

UNDER THE HOOD

# Lonely No More: 6 Surprising Ways Being Alone Is Hazardous To Your Health

Aug 12, 2015 03:30 PM By Lizette Borrelli @lizcelineb



Social or emotional isolation can affect your health in a variety of ways, from disrupted sleep to poor nutrition. *Eric Moreno, CC BY 2.0*

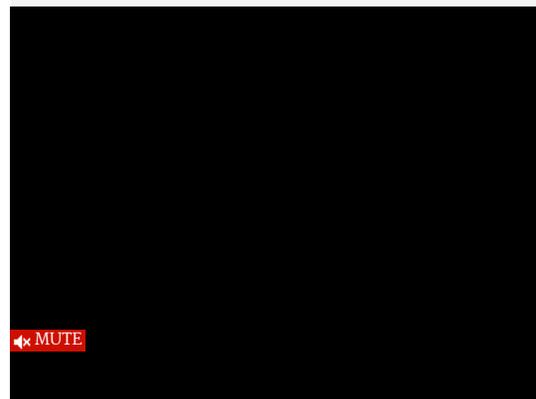
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Living in a digital age allows us to constantly be connected to each other via the Internet, social media, and our electronic devices. However, there's a huge disconnect between many of our online lives and reality. As humans, we are meant to be socially connected, but while many of us may be connected to a vast social network online, events like a breakup, a move, or a falling out with friends can cause us to lose those in the real world — causing us to fall into loneliness.

Twenty percent of Americans, or about 60 million people, suffer from loneliness that is severe enough to become their main source of unhappiness. Loneliness is not determined by the number of relationships we have, but rather by our perception of how socially or emotionally isolated we are. For example, we can be surrounded by family, friends, and colleagues but still feel disconnected and unwanted.

Holly LaBarbera, a licensed marriage and family therapist in Fremont, Calif., says we are an inherently social species that depends on each other from the moment we're born. "We evolved to live and work together for survival, and we still need emotional connection for healthy functioning," she told *Medical Daily* in an email. "People tell themselves that having Facebook friends or Twitter followers means they are connected,



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but social media does not provide the meaningful connections that people need to be emotionally healthy and vibrant — to really thrive in their lives."

These feelings can put our social lives on hold and lead us to many lonely days. Feelings of loneliness can be significantly damaging to our health because they come with an array of symptoms, including helplessness, worthlessness, excessive worrying, irritability, and disrupted sleep. Although loneliness has not been classified as a disease, it affects our health in surprising ways.

Here are the unexpected ways loneliness can be hazardous to your health.

## DISRUPTED SLEEP

People who feel lonely are more likely to get a poor night's sleep when compared to those who don't feel lonely. A 2011 [study](#) published in the journal *Sleep* found loneliness was a "significant predictor" of disrupted sleep, causing symptoms like tossing and turning. "Humans' social nature may partly manifest through our dependence on feeling secure in our social environment to sleep well," the researchers wrote.

## PHYSICAL PAIN

Feeling excluded, rejected, or unwanted can affect a person in the same way as physical pain. A 2003 [study](#) published in the journal *Science* found that when we feel lonely from exclusion, our brains respond in the same way as they would when we feel real, physical pain, releasing naturally occurring pain relievers, such as endorphins.

## POOR NUTRITION

Takeout for one can be good for a night in, but frequently dining alone can lead a person to make unhealthy choices. A 2013 [report](#) published by the Centre for Diet and Activity Research found single and widowed men and women aged 50 and over ate less vegetables a day than married or cohabitating couples. When people try to cure these emotional roadblocks, it's easy to choose the fastest, most convenient route to happiness, but it's not always the best.

[April Masini](#), relationship expert and author, says these people usually end up eating, "hence the term comfort food, which is better expressed as comforting food," she told *Medical Daily* in an email. "We eat foods that make us feel good, and when we're lonely, we have foods that distract us from feeling lonely."

## PREMATURE DEATH

Living alone or feeling lonely can increase your risk of premature death. A recent [study](#) published in the journal *Perspectives in Psychological Science* found being well connected was associated with greater longevity. Loneliness increased a person's risk of death by 26 percent, social isolation by 29 percent, and living alone by 32 percent. These risks are linked to well-established causes of death, including obesity, substance abuse, lack of immunization, mental health disorders, and violence or injury.

## DEMENTIA RISK

Loneliness or simply living alone may increase a person's risk of serious memory problems. A 2012 [study](#) published in the *Journal of Neurology, Neurosurgery & Psychiatry* found people who report feeling lonely — independent of how many friends and family surrounded them — were more likely to develop dementia than those who lived on their own. The researchers also found other relevant factors, like age, raise the risk of dementia by 64 percent. The study did not consider a link between Alzheimer's.

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Audrey Hope, a counselor and therapist at Seasons Malibu in Malibu, Calif., says loneliness comes with an energy that can be detrimental to our health. “The energy of this feeling is like being on the top of a staircase and gradually ending at the basement, in the root of despair. It is real. It does exist. And it can cause great suffering and illness,” she told *Medical Daily* in an email.

## HEARTBREAK

Loneliness can literally break your heart. People who report chronic loneliness can suffer from tissue damage, according to a 2011 study published in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*. The study found this was caused by an overexpression of genes in cells that produce an inflammatory response. Long-term inflammation can lead to heart disease and cancer.

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Liz is a Senior Reporter at Medical Daily who is an outdoorsy sports enthusiast focused on sexual health, relationships and healthy living. [read more](#)

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**Paul Sanders** · Author at Get The Friends You Want

I truly think that a good education on making friends can go a long way in combating loneliness. From understanding your own social needs (we're social animals, after all), to understanding the basic building blocks of social skills, conversation, and the process of making friends. Reaching out and making friends is a challenge for many people. Hopefully, we can change that. I try and do my best to spread that message at: <https://getthefriendsyouwant.com>

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