

Book Review: *Together: The Healing Power of Human Connection in a Sometimes-Lonely World*

by Vivek H. Murthy, M.D., MBA
(Harper Wave, ISBN 9780062913302)

Reviewed By
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In *Together: The Healing Power of Human Connection in a Sometimes-Lonely World* (2023), Vivek H. Murthy, 19th Surgeon General of the United States, explains that loneliness is *not just* an increasingly common unfortunate life experience – rather, it is *a public health problem*. Loneliness contributes to a variety of physical and mental illnesses, including depression, and can lead health-compromising behaviors, including suicide. Although this is a weighty topic, Murthy’s writing is lively and easy to read. His chapters are filled with stories of real people he has met as physician, researcher, and citizen, which make them enjoyable reading as well as informative.

The book has two parts. Part I. **Making Sense of Loneliness**, includes five chapters that explain the larger picture: what loneliness is, why is it a health hazard, why is it prevalent in our society, and why now. Part II. **Building a More Connected Life**, discusses ways to reduce loneliness in adults and children.

Part I

Years ago, as a newly practicing doctor, Murthy noticed that loneliness was a pervasive problem at the hospital in which he worked. This was before Covid limited visits to patients in medical settings. Many patients had no visitors; others had very few. Without human connection, patients suffered mentally and physically-- although medical providers did their best to provide some comfort, they could not fill the gap.

Murthy distinguishes loneliness from isolation and solitude. Loneliness is an emotional, self-perpetuating condition that leads to self-destructive behaviors, such as alcohol or drug abuse to relieve the pain. Isolation refers to being physically away from and out of touch

with others. Isolation is a risk factor for loneliness, but being isolated for a purpose does not necessarily lead to loneliness. It is possible to feel lonely while in a group of people, and possible to feel connected when isolated. Loneliness is an emotional state, not a physical state. Solitude is a peaceful state of voluntary aloneness. Most of us need time by ourselves to think, reflect, and take stock.

Chapter 2 discusses the evolution, or the biological basis of loneliness. Because being part of a group was essential for safety in early human experience, “our bodies read isolation, and often the threat of isolation, as an emergency” (p. 38). Isolation, or finding oneself among strangers, led to hypervigilance. As a result, persistent loneliness put stress on the body, leading to increased risk of heart disease and other chronic illnesses.

Chapter 3 focuses on the cultural differences in social expectations, and how they can set different thresholds for loneliness. In some cultures, shared beliefs bring comfort and connection, but for those who have feelings and/or beliefs outside those typical of their culture or subculture, loneliness could be overwhelming. Comfort comes when there is common ground and yet individuals are able to be different. Being intertwined was necessary for our early ancestors. “But social change is every bit as real as the signals flashing through our emotional wiring, and therein lies the tension. We no longer live in a world of isolated and insular tribes and villages. We no longer are likely to stay in one location with the same group all our whole lives. We no longer have any rational justification for attacking or excluding others simply because they don’t look like us. Nor are we condemned to wander in the wilderness forever if we don’t fit into the community where we’re

born. We're still wired as if all those conditions were true, but they are not." (p. 95)

Which leads to the question of **Chapter 4, Why Now?** Social change is one big reason. Fewer people are attending religious institutions. Fewer people are members of community organizations. Fewer people are inviting people into each other's homes. The erosion of these forms of social engagement has led to less human interaction. Instead, many turn to online interaction, which is superficial, unless on-line contacts is augmenting real connection with friends and loved ones between in-person visits.

Migration is another big reason. With so many people moving and immigrating, the loss of connection becomes profound. Faraway relatives cannot meet all of a person's needs for social connections, whereas language and culture often serve as barriers to becoming close to neighbors. In addition, immigration often leads to underemployment or unemployment because of different licensing requirements, or government policies in the United States. All of these factors add to the likelihood of experiencing loneliness and contribute to the increase of suicides.

Age is an additional factor. As the human lifespan has increased, more people are living years after their partners and close friends die. This phenomenon contributes to loneliness. The Village Movement, born in Boston, has expanded into many different parts of the country. Individuals who desire to age in place join together with others in their geographic community to help each other, sharing their problems and solutions and serving the functions that kin used to serve.

Facilitating connection with new and different people requires "the prepolitical layer of voluntary association" (p. 146) that reminds individuals of our shared humanity. Many of us join community organizations -- community gardens, book groups, and hiking clubs -- in order to be engaged with things that interest us. The others in the groups may well have different political perspectives. But forming relationships where we first meet as human beings with shared interests can enable us to find more common ground when we move into conflicted areas of thought. Murthy provides an interesting example of a white nationalist and Jewish man becoming friends, after bridging their private and public lives at Shabbat dinners that included Jews, immigrants, and members of the LGBTQ community. Eventually, the white nationalist shifted his beliefs.

A recent study by the Pew Research Center found that 61% of adults in the United States say that having a close friend is essential for a fulfilling life, more than

those who mentioned a marriage partner or children. In the same study, eight percent reported having no close friends and another seven percent only one. This reality reflects a great deal of loneliness (Pew Research Center 2023). More than twenty percent of Americans over 18 report that they often or always feel lonely or isolated (Cummins & Zaleski 2023).

One characteristic of loneliness is that it hides itself. Lonely people become closed off, act defensive, and push others away. "The main reason for this behavior is fear, sometimes amounting to terror, that becomes embedded in the trauma of loneliness. It's a fear of being hurt, aimed at those who might reject us. And it's a fear of being abandoned, which can turn to anger -- an even violence -- at those perceived to be leaving or ignoring us" (p. 156). Research indicates a connection between loneliness and violence.

Chapter 5 is filled with stories about lonely people and organizations that help them. For example, the Anti-Recidivism Coalition (ARC) in Los Angeles is devoted to assisting men who had have been released from prison. This chapter helped me understand better the attractions and limitations of gang membership for lonely boys/young men. Joining a gang brought love, but that love was conditional on following the gang code which often led to violence. "Loneliness can beget violence, which perpetuates loneliness" (p. 163). Those who recover and thrive often do so by helping others or providing some form or service that feels meaningful and connects them with others. Having a sense of purpose shifts the focus from avoiding danger to working with others for a common goal. ARC provides connections to safe activities that are therapeutic. "... service operates like a back door out of loneliness into social revival" (p. 168).

Part II

In times of big change -- like starting a new school or job, or moving to a new region -- it is easy to feel disconnected from ourselves as well as from others. In order to connect with others, Murthy says that must first know ourselves. "Self-knowledge is not egotistical or self-aggrandizing. The goal is to examine our natural instincts, feelings, and behaviors honestly, to come to understand them better so that they inform our choices instead of colliding with them" (p. 201).

Friendship is crucial to our mental and physical health. Some people make friends easily; others have a harder time. Knowing oneself is a good start to making friends, but it is not always enough. The most beneficial

relationships are mutual, friends who support each other reciprocally. “What makes a relationship “mutual”? Listening and helping each other is important, but the most fundamental element may be what lies beneath those interactions: reciprocal feelings. ... In the most basic terms, friends show that they care about each other, and in so doing, they mirror each other’s human value.” (p. 217)

In **Chapter 7**, Murthy presents friendships as three rings, or three concentric circles of connection: Intimate, Relational, and Collective. We share ourselves the most with our inner circle of intimate friends, the ones with whom we have mutual bonds of affection and trust. “These are our romantic partners, the close friends and family that we depend on in a crisis, the people we want to spend time with on a frequent basis.” (p. 219) The next level includes casual friends, with whom we share support and connection. We also need to be a part of a larger community, the collective circle, with whom we share a sense of shared purpose and identity. An example of my inner circle from my professorial life is a best friend with whom I taught and coauthored articles; the members of my psychology department were in my middle circle; and my colleagues at the university were in my outer circle. According to Murthy, I was fortunate to have a close friend at work, because “having a friend at work makes us feel safer, more resilient and calmer when disagreements arise and more likely to support one another emotionally and physically.” (p. 230) Murthy reports a Gallop poll that indicates that having a close work friend is more important for women than for men. I imagine that is because women face more barriers in the workplace.

Friendships take time – the more intimate they are, the more time they take. If we *do not* spend time with close friends, they are likely to move out of our inner circle. Likewise, middle circle friends may move closer with more time and energy. That is why joining a group may lead to friendship, as well as provide sociability. Even small, spontaneous interactions can lift our mood and energy level. Human connection matters, even with strangers. Chatting with a stranger during travel on public transportation can lead to smiles and feeling good. Being of short stature, I sometimes have to ask for help reaching items at the grocery store. More often than not, those I ask appear happy to be asked and share a few pleasant words.

Chapter 8 focuses on teaching children to care for others. Parents and teachers prioritize achievement. Many programs focus on preventing bullying, but a child sitting alone at lunch, being ignored in the hallways, or

otherwise not being socially accepted suffers although not being bullied.

This chapter presents research which indicates the long-term damage that social isolation can foretell for adolescents. “The power of popularity typically rises during the middle school years, between ages twelve and fifteen, and levels off toward the end of high school.” (p. 253) This is a complicated time in a kid’s life, as puberty, romantic attraction, and growing independence are occurring simultaneously. Murthy advises adults not to dismiss the feelings isolated kids reveal but to listen and to remind them that they are loved by you and others they know. He also provides a great deal of helpful advice for parents in how to teach and model emotional intelligence.

In conclusion, this research-based book is a reminder that human connection is the most important component of our life journeys. In addition to illuminating the causes of the current crisis of loneliness, it provides many suggestions and examples of how to enhance our connection with others and how to teach our children the necessary skills for connecting. After reading this book, I find myself thinking about the importance of listening to others, the power of small kindnesses, and the value of spending time with people who matter to me.

References

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About the Reviewer: Michele Hoffnung, who trained as an experimental psychologist, earned her PhD from the University of Michigan. She is Professor emerita of Psychology at Quinnipiac University in Hamden, CT where she taught scientific research methods and the psychology of women for more than 40 years. Hoffnung has authored many articles, books, and book reviews about lifespan development, women’s roles, women’s choices, and motherhood. Her most recent book is *Being Grandma and Grandpa* with sociologist Emily Stier Adler. She is the current President of the Friends of the Hamden Library.