

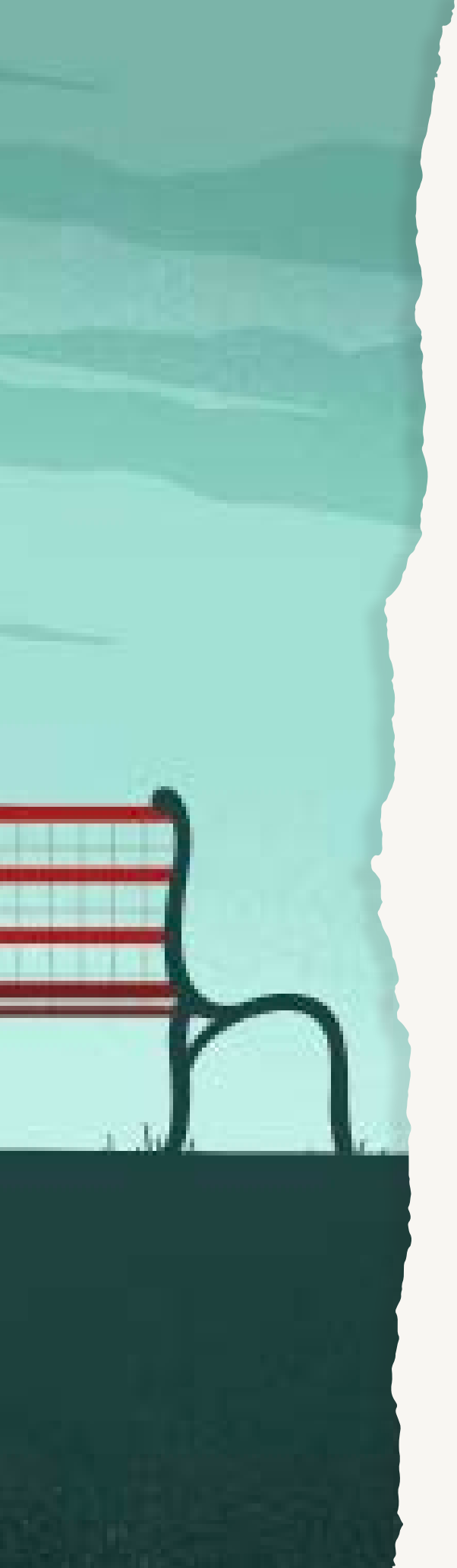


ILLUSTRATION BY **DAVIDE BONAZZI**

THE LONELINESS EPIDEMIC

+WHAT SCIENCE TELLS US ABOUT OUR NEED TO CONNECT.

Several times a week, Rita Goldhor picks up her phone and dials into a class or support group offered through the national Well Connected program for older adults. Goldhor, who lives in San Leandro, is 96 years old, legally blind, and confined to a wheelchair, but that doesn't stop her from participating in a writers' group, two support groups for those with vision impairments, and a "Gratitude Group" in which people with challenges and disabilities take turns sharing something positive.

"Without Well Connected, I think I would be severely depressed," she says. "These groups form a community and even a family for you. You make a connection."

Goldhor may not know it, but she is in step with a growing field of science around the health benefits of positive human connection. In a report released in May, "Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation," United States surgeon general Vivek Murthy shared scores of studies showing that loneliness is rising in our nation and contributing to many negative health impacts. On the flip side, positive social connections can protect our health and contribute to better mental, emotional, and physical well-being.

There may be no one-size-fits-all answer to the "loneliness epidemic," but many experts have ideas about how we can reverse the isolation trend we face as individuals and communities.

WRITTEN BY **ESTHER CHAPMAN**

THE PROTECTIVE EFFECTS OF CONNECTION | Loneliness is a normal part of the human experience, especially when we go through a major life change or disruption. A child moves to a new neighborhood, a young adult graduates from college and starts a new job, a parent leaves the workplace to stay home with young children, or an older adult loses his spouse and must navigate loneliness alongside his grief.

These transient seasons of loneliness can actually be helpful, prompting us to reach out to others to build–or rebuild–connections. However, chronic loneliness and isolation can contribute to negative long-term health impacts, such as:

29%
INCREASE IN THE RISK OF HEART DISEASE

+HIGHER RISK OF COGNITIVE DECLINE IN OLDER ADULTS

+WEAKER IMMUNE RESPONSE TO DISEASE

32%
INCREASE IN RISK OF STROKE

+HIGHER RATES OF DEPRESSION IN PEOPLE OF ALL AGES

On the other hand, positive social connection produces beneficial health outcomes almost from the moment we enter the world.

"Early in life, if we're attended to, nurtured, and supported, we end up in a category called 'securely attached,' and that makes us healthier, happier, and more satisfied in relationships throughout adulthood," says Emiliana Simon-Thomas, Ph.D., science director at the Greater Good Science Center at UC Berkeley.

Social connection can prompt us to take on the healthy habits of our peers, studies show, such as becoming more physically active, quitting smoking, and getting involved in rewarding activities like volunteering. In the workplace, those with supportive work relationships tend to report more job satisfaction and less burnout.

Close community even seems to contribute to a longer life span. When scientists studied the five areas of the world with the longest-living populations, referred to as Blue Zones, they discovered one commonality was a tight-knit community. Close community provides a positive network of support that elevates happiness and well-being and also reinforces shared practices (diet, exercise) that promote better health and longer life.

HOW WE LOST CONNECTION | Though many people believe the COVID-19 pandemic caused our current state of isolation, the trend actually started decades earlier. Time-use studies beginning in 2003 show people spending more time alone and less time with family and friends. According to other research, 90 percent of those who say they are not lonely have three or more confidants, yet almost half (49 percent) of Americans have three or fewer close friends, up from 27 percent in 1990.

Other contributors to isolation include growing political, racial, and economic polarization that has built mistrust. An increase in remote work has weakened camaraderie among workmates, and historically low involvement in churches, synagogues, and mosques has removed yet another element of community for many people.

And let's not forget technology and social media, which have proved to be a mixed bag. They enable connection for people like Goldhor but leave others feeling more isolated, self-conscious, and lonely.

"I've heard it said that 'social media makes social people more social and lonely people more lonely,'" says Nancy Maguire, Ph.D., director of clinical care for Sutter Health Mental Health and Addiction Care. "People who tend to be more extroverted use it to connect with people and make plans to meet, while those who are more withdrawn or lonely use it to escape."

STEPS TO CONNECTION | Despite these powerful cultural trends, individuals can take steps to move themselves out of isolation and into community.

Rondi Gilbert did that through home sharing. Recently retired from teaching English at UC Berkeley, 78-year-old Gilbert realized she could use some company, so she decided to reach out to Home Match, a Bay Area program that matches homeowners with compatible boarders to share expenses and household tasks and build connections.

Gilbert's new housemate, a 62-year-old woman, was in need of a safe and affordable place to live in the Bay Area. A

few months into the arrangement, Gilbert says things are going very well.

"It's nice to have someone come in the door in the evening, someone to talk with at the end of the day. People do better if they live with other people and see themselves as members of a community," she says.

Home sharing is just one way East Bay residents are finding connection and companionship through alternative housing choices. Some adults are moving to 55-and-older communities or heading to independent senior living complexes where they can participate in communal activities and dining.

Other adults, such as millennials and young families, are moving into cohousing communities where they have private living space and shared areas, such as kitchens and recreation rooms, that foster community. (Check out East Bay Cohousing at ebcoho.org.)

Another antidote to loneliness is to find a group of people with common interests. Meetup.com is a good place to start. There, you can discover dozens of local groups geared toward every interest from hiking (East Bay Hikers) to biking (Wanderlust Motorcycle Club) to speculative fiction writing (East Bay Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers).

Volunteering is also a helpful way to make connections and give back. Volunteering has been shown to lower stress and blood pressure, reduce depression, and increase self-esteem and physical activity.

"Feeling a sense of purpose helps reduce feelings of loneliness," says Maguire.

Volunteer opportunities are available for every interest and stage of life, even families with young children and housebound adults. To find the right fit for your schedule and interests, check out volunteermatch.org.

THINKING BIGGER | Though these self-directed efforts are effective at reducing loneliness, they may not meet the needs of those struggling with serious and long-term mental health challenges. Some people may want to seek help from their primary care doctor or a behavioral health specialist.

Maguire says more health professionals now look at loneliness as a social determinant of health and an important part of addressing "whole person care: mind, body, and soul."

"We look at [the client's] environment, social life, and spirituality and determine which areas need care. If someone is identified as being socially isolated, a different intervention, like case management or social work, may be a component of their care," she explains.

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Maguire tells the story of a patient who was experiencing serious mental health struggles. After an assessment, his medical team found that his hearing aids were not working properly (a common cause of isolation in older adults) and his medications were not being taken properly. When those problems were corrected, his mental health quickly improved.

Loneliness may seem like a personal problem, but some of the best remedies may end up coming from broader systemic changes, such as better policies, infrastructure, and corporate commitment.

"There are societal or structural ways city planners or organizations might enact policies that encourage behaviors that buffer against loneliness," says Simon-Thomas of Greater Good. "Technology companies must be held to a different standard when it comes to offsetting the kinds of use patterns they've been monetized to prioritize, which ultimately contribute to loneliness. And any effort to make community events available and safe and appealing is worthwhile."

In his report, surgeon general Vivek Murthy called loneliness and isolation a "public health concern" not unlike smoking or cancer. It's now up to communities like ours to heed that warning and take action, initiating opportunities and interventions that will make us healthier, happier, and more fulfilled, one connection at a time.