

EXPLORE WELLNESS

Loneliness: A Worse Killer than Obesity + What to Do About It



Loneliness may be more of a hazard to our health than **obesity**, according to a 2017 article published by the American Psychological Association in Washington, D.C.

Annie Price (August 28, 2017) shares the article, *Loneliness: A Worse Killer than Obesity + What to Do About It* in Dr. Axe: Food is Medicine.*

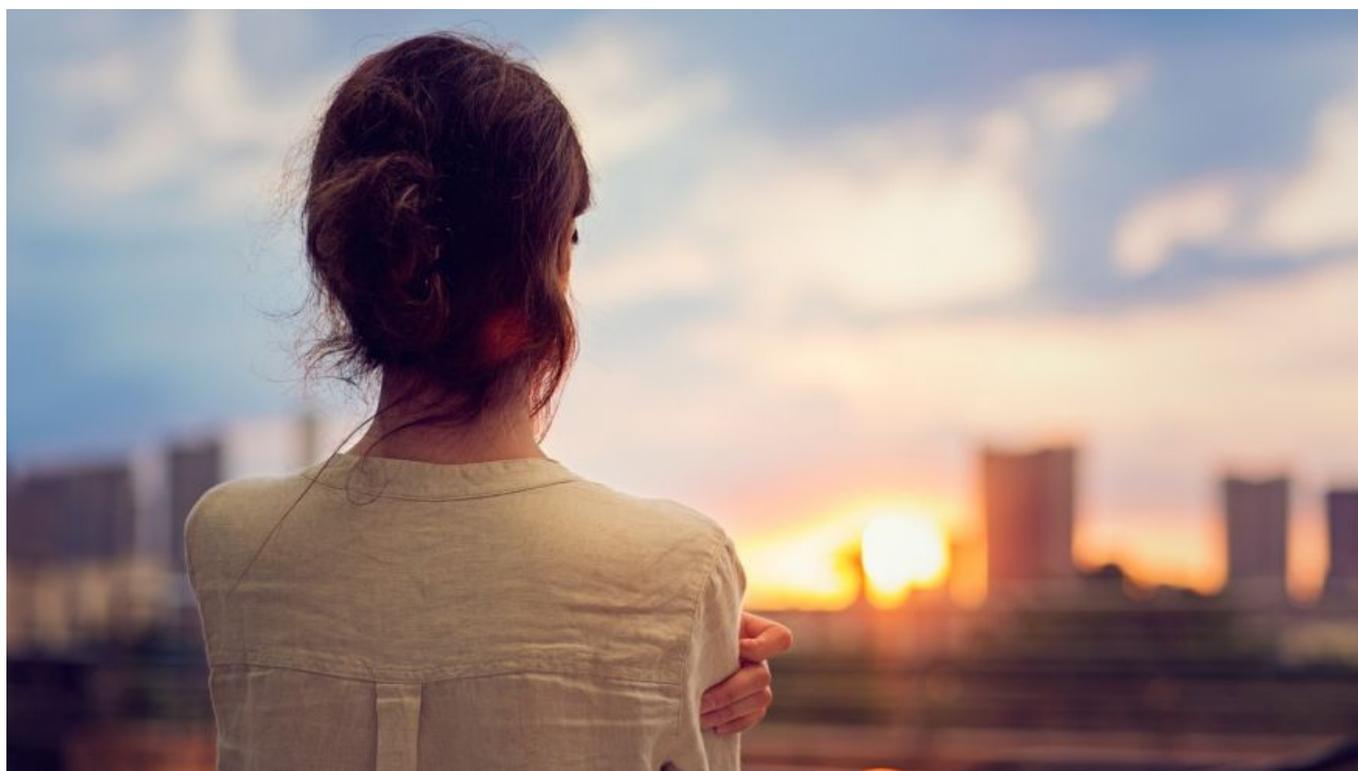
In Canada, nearly 70% of [university students](#) struggle with loneliness during the school

term. According to Statistics Canada, as many as 1.4 million [elderly Canadians](#) report feeling lonely. Recent data suggests [we may be experiencing an epidemic of loneliness in Canada](#). Indeed, statistics suggest that more and more people are spending more and more time alone, and this is having a negative impact on their mental health.

Why would this be? For starters, loneliness has been found to increase the levels of both stress hormones and blood pressure, which has a majorly negative impact on one of your most vital organs: the heart. No wonder a loneliness synonym is “heartache.” (2)

Feeling alone from time to time isn’t abnormal or necessarily cause for alarm, but when feelings of isolation and loneliness persist it can really take a serious toll on all aspects of your health — and often, you won’t to see the negative health impact until years later. Isn’t it such irony that there is currently a loneliness epidemic taking place in this digital age when we are seemingly more connected than ever before? Interacting with someone via the computer or by other virtual means is just not the same as seeing each other in person or hearing a voice on the other end of the phone. Not only are many of us now feeling more alone with all this technology, but we’re also losing our interpersonal skills.

People of all ages can feel lonely, but this emotion can be an especially deadly among the elderly. A 2012 report by the National Academy of Sciences found that loneliness and social isolation in older men and women is linked to increased **mortality**. (3) Regardless of your age, you will likely experience moments of loneliness in your life, but the great news is that natural remedies for loneliness are mainly habits and choices in your control and you can help yourself to feel better soon.



What Is Loneliness Exactly?

Norman Cousins, author the best-selling book “Anatomy of an Illness,” once said, “The eternal quest of the individual human being is to shatter his loneliness.” This is just one of many loneliness quotes that speaks to many people’s hearts. There are also lots of loneliness poems and loneliness songs out there, which is not surprising since loneliness is such a common yet unpleasant emotion for human beings of all ages.

LONELINESS

STATS & FACTS

Loneliness increases the levels of both stress hormones and blood pressure



May be more of a hazard to our health than obesity



Heartache is a synonym of loneliness



Loneliness is a leading precursor to depression and alcoholism



Feeling alone from time to time is normal



When loneliness persists it can take a serious toll on all aspects of your health



Can be especially deadly among the elderly



What is the actual loneliness definition? Loneliness is the state of feeling lonely. The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines lonely in a number of ways, including: being without company, cut off from others, sad from being alone, or producing a feeling of bleakness or desolation. (4) Its really important to note that being physically alone doesn't just automatically equate to loneliness. As Psychology Today points out: (5)

Loneliness is a negative state, marked by a sense of isolation. One feels that something is missing. It is possible to be with people and still feel lonely—perhaps the most bitter form of loneliness. Solitude is the state of being alone without being lonely. It is a positive and constructive state of engagement with oneself. Solitude is desirable, a state of being alone where you provide yourself wonderful and sufficient company.

So how do you know if you're experiencing loneliness or solitude? Is there a loneliness test? There actually are some tests you can take to determine if you are struggling with loneliness. For example, you can take [The Loneliness Quiz](#), which is said to be based upon the UCLA Loneliness Scale. (6)

Seven Natural Remedies for Loneliness

Occasional feelings of loneliness are not problematic if you do something to relieve yourself of lonely feelings. According to psychologist John Cacioppo, Ph.D, from the University of Chicago, "Loneliness is actually an evolutionary adaptation that should spur us to get back to socializing, a state in which we are happier and safer." (7) Now let's look at some of the best natural ways to combat feelings of loneliness and get to a much more enjoyable state of mind and being.

1. Less Social Media and Technology

You may enjoy social media at times, but at other times, maybe you've wondered or even searched the Internet for: "Do I have an obsession with Facebook"? Technology and social media can be quite addictive and time-consuming. On the positive side, you are able to keep in touch and maybe even form relationships with people all over the world. On the negative side, you may find you're spending a lot less time connecting with people in person, getting outdoors, exercising, being creative and practicing other habits on a regular basis that help decrease feelings of loneliness.

A study published in 2017 in the *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* found that heavy use of social media platforms, including Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat and Instagram, was correlated with feelings of social isolation. Specifically, this study looked at 1,787 adults in the United States between the ages of 19 and 32 and found that people who spent more than two hours each day on social media had double the likelihood of feeling socially isolated and lonely. Researchers also found that the people visiting social media most often (58 visits or greater each week) were more than three times as likely to feel socially isolated compared to people who visited less than nine times each week. (8, 9)



It's also really important to consider the effects of social media and technology use on children when it comes to loneliness. A U.K.-wide study conducted by the Royal Society for Public Health released in May 2017 revealed that image-focused Instagram "is considered the social media platform most likely to cause young people to feel depressed, anxious and lonely." Snapchat came in second followed by Facebook, Twitter and YouTube. (10)

It's totally up to you what social media you choose to take part in (or allow your children to take part in), but reducing your time using technology in general can make a huge positive impact on your life and actually help with feelings of loneliness. An idea to remember is "disconnect to connect," which means being intentional about being present in the moment, especially when you are spending time with loved ones or doing something you enjoy. **Turn off your phone** when you can or put it on silent. There will always be time to check a text or an email, but you can't get cherished moments back and you can't really enjoy what you're doing when you're not fully there.

2. More Outdoor Time

When you're looking to overcome loneliness, getting out of your house and into the stress-relieving outdoor world is a fabulous idea. You can also choose an outdoor space where interaction with other people will be possible, such as a dog park or a hiking trail. Getting into nature is also a helpful option if you don't currently have the option to see a loved one in person but are looking to **relieve any loneliness depression** feelings. Exposure to sunlight, fresh air and nature are all scientifically known for increasing serotonin levels. What is serotonin? Serotonin is a brain chemical known for improving a

person's state of mind. When serotonin levels are higher, researchers have found that people tend to be happier and "that positive emotions and agreeableness foster congenial relationships with others." So in other words, getting outdoors and boosting those serotonin levels on a regular basis can likely help improve the sympathetic relations you have with others, which can help decrease loneliness. (11)

Fresh air also helps boost oxygen intake, which in turn can help to improve energy and mood. Living in mountainous areas with lower oxygen levels has even been linked to increased rates of depression and suicide. (12) Fresh air is certainly one of the most basic yet essential lifelines of good health.

Anne Frank had one of the best lonely quotes when it comes to nature's healing effect on loneliness. She said, " The best remedy for those who are afraid, lonely or unhappy is to go outside, somewhere where they can be quiet, alone with the heavens, nature and God. Because only then does one feel that all is as it should be." (13) You can try earthing as well, which can help reduce stress hormones.

3. Contact a Friend or Family Member (In a Non-Digital Way)

Sometimes when you feel like you're suffering from burnout or exhaustion, you may think the best thing to do is be alone and keep to yourself, but think twice. Isolating yourself is only helpful when it promotes feelings of solitude rather than loneliness. Remember that solitude is a positive state of being alone while loneliness is a negative state. When you're feeling really stressed out, lonely and/or depressed, it's always important to talk to people you trust and get your feelings out. It's also a great idea to hear their voices on the other end of the phone (rather than a text message) or, even better, see them in person. Let yourself be supported by those around you and you are less likely to feel so alone.

If you don't have anyone you trust to reach out to and your feelings of loneliness are really getting you down, never hesitate to reach out to caring people at places like the [Canadian Mental Health Association](#) or [find a crisis centre](#) if you are having thoughts of suicide.



4. Share Your Living Space

When people feel lonely, they have a harder time handling stress well. Living alone has also been shown to increase the risk for suicide in both the young and the old. If you're struggling with loneliness and live alone, you maybe want to consider having a roommate. A few years back, a Dutch retirement home came up with an answer to loneliness for both the elderly and the young — it actually offered free housing to students if they agreed to spending time with the residents of the retirement home. In exchange for a rent-free living space, the students were required to spend a minimum of 30 hours each month being "good neighbors." This intergenerational living situation is a way of encouraging both the old and the young to interact with each other in a way that can help foster feelings of connectedness rather than isolation and loneliness. (14)

5. Don't Work Too Hard

According to the a 2017 article published in the *Harvard Business Review*, there is a strong correlation between work exhaustion and feelings of loneliness. So the greater the level of burnout due to work, the more lonely people seem to feel. This affects a lot of people today since apparently double the amount of people today say they are **always exhausted** compared to two decades ago. (15)

It makes sense that when we are exhausted we're less likely to feel physically and mentally well, and we're also less likely to have energy for social engagement and positive relationship maintenance. Our jobs, and life in general, can be quite demanding, but do what you can to not overwork yourself and make **natural stress relievers** a part of your daily routine.

6. Avoid Binge-Watching TV

You've probably seen some of those quintessential loneliness pictures featured on various pharmaceutical commercials for depression. Loneliness can certainly lead to depression, and there is a habit that is linked to both. The term "binge-watching" may be common these days, but that wasn't always the case. Watching episode after episode of your favorite show can be fun at times, but research conducted in 2015 showed a link between binge-watching television and feelings of loneliness and depression. (16)

So while watching more than one episode of a favorite show in one sitting can be fun from time to time, watching several episodes every night for hours on end may lead to feelings of isolation and loneliness.

7. Get a Pet

For some people, a furry four-legged friend helps them feel not lonely. Not only are pets unconditional with their love and affection, but research has shown that they help reduce stress and tension while improving the mood of their owners. Animals won't provide the same level of connection as humans, but they are certainly companions that can be with you at home or even on the go. Plus, a dog is a good reason to go to a local dog park and socialize with other dog owners. Pets can also be great conversation starters that lead to new friends. (17)



The benefits of pet ownership have been clear since before people started referring to dogs as "man's best friend," and continue to be helpful today. Read [how pets benefit mental health](#) or [8 Ways Pets Your Pet Can Help Relieve Your Stress](#)

LONELINESS

NATURAL REMEDIES



Less Social Media and Technology

- ▶ Heavy use of social media platforms (Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat) has been correlated with feelings of social isolation (NPR)
- ▶ Image-focused Instagram "is considered the social media platform most likely to cause young people to feel depressed, anxious and lonely" (CNBC)



More Outdoor Time

- ▶ Exposure to sunlight, fresh air and nature are all scientifically known for increasing serotonin levels (NCBI)
- ▶ Fresh air also helps boost oxygen intake, which in turn can help to improve energy and mood (Live Science)



Contact a Friend or Family Member (Non-Digitally)

- ▶ It's important to talk to people you trust and get your feelings out
- ▶ Hear their voices on the other end of the phone (rather than a text message) or, even better, see them in person



Share Your Living Space

- ▶ Living alone has been shown to increase the risk for suicide (Psychology Today)



Don't Work Too Hard

- ▶ There is a strong correlation between work exhaustion and feelings of loneliness (HBR)



Avoid Binge-Watching TV

- ▶ Research conducted in 2015 showed a link between binge-watching television & feelings of loneliness & depression (AAAS)



Get a Pet (WebMD)

- ▶ Pets unconditional with their love and affection
- ▶ They help reduce stress and tension while improving the mood of their owners
- ▶ Pets can also be great conversation starters that lead to new friends

Final Thoughts on Loneliness

This loneliness epidemic is nothing to take lightly since it appears to be more threatening than other top public health concerns like obesity. Plus, feeling lonely makes so many other health problems, both big and small, more likely. It's not surprising that feeling connected to others can help decrease feelings of loneliness, **anxiety** and depression; **boost our immune systems**; and even elongate our life spans.

With the ever-increasing virtual connectedness we now have, it's really important that we all take the time to be with each other in person and get outside on a regular basis. Our mental, physical and emotional health clearly improves from more real forms of connection and from being in nature.

Being physically alone at times is a normal part of life and not automatically problematic, but when loneliness sets in and we don't do anything about it, this is when our health can be negatively impacted. Since loneliness is a state of mind, it's possible to feel lonely even when you're not alone or you're talking to someone online. This is why it's so important to evaluate your life on a regular basis — what habits and choices are truly bringing joy and good health to your life, and what may be negatively affecting you and leading you to feel lonely?

Annie Price (2017). *Loneliness: A Worse Killer than Obesity + What to Do About It*, Dr. Axe: Food is Medicine.*

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*Canadian statistics added