The Epidemic of Isolation Is as Harmful as Smoking

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Your doctor’s orders for staying healthy might include a daily routine of eating your broccoli, going to the gym and getting a good night’s sleep. Now, the US surgeon general would like to add another action item to the list: Reach out to a friend.

In a new report, Vivek Murthy says that the US is experiencing an epidemic of loneliness and isolation that can be as harmful to our health as smoking up to 15 cigarettes a day. Murthy also offers practical fixes: public policies and spaces that bring people together, as well as simple things like texting a friend or volunteering.

If that feels squishy, or so obvious that you wonder why it needed to be spelled out for the public, consider how little the US as a society acknowledges its disconnectedness — and how few people understand its detrimental effects on our physical and mental health. There are very real consequences to living with social isolation, and the US needs to make sweeping changes at a societal and individual level to foster deeper, healthier connections.

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