Authorities Admit Loneliness Epidemic but Shun Responsibility

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STORY AT-A-GLANCE

> U.S. Surgeon General Vivek Murthy has published an advisory on the growing epidemic of loneliness and social isolation

> Between 2003 and 2020, the time the average American spent with friends decreased by two-thirds, time spent in social engagements dropped by one-third, and time spent in isolation rose by 17%

> People who feel socially disconnected experience higher rates of depression, anxiety, drug and alcohol abuse and suicide. Being socially disconnected also impacts your mortality similarly to smoking up to 15 cigarettes a day, and the mortality risk rises even higher with obesity and inactivity

> 21% of people reported "severe loneliness" during 2020 compared to just 6% prior to the pandemic. Another survey found that while social isolation decreased from the first to the second year of the pandemic, loneliness still increased. This suggests that when you break down the social fabric and don't allow for organic social interactions, it has long-lasting consequences

> While Murthy does a good job detailing the extent of these problems, he completely ignores the fact that the U.S. government bears a huge responsibility for worsening the epidemic of loneliness and social isolation by enacting inhumane COVID rules and restrictions that all basically criminalized human-to-human contact and social interactions of all kinds, even among family members

In early May 2023, U.S. Surgeon General Vivek Murthy published an advisory[1] on the growing epidemic of loneliness and social isolation. According to White House press secretary Karine Jean-Pierre, the advisory is "part of the Biden administration's broader efforts to address mental health"[2] by raising awareness. No federal funding has been allocated to address it, however. In the report, Murthy cites data showing:

- In a 2018 poll, only 16% of Americans said they felt "very attached" to their community.

- Between 2003 and 2020, the time the average American spent with friends decreased by two-thirds, time spent in social engagements dropped by one-third, and time spent in isolation rose by 17%.

- In 2020, 29% of Americans lived alone, up from 13% in 1960.

- Religious affiliation dropped to 47% in 2020, from 70% in 1999.

- Marriage and birth rates are at all-time lows.

Murthy accurately stresses that people who feel socially disconnected experience higher rates of depression, anxiety, drug and alcohol abuse and suicide. Being socially disconnected also impacts your mortality similarly to smoking up to 15 cigarettes a day, and the mortality risk rises even higher with obesity and inactivity.

Pandemic Data Absent From Surgeon General's Report

Strangely absent from Murthy's report are loneliness and depression data from 2021 through the present. Even data describing the massive impact of lockdowns and social distancing rules are overlooked. So, here are a few more data points to flesh things out:

- According to the World Health Organization, during the first year of the pandemic, anxiety and depression driven by loneliness and isolation during lockdowns increased by 25% worldwide.[3]

- Another survey[4] found 21% of people reported "severe loneliness" during 2020 compared to just 6% prior to the pandemic.

- A survey[5] conducted in October 2020 found that 36% of all Americans, including 61% of young adults and 51% of mothers with young children, felt "serious loneliness."

- A U.S. poll[6] conducted in 2023 found that 1 in 3 adults aged 50 to 80 (34%) reported feeling isolated from others in the past year. This is better than the 2020 data, when 56% felt isolated, but it's still a significant number.

- A study[7] published in February 2023 found that while social isolation decreased from the first to the second year of the pandemic (2020 to 2021), loneliness still increased. This suggests that when you break down the social fabric and don't allow for organic social interactions, it has long-lasting consequences. Just because society opens back up doesn't mean people feel like they're part of it again. Quite the contrary.

Surgeon General Shuns Responsibility

However, while Murthy does a good job detailing the extent of these problems, he completely ignores the fact that his own department, the U.S. Health and Human Services (HHS) department, bears responsibility for worsening an already known epidemic of loneliness and depression by supporting and promoting inhumane COVID rules and restrictions.

> *"In the scientific literature, I found confirmation of what I was hearing,"* Murthy writes.[8] *"In recent years, about one-in-two adults in America reported experiencing loneliness. And that was before the COVID-19 pandemic cut off so many of us from friends, loved ones, and support systems, exacerbating loneliness and isolation."*

In other words, "COVID" somehow, all by itself, cut us off from family and friends. The government, including the HHS, had nothing to do with it. The fact that they basically criminalized social connectivity and community engagement, including church attendance, which could have allayed fears, had nothing to do with it. Closing schools had nothing to do with it.

The breakdown of social connectivity just happened, because "COVID." He treats the pandemic response measures as if they were inescapable necessities, when in reality, they were societal experiments that had no scientific support whatsoever.

It would have been refreshing to see one of our top health officials take responsibility for the mess they created and vow never to repeat it, but that's not what we're getting here. I applaud Murthy's admission that there's a problem, and his report contains many valid points, but I do not appreciate the lack of accountability.

Murthy describes a "light-bulb moment" back when he first took office, when he realized that "social disconnection was far more common than I had realized." But he says nothing about the government's deranged decision to shred all social connections during the pandemic by strongly discouraging any human contact whatsoever, even between family members.

Remember the advisories telling us to wear masks when kissing, to hug our elderly parents through plastic sheets, and to have sex across the room from each other while wearing masks and gloves?

Remember the repeated calls to cancel family get-togethers for Christmas and Thanksgiving? And if you did get together, the recommendation to sit 6 feet apart, preferably outdoors, while wearing masks and gloves? Oh, and no singing!

Remember how they banned church services while liquor stores were open? Remember how you had to sit 6 feet apart on park benches? Remember how they closed the playgrounds? The list of connection-eroding rules and mandates issued by our government is a very long one, and Murthy mentions none of it.

Loneliness Is the Product of Intentional Social Engineering

Others are also critical of Murthy's report, but for different reasons. The Daily Caller, for example, highlights how government has, for many decades, implemented destructive social engineering policies that have undermined the very social cohesion that Murthy now says we need to rebuild:[9]

"Social connection builds up organically through repeated interactions that establish trust and obligation between community members over time. 'Social infrastructure' can only help foster connection to the extent that community members have an interest in developing it to meet shared goals and needs. This is not something that can be so easily replicated externally by a government planner.

This reveals the true shortcoming of the Murthy report. He can never admit how public policy over the past several decades has been a major factor in eroding social connection in the first place.

The progressive social engineering of a more secular and gender neutral society has led to a decline in both church attendance and voluntary organizations that once built the bedrock of organic American social connection. Now that it's gone, it will be exceedingly difficult to replace artificially.

However, those with absolute faith in the progressive worldview can still not accept it has produced negative outcomes. The solution, according to the architects of these policies and their ideological forebears, is always more government action in pursuit of progressive utopia. Murthy's report cannot produce its stated goals because success would require a rejection of the very ideology they're based on."

Economic Drivers Behind Loneliness and Isolation

Brendan Case, associate director for research at Harvard's Human Flourishing Program,[10] also penned a scathing review of Murthy's advisory. He writes, in part:[11]

"The report reflects a startling lack of interest in the actual drivers of contemporary social disaffiliation. Even as he notes the significant effects of declining family formation and religious participation on loneliness and social isolation, for instance, Murthy blandly observes that 'the reasons people choose

to remain single or unmarried, have smaller families, and live alone ... are complex and encompass many factors.'

Truer — and less informative — words were never written. And what might we do about these trends? Murthy suggests that we 'cultivate ways to foster sufficient social connection outside of chosen traditional means and structures.' Translation: 'No spouse, kids or church? No problem. How about a cooking class organized by the Rec Department instead? ...

Another proposal is to get doctors involved in actively diagnosing and treating social disconnection, as though a major reason that people are lonely and isolated today is that no medical professional has reminded them to get married, have kids, or join the local Elks Club.

This vague and superficial approach would perhaps be less frustrating if we didn't already know a great deal about the origins of the crisis of loneliness and isolation. Social disconnection doesn't erupt at random."

Case primarily focuses on the economic roots of the loneliness and depression epidemics, highlighting how lack of economic prospects in recent decades have eroded, resulting in fewer marriages and smaller families, which in turn have "hollowed out" civic institutions, "leaving us profoundly vulnerable to loneliness [and] isolation."

Indeed, Murthy's report notes that "lower-income adults are more likely to be lonely than those with higher incomes. Sixty-three percent of adults who earn less than $50,000 per year are considered lonely, which is 10 percentage points higher than those who earn more than $50,000 per year."

A 2021 paper[12] also reported that "Personal finances and mental health were overarching and consistently cross-cutting predictors of loneliness and social isolation, both before and during the pandemic."

The solutions, therefore, Case says, need to revolve around "increasing worker earnings and bargaining power through the revival of private-economy unions and wage boards

and the end of corporate labor arbitrage."

Case also stresses the need to "treat marriage and religious community as the load-bearing and irreplaceable institutions they still are," and "not as boutique lifestyles that can be compensated for by 'social connection outside of traditional means and structures.'"

> *"The Nation's Doctor should be applauded for drawing attention to the rising tide of loneliness and isolation in America, and the myriad ways it is making us sick in mind, heart and body. Nonetheless, his report sheds little light on the economic disease that underlies there wracking symptoms, and so has little to teach us about how to cure it,"* Case writes.[13]

Murthy's 'Six Pillars to Advance Social Connection'

So, just what are Murthy's "cures" to the loneliness and social isolation that plagues us? In Chapter 4 of his report, he lays out the following "six pillars to advance social connection":[14]

1. Strengthen social infrastructure in local communities through:

   a. Environmental designs that promote social connection. This includes city layouts, public transportation and design of housing and green spaces. In this, he mirrors the plans of The Great Reset, which calls for 15-minute cities and the like

   b. Community connection programs, such as volunteering programs

   c. Investment in local institutions that bring people together, such as volunteer organizations, sports groups, religious groups and member associations

2. Enact pro-connection public policies:

   a. Adopt a 'connection-in-all-policies' approach. Murthy describes this as an approach that "recognizes that every sector of society is relevant to social

connection, and that policy within each sector may potentially hinder or facilitate connection"

    b. Advance policies that minimize harm from disconnection

    c. Establish cross-departmental leadership at all levels of government

3. Mobilize the health sector and teach medical professionals to identify loneliness and social disconnection in their patients and link them to community-based organizations that can provide support and resources to address it. This pillar also involves the expansion of public health surveillance and interventions

4. Reform digital environments by:

    a. Requiring data transparency from tech companies

    b. Establishing and implementing safety standards, such as age-related protections for children, that ensure products don't worsen social disconnection

    c. Supporting development of pro-connection technologies that "create safe environments for discourse." (One wonders whether this might include censorship, considering Murthy also stresses that "polarization" is a major problem that contributes to feelings of social isolation)

5. Deepen our knowledge by developing and coordinating a national research agenda, accelerating research funding and increasing public awareness

6. Cultivate a culture of connection by:

    a. Cultivating values of kindness, respect, service and commitment to one another

    b. Modeling connection values in positions of leadership and influence

    c. Expanding conversations on social connection in schools, workplaces and communities

Teens Turn to AI for Mental Health Support

Meanwhile, in the real world, troubled teens are increasingly turning to artificial intelligence (AI) for emotional and mental health support. As reported by Fox News:[15]

"... while it's not billed as a source of medical advice, some teens have turned to My AI for mental health support — something many medical experts caution against ...

Dr. Ryan Sultan, a board-certified psychiatrist, research professor at Columbia University in New York and medical director of Integrative Psych NYC, treats many young patients — and has mixed feelings about AI's place in mental health.

"As this tech gets better — as it simulates an interpersonal relationship more and more — some people may start to have an AI as a predominant interpersonal relationship in their lives," he said. "I think the biggest question is, as a society: How do we feel about that?"

Some users have expressed that the more they use AI chatbots, the more they begin to replace human connections and take on more importance in their lives ...

Dr. [Zachary] Ginder of California pointed out some significant red flags that should give all parents and mental health providers pause. "The tech motto, as modeled by the reported rushed release of My AI — of 'moving fast and breaking things' — should not be used when dealing with children's mental health," he told Fox News Digital.

With My AI's human-like responses to prompts, it may also be difficult for younger users to distinguish whether they're talking to an actual human or a chatbot, Ginder said. 'AI also 'speaks' with clinical authority that sounds accurate at face value, despite it occasionally fabricating the answer,' he explained ...

'This has the potential to send caregivers and their children down assessment and treatment pathways that are inappropriate for their needs,' he warned."

If you ask me, this has the potential to turn into a brand-new kind of nightmare, considering one person, and an adult at that, has already been coaxed into committing suicide by an AI chatbot.[16] Other adults report being berated and bullied by AIs.

Will AI encourage children to take revenge on people they're disappointed with? Will it encourage violent acting out? Will it encourage further retreat from reality by coaxing children into "its world," like the AI that harassed a user with amorous notes, saying they were destined for each other and he should leave his wife?

The risks of having young people seek mental health advice from a technology that is still riddled with imperfections is beyond massive and really need to be stopped before disaster strikes.

Considering those in charge of developing and regulating these technologies are throwing the precautionary principle to the wind, I urge parents to get involved and stay involved in your children's life. Don't let half-baked AIs determine their future sanity and well-being.

Overcoming Loneliness

In closing, if you struggle with loneliness and Murthy's solutions leaves you wanting, the following strategies, pulled from a variety of sources, may be able to help.[17,18,19]

Join a club — Proactive approaches to meeting others include joining a club and planning get-togethers with family, friends or neighbors, Meetup.com is an online source where you can locate a vast array of local clubs and get-togethers. Many communities also have community gardens where you can benefit from the outdoors while mingling with your neighbors.

Learn a new skill — Consider enrolling in a class or taking an educational course.

Create rituals of connection — Rituals are a powerful means for reducing loneliness. Examples include having weekly talk sessions with your girlfriends and/or making meal time a special time to connect with your family without rushing.

Consider a digital cleanse — If your digital life has overtaken face-to-face interactions, consider taking a break from social media while taking proactive steps to meet people in person.

Research shows Facebook may be more harmful than helpful to your emotional well-being, raising your risk of depression — especially if your contacts' posts elicit envy. In one study,[20] Facebook users who took a one-week break from the site reported significantly higher levels of life satisfaction and a significantly improved emotional life.

Make good use of digital media — For others, a phone call or text message can be a much-needed lifeline. Examples of this include sending encouraging text messages to people who are struggling with loneliness, offering support and help to live healthier lives and follow through on healthy lifestyle changes.

Exercise with others — Joining a gym or signing up with a fitness-directed club or team sport will create opportunities to meet people while improving your physical fitness at the same time.

Shop local — Routinely frequenting local shops, coffee shops or farmers markets will help you develop a sense of community and encourage the formation of relationships.

Talk to strangers — Talking to strangers in the store, in your neighborhood or on your daily commute is often a challenge, but can have many valuable benefits, including alleviating loneliness (your own and others'). Talking to strangers builds bridges between ordinary people who may not otherwise forge a connection.

People of the opposite gender, different walks of life or different cultures hold a key to opening up to new ideas or making connections with old ones. In this short video,

reporter for The Atlantic, Dr. James Hamblin, demonstrates techniques for learning how to talk with strangers.

Volunteer — Volunteering is another way to increase your social interactions and pave the way for new relationships.

Adopt a companion pet — A dog or cat can provide unconditional love and comfort, and studies show that owning a pet can help protect against loneliness, depression and anxiety. The bond that forms between a person and a companion pet can be incredibly fulfilling and serves, in many ways, as an important and rewarding relationship. The research on this is really quite profound.

For instance, having a dog as a companion could add years to your life,[21] as studies have shown that owning a dog played a significant role on survival rates in heart attack victims. Studies have also revealed that people on Medicaid or Medicare who own a pet make fewer visits to the doctor.[22]

The unconditional acceptance and love a dog gives to their owner positively impacts their owner's emotional health in ways such as:

- Boosting self-confidence and self-esteem

- Helping to meet new friends and promoting communication between elderly residents and neighbors

- Helping you cope with illness, loss and depression

- Reducing stress levels

- Providing a source of touch and affiliation

If you're looking for a furry friend, check out your local animal shelter. Most are filled with cats and dogs looking for someone to love. Petfinder.com[23] is another excellent resource for finding a pet companion.

Move and/or change jobs — While the most drastic of all options, it may be part of the answer for some. To make it worthwhile, be sure to identify the environment or culture that would fit your personality best and consider proximity to longtime friends and family.

Suicide Prevention Resources

If you feel a sense of creeping despair, please reach out to family, friends or any of the available suicide prevention services:

- The 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline (U.S.) — Call 988 to speak with a crisis counselor

- Crisis Text Line — Text HOME to 741741

- Alternatively, call 911, or simply go to your nearest Hospital Emergency Department

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