthy relationships; talking more to relatives, friends and co-workers; and spending less time online and on social media if it comes at the expense of in-person interactions.

Time spent with friends declined 20 hours a month between 2003 and 2020, according to research cited in the advisory, while time spent alone increased by 24 hours a month in that period. These trends probably intensified during the coronavirus pandemic as Americans were sequestered at home, experts say.

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